



CREST ³ OF THE STARS

THE RETURN TO STRANGE SKIES

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Welcome to the Abh Empire](#)

[Summary & Characters](#)

[Chapter 1: *Nataimecoth* \(Investigation\)](#)

[Chapter 2: *Dihérhoth* \(On the Run\)](#)

[Chapter 3 : *Raïchacarh Üécr Sauder Sfagnaumr* \(Clash at the Sfagnoff Gate\)](#)

[Chapter 4: *ÿucrabh Frybarer* \(Battleground of the Empire\)](#)

[Chapter 5: The *Logh Labyrena* \(Maddening Maid\)](#)

[Chapter 6: The *Bhoüécoth* \(Great Chase\)](#)

[Chapter 7: The *Üamh Gymehynr* \(Horse of Dream Park\)](#)

[Chapter 8: The *Üadrhoth Sathotr* \(Dance of Victory\)](#)

[Chapter 9: *Robiach Saiser a* \(Space-Soaring Nuisances\)](#)

[Chapter 10: The *Sairhoth Lothlortagh* \(Return to Strange Skies\)](#)

[Chapter 11: The Imperial Capital of Lacmhacarh](#)

[Chapter 12: Daughter of the Empire](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Appendix: Summary of the Formation of Baronh](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



O Stars around,

Heed the hopes of your short-lived kin.

What be our hopes?

We wish only to be by your side

At your final resting place.

...Selected verses of the imperial anthem of the Humankind Empire of Abh.

Welcome to the Abh Empire

...or as they would say in their native tongue of Baronh, the great and indefatigable Bar Frybarec!

“Bar fry-ba-rec?”

Nope, it’s actually pronounced “Bar Fryoobar”!

What the hey!?

Some quick points!

Things To Look Out For:

- It’s spelled “Abh” but pronounced “Ahv”! “Bh” is a “v” sound! Keep your eye out for other two-letter combinations that use the letter “h” to make for a single sound!

For Example: Rébh (a passenger ship) is pronounced “REV.” The name of the language, Baronh, is pronounced “BARONYUH” because the “nh” digraph represents a “nyuh” sound.

- You’ll see a lot of “-c” and “-ec” at the ends of Baronh words. These are silent! (They’re there to mark their grammatical purpose.)

For Example: Lonidec (a base) is pronounced “LOHNEED.”

- When “c” isn’t silent, it’s ALWAYS a hard “c” (like a “k”)!

For Example: Cénh (a trainee pupil) is pronounced “KENYUH.”

- You’ll also see a lot of “ai”s that represent “eh” sounds (or close enough), as well as “au”s that make “oh” sounds.

For Example: Arnaigh (an orbital tower) is pronounced “ARNEHZH.”

Meanwhile, arauch (the imperial capital) is “AROHSH.”

- “Eu” is akin to a “yoo” sound.

For Example: Reucec (gentry) is “RYOOK.”

- There are some spelling exceptions.

For Example: It’s spelled aïbss (surface-dwelling “Lander” human) but pronounced “AEEP.”

We’re sure you’ll pick it up as you go!

Pronunciation Guide Legend (for things that are not otherwise obvious)

- ZH is similar to a “j” sound, but softer. (In Baronh, this is “gh.”)
- RR refers to a rolling “r” sound. (In Baronh, this is “rh.”)
- DTH refers to a voiced “th” sound (like the “th” in “the” as opposed to the one in “thin.” In Baronh, this is “dh.”)

NOTE: The actual phonology is more varied, and these pronunciation guides are handy approximations. For example, “EH” is standing for a multitude of different sounds that are in more or less the same ballpark. The way these words are spelled are based on Baronh’s own baked-in system of Romanization/transliteration (the script is in fact written in glyphs called “Ath”).

ALSO NOTE: After the first appearance of the majority of Baronh vocabulary, if they appear again, they will be replaced by their English equivalent in bold text.

The language is just another aspect of what makes this magnificent space empire and its culture so fascinating! And we’re confident that you’ll know your froch from your frocragh in no time!

CREST OF THE STARS III — The Return to Strange Skies

Summary of Crest of the Stars II

Though Jinto and Royal Princess Lafier managed to escape from the Febdash Barony, they weren't able to beat the enemy forces of the United Humankind to the Sfagnoff Marquessate.

When the duo returned to normal space in their small connecting vessel, they discovered Sfagnoff already occupied by the enemy.

Lafier slipped away from their hostile eyes and crash-landed their ship onto the planet of Clasbule. Meanwhile, in order to protect the royal princess who found herself powerless on a surface world, Jinto disguised himself and Lafier as planet natives, with the intention of doing their best to evade the troops' notice until Empire ships returned.

However, a dodgy-looking group of activists who call themselves the "Anti-Imperial Front" have now brushed against Jinto and Lafier after the two successfully infiltrated the city of Lune Beega, near where they ended up landing.

Characters

Jinto

..... the son of the president of the planet Martin.

Lafier

..... a trainee starpilot in the Abh Empire's Star Forces, as well as the Empress's granddaughter.

Entryua

..... Police Inspector of the Lune Beega Criminal Investigation Department.

Kyte

..... Military Police Lieutenant of the Peacekeepers.

Marca

..... a member of the Claspule Anti-Imperial front.

Min

..... another member of the Claspule Anti-Imperial front.

Bill

..... another member of the Claspule Anti-Imperial front.

Daswani

..... another member of the Claspule Anti-Imperial front.

Undertaker

..... another member of the Claspule Anti-Imperial front.

Commodore Tlife (*Tlaïmh*)

..... Commander-in-chief of the Abh Imperial Dispatch Fleet.

Associate Commodore Sporr (*Spaurh*)

..... Commander-in-chief of the Abh Imperial Reconnaissance Half-fleet.

Chapter 1: *Nataimecoth* (Investigation)

Entryua, Police Inspector of the Lune Beega's Criminal Investigation Department, was in just as sour a mood as usual.

Entryua consoled himself: *At least this is a great chance to contemplate what rock bottom's like.* After all, it was never *truly* "rock bottom." There was always further to dig!

And now, he found himself treading even deeper in the sinkhole.

"Three more to check, huh? My gut's telling me they aren't holed up in any damn hotel," grumbled Inspector Entryua.

"Then what do we do?" asked Kyte, the Military Police Lieutenant of the Peacekeepers.

Entryua shrugged. "We do what you said — comb every last building. Not that I'm chomping at the bit to do that."

"It's not a question of whether you're inclined to do it," Kyte carped.

"Whatever you say," he said noncommittally.

If you asked him, though, this was pretty far from his actual job description.

Sure, the Abh committed a crime, and grand theft **hovercar** was no light charge. It also wasn't a grave enough charge to warrant a criminal investigation squad of this size.

In its caprices, fate had seen fit to station the majority of the Lune Beega Criminal Investigation Department in Guzonh. Not only that, but also half of the normal officers and all of the forensics officers. The Lune Beega police force was all in on the hunt for a petty car thief.

Entryua had divided his men and women into fifteen different teams. Four of those teams lay in wait at the airport, two were reserve corps, and the remaining eight had been commanded to inspect every single room in all of the various inns and hotels, bidden not to trust the words of the managers or proprietors. Entryua told them not to worry about search warrants, since in the end, it'd all be on the occupying army. Yes, the occupying army, not the

“liberation army” or what have you. They’d never have him thinking of it as anything else, “correct” him as they might.

He wanted to inspect the roads, too, but he lacked the boots on the ground. Besides, the occupiers were inspecting the roads, though they’d let them slip past once before. In any case, if they made the same blunder a second time, that would be no fault of his.

On the screen at the back seat of the command vehicle, a catalog of over forty different fee-based lodgings was displayed. Every item was listed in red, save for the last three. The red text, naturally, meant that particular building had been inspected.

Beside that catalog, another screen listed all the suspicious persons they’d encountered. Anybody who couldn’t prove their name matched the name given for the guest list ended up on this screen, and so far around twenty people had met just such a fate.

Citizens of Clabule could prove their identity and status by simply presenting their wallets, so usually these “suspicious persons” were using aliases, and mostly for dumb reasons. Family affairs. *Affairs* affairs. Things that, while misguided, didn’t involve the police.

There was one arrest, a man in possession of a wallet reported stolen. He had, in fact, been in possession of twenty wallets in other people’s names. That was the only fruit of their investigation thus far.

No one “Abh-like” had yet been spotted.

“Inspector.” The police sergeant with him in the car had a phone transceiver to their ear. “It’s Gondolin’s team. They’ve combed their target area, and now they want to know what they ought to do next.”

Entryua mulled it over. He’d already allotted teams to check out the three places left on the list. *Should I have them join them as reinforcements? Nah, those rooms are small, they’d just get in the way.*

“Tell them to come here. We’ll have them join the reserve corps, to wait there until we settle on the next course of action.”

“Roger.” The police sergeant relayed Entryua’s orders.

“Are there no citizens who’re likely to give shelter to an Abh?” asked Kyte, his impatience all but evident.

“Search your democracy reeducation schools. That’s where all the people who’d harbor Abhs are.”

“That again?” Kyte hung his head.

“We’re giving this everything we’ve got. You’ve got to see that much for yourself.”

“I do.”

“Inspector,” the sergeant cut in.

“What?”

“It’s Sergeant Ramashdy. They’re being held up by occupier inspection.”

“Not again.” Entryua was fed up. Their investigation had been obstructed by the occupying army ten whole times now. It seemed as though, while they’d committed the police crest to memory, they still found Lune Beega police crests to be a strange sight here in Guzoh.

“You’re up,” said Entryua, poking the military police lieutenant’s flank.

“Of course.” Kyte asked the sergeant to transfer the line over to his army’s Commanding Officer. An exchange in a language that was foreign to Entryua ensued, and his mind wandered to the number of more important cases that were nagging at him.

“Finished.”

“Huh?” Entryua snapped back to reality.

“Sergeant Ramashdy is in the clear.”

“Yeah, until the next checkpoint.”

“That’s, uh, yeah,” said Kyte bashfully.

“You sure you told them everything they needed to hear about us?” he grilled him.

“I’m sure. I explained our predicament in detail to the area’s military police

regiment.”

“Then why is it they keep getting called to a halt?”

Kyte averted his gaze. “It seems it hasn’t permeated down to the lower branches of the organization.”

“Pains me to say it, but your ‘organization’ is pretty inefficient. Even us police’ve got this little thing called ‘lateral communication.’”

“You’re absolutely right,” said Kyte, who was shrinking in his seat.

Entryua almost wanted to whistle in appreciation. He’d thought Kyte a total jerk earlier, but now it seemed he had some capacity to be genuine after all.

Again a phone rang, but this time, it was Kyte’s. Kyte took the display from the terminal at his waist, and skimmed its screen. His complexion shifted more and more as he read on.

This piqued Entryua’s interest. “What?”

Kyte slumped against his seat back, dejected. “The military police regiment is on the move. They’re looking to arrest the Abh, too, now.”

“That sounds great to me. So... are we off the hook?” Entryua asked hopefully.

“No. While I’ll hand over the documentation of our investigation, we’ll be continuing the hunt in another way. In other words... I have new orders. If we discover the Abh’s hiding spot, we are to report to Headquarters, then wait and observe to prevent the Abh from running — nothing more.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? We aren’t allowed to arrest them?”

“That’s right. The arrest will be carried out by my army’s military police regiment.”

“You’ve GOT to be joking! They want us to watch after WE put in all the time chasing after the Abh, and they swoop in at the last second?”

That was it. This was an affront to the Lune Beega police force, a profession that ought to be respected. Plus, he had to balk at how the pretense their occupiers were “cooperating” with the police had vanished in a puff of smoke.

They were, for all intents and purposes, just the drudges of their conquerors. “Your superior’s saying capturing the Abh’s beyond us, is that it?”

“That’s not it,” said Kyte, but he didn’t look Entryua’s way. “At first, Headquarters believed the Abh to have escaped from the estate or base. That’s why they weren’t all that interested. They captured dozens of Abhs at the estate, so they weren’t too concerned by a single one evading them. But now the possibility the runaway Abh was crewing the small vessel that entered from flat space is more apparent.”

“And? So what?” Entryua stared at the side of Kyte’s face.

“There might even be a good chance that that pilot was on the enemy ship that my army destroyed in flat space. In which case, the Abh might be privy to important information.”

“Important information?”

Kyte waved a hand. “I don’t know what it might entail, either. And even if I did, I couldn’t say.”

“Figures.” Entryua was not disappointed to hear that. If it wasn’t **Star Forces** military secrets, then it probably had to do with interstellar politics. In either case, Entryua couldn’t care less.

“As such, the value of the Abh we’re after has risen significantly. And the Human Resources Department can’t afford to ignore the achievements of whoever captures this Abh.”

“Ah, I get it now. You lot can’t let the likes of us ‘local police’ win the day.” Yet greater anger flared in Entryua’s chest. They did the work, others got the credit? No thank you.

“It’s not you they don’t want ‘winning the day,’ probably. It’s me,” he grumbled.

“Why?” he replied, surprised. “You were chosen by the higher-ups, weren’t you? I mean, a lieutenant, at your age...”

“You think I’m young?” A self-deprecating smile broke on his handsome face. “How old do you think I am, Inspector?”

“Lessee...” He shot older than he would otherwise.

“27 or 28, in standard years.”

Kyte’s smile only widened. “In standard years, I’ll be 49 this year.”

“No way. That makes you older than I am! But then, why...” Entryua clammed up. “Oh. Genetic modification.”

“Correct. It isn’t solely an Abh technology.”

“But according to all your broadcasts, human genetic modification is an indisputable sin.”

“Yes. The United Humankind sees genetic modification in people as a grave crime.”

“Which would make you a misbegotten child in their eyes...”

Kyte sighed. “Were it that simple...”

“So you’re not?”

“Have you ever heard of the Republic of Silezia?”

“‘Fraid not,” the Inspector shrugged.

“I see...” Kyte folded his arms and looked out the window.

Entryua thought he’d tell him about this “Silezia,” but Kyte didn’t say a word. Finally, Entryua lost his patience. “Well? What about it?”

Kyte mumbled his answer. “Silezia is the name of a country that, around 120 years prior, incited the Silezia War, and crumbled. Thankfully, today it forms part of the United Humankind. Before then, the so-called ‘republic’ was in fact a military dictatorship. Around 1,000 families of hereditary soldiers held all of society in their grip. Those military families practiced genetic modification on their descendants. Their technology wasn’t as advanced as the Abh’s; it didn’t allow for, say, changing hair color or crafting specific organs. All it did was stop aging.”

“And you’re one of them...” Entryua groaned.

“To be precise, it was my grandfather’s generation that received the anti-aging modification.”

“Hold on...” Entryua cocked his head. “What does any of that have to do with them not wanting to let you win the day? That’s a story from three generations ago.”

“It doesn’t matter how far back it happened. I’m in my family register as a ‘Silezia Unaging.’”

“But why?”

“Because it comes up when marrying. There are heavy restrictions on us when it comes to marriage. It’s a shame, but it has to be this way. Any child conceived between somebody with the Unaging genome and somebody without always grows cancerous in the womb.”

“All the more reason to do genetic modification, in that case,” Entryua pointed out. “Do that, and your kids could live a normal life.”

“But genetic modification is strictly forbidden, no matter what.”

“Even for birth defects?”

“Even for birth defects. Even just conducting genetic testing at the fertilized egg stage is illegal. When the defect is discovered, any kind of genetic modification whatsoever is impossible, let alone gene therapy. Of course, most organic diseases can be treated through mechanical engineering.”

“I guess.” But the Inspector was shocked. The fact that they hated genetic tampering to this absurd extent was a sickness in itself.

“That’s why I’m still single. The Silezia Unaging population will likely die out when my generation does.”

“That’s just awful,” muttered Entryua. “But wait, I still don’t get it. Why would they begrudge you a deed to your name over that?”

“Please, forget I ever said that.” Kyte waved a hand. “It was a slip of the tongue.”

“If that’s a slip of the tongue, then you let your tongue slip enough to fill a damn book.” Entryua realized Kyte had been changing the subject on purpose, and he frowned.

“It doesn’t concern you.”

“Sure it does. You lot are our overlords. So why shouldn’t I want to know about all the gritty details? What happened to your ‘right to know’?”

“We aren’t your ‘overlords.’ We will be building up civilian society alongside you. We are your new friends.”

“All the more reason to tell me, then. I want to know more about my new comrade.”

Entryua had worn him down. “Okay, you’ve got me there. To make a long story short, they don’t trust me. They say the Silezia Unaging are born unable to understand the true essence of democracy...”

Now he understood that Military Police Lieutenant Kyte was an unfortunate soul within the organization. He also understood why.

It was racism , pure and simple.

Suddenly, it all made sense. The fact that Kyte had no subordinates. The fact that Kyte’s motion wasn’t paid much attention to by the brass.

He felt sorry for Aizan; after all that effort buttering up Kyte, he wouldn’t be thrilled to learn that Kyte was in fact walking a lonely path far removed from the highway to success.

There was, however, still one more thing that needed clarification for Entryua.

“Isn’t that a bit weird, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“How are you still so zealous, even after all of that prejudice against you? I don’t see myself being so gung-ho about a job where I’m not valued. Commissioner Aizan may not appreciate me, but the people do. That’s how I can keep at this. So how do you manage?”

“I’m quite happy, actually,” he said. And Entryua could tell it was from the heart. “Where I was born and raised, police officers appreciated by the people were a rarity.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“I am a believer in democracy. Isn’t that enough?”

“Is it? I mean, you still can’t get them to trust you.”

“I merely act in accordance with my conscience.”

“Gotcha, gotcha,” he answered perfunctorily. Entryua knew he’d never see totally eye to eye with him, but he just couldn’t sit on the big question: “And you’re okay with that?”

“Of course,” answered Kyte resolutely. But there was something *unnatural* there, in that forcefulness.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Inspector.” The sergeant handed him his earpiece. “It’s Sergeant Kyua.”

“Got it.” Entryua ran his eyes over the screen. Kyua’s team was in charge of the inn called The Rimzale.

“Stream it.”

“Inspector, we’ve discovered two suspicious persons,” reported Kyua’s voice.

“Don’t give it all to me over the phone. Input the details into the **computing crystals** .”

“They’ve already left, sir.”

“Did they get away?” There were quite a few things Entryua couldn’t stand, and foolish subordinates was one of them.

“No, sir.” Kyua seemed flustered. “They’d already left by the time we arrived.”

“How do you know they were the perps?”

“It was a boy and a girl, both using aliases. We searched the family registers, and no such names were listed.”

“I see.” Entryua was still unimpressed. It was true that they were looking for a boy and a girl. However, by some strange cosmic coincidence, since time immemorial, when it came to travelers not wanting to be found out by their families or other parties, it tended to be a boy and a girl.

“The names they’d given were ‘Sye Jinto’ and ‘Sye Lina.’”

“Forget their names, what were they like? What did they look like?”

“We had a number of employees testify that they were very young. And that they seemed, *off*, sir.”

“‘Off’? How so?”

“They almost never left their room. Especially the girl, who literally never left.”

“That’s not so strange. When a man and a woman share a room, there’s all sorts they get up to. Or rather, just the one thing.”

“That’s not all, sir. According to the employee that led them to their room, the girl had a hat on. A hat for men.”

“Haha!” Entryua looked at Kyte.

Kyte was listening raptly. A girl wearing a hat — just like those hooligans had said.

“What about her face?”

“Her hair and eyes were black. Her skin was a light olive color. Slender face. It seemed she was a real looker, too.”

“‘A real looker,’ you say.”

“They also didn’t pay the *sheef*.”

“The *sheef*? I see.” Entryua nodded.

It was odd, all right. If they wanted to evade notice, they should have paid that gratuity, even if just to zip lips. That they hadn’t paid any whatsoever meant one of two things: either they weren’t versed in the customs of the planet, or they were just that incredibly cheap.

“Give me the footage. The footage of them.”

Kyua hesitated to tell him. “About that... we’re told there’s no footage left of them. It’s been disposed of.”

“‘Disposed of’? What exactly did the manager tell you?”

“That once a customer leaves, if there was no outstanding problem, they get

rid of the footage, sir.”

“Do they even know hotel law? They’re supposed to hold onto it for a year...” But Entryua stopped himself. There was no point in complaining to Kyua about it. “What did the receptionist tell you? If they were in the room the entire time, then the person who saw them the most must have been the person at the desk.”

“The manager was at the desk, but his testimony completely contradicts everyone else’s. He claims they were middle-aged, for one. That they seemed so ordinary as to leave no impression.”

“That manager person is shady,” Kyte butted in. “I fear he may be covering for them.”

“I can’t deny the possibility. Kyua, give me that manager’s name and citizen number.”

“Yes, sir.” The pertinent information flowed from Kyua’s telephonic transceiver to the command car’s **computing crystals**. Entryua then entered the identification number and brought up the police info regarding him and The Rimzale on the screen.

He fixed his eyes on the screen. “Well, this is unexpected. He’s a member of the Secessionist Party, and provides moral support to radical extremists.”

“The Secessionist Party?” asked Kyte. “What is that?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like. A party that advocates for the exile of the appointed **lord** and independence from the **Empire**.”

“Is it a secret society?”

“No. They have a headquarters, with signage and everything. They’ve even got seats in the state legislature.”

Kyte was dumbfounded. “A party like that’s allowed to exist?”

“Yep. You didn’t know? I thought you lot would’ve gotten the downlow ages ago.”

“No, I honestly didn’t know. So that would mean anti-imperial parties are legal.”

“Yeah, being against **Empire** rule isn’t a crime. It just blocks you from being a **territorial citizen representative** . The **lord** would veto you.”

“A ridiculous charade,” Kyte smiled derisively. “You’re just working within the **Empire** ’s framework. Personally, I see it as them treating democratic debate as an amusing plaything.”

“Oh, there are plenty here to agree with you, trust me. That’s the very reason the Secessionists can’t win elections. And there were even folks within the party that say independence can’t be achieved by peaceful means. They exited the party and became extremists. There are a handful of groups, now. Seems our manager man’s sympathies lie with the ‘Clasbule Anti-Imperial Front’...”

Entryua drew information on the Clasbule Anti-Imperial Front from the public safety records. “Damn, nothing much on them here. They attempted to occupy the **orbital tower** , once, twenty years ago. Most of the perps were arrested, and now it looks like the front is dormant.”

“What do those ‘extremists’ do?”

“Nothing noteworthy.” *Not compared to what you lot have done*, Entryua wished dearly to add. “They set fire to the plantation of the **Marquis’s Estate** , bomb the **Star Forces Recruiting Office** , that sort of thing. ‘Course, those are crimes, so we’re always on those cases. That’s why we’re keeping an eye on the members of extremist secessionist groups and their allies. They just don’t get our undivided attention.”

But Kyte was shaking his head. It wasn’t adding up for him. “You’re saying the **Empire** knows such groups exist, but...”

“I’m not sure the **Empire** does know.”

“Huh? Didn’t they do humanity the service of bombing that **Star Forces** office?”

“Yeah, ages ago. That was from before I entered the force. Plus, Clasbule told the **Star Forces** who the perp that did it was. I reckon they forgot more or less immediately afterward, though. As far as I know, the **Empire** hasn’t breathed a peep to us about any of the Secessionist Party or extremist business.”

“I don’t believe it... You must be being deceived.”

“That right? Guess it’s not out of the question. Anything could be a big lie. I can tell you for a fact that the Secessionist Party exists, though.”

“But...”

Kyte was about to speak, but Kyua had grown impatient. “Inspector, what do we do?”

“Sorry, slipped my mind.” Etryua scratched his head. “Detain that manager.”

“To take him to the precinct?”

“No, no need. We can’t take him on the grounds of a hotel law violation. Just have your team cling to him. Tell him not to go anywhere, but all polite-like. Get him to cooperate. I’ll be there soon. Wait, Mr. Manager hasn’t rung anybody up in the meantime, has he?”

“No, sir, he hasn’t. We’re observing him closely.”

“Good. Don’t let him contact anybody. If the inn suffers losses because of it, tell him the occupiers’ll pay for them.”

“What, really?” Kyua sniggered.

“Hey, if that promise falls through, it’ll be them he resents, not us.”

“Roger that.”

“End transmission.”

“Ending transmission.”

Etryua patted the shoulder of the sergeant beside him in the car. “‘The Rimzale,’ was it? Be a pal and take us there. And tell the cops that are on their way here to go there instead.”

“Yes, sir.” The command car took to the road.

“Listen, about those ‘orders’ of yours...” Etryua was gazing at the scenery flying past through the window. “YOU were the one ordered to ‘not arrest.’ That has nothing to do with us. Just so we’re clear. Us police, we’re just in this to catch a car thief.”

Kyte felt relieved. “Yes, of course. I never received any orders to stop you or your people.”

“Let’s take Mr. Manager into custody, for starters.”

“Is it possible that the manager is harboring an Abh?”

“Beats me.”

“If he’s a secessionist, then there’s no way he’d want to, right?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

“Don’t tell me the ‘Secessionist Party’ might be a ruse?”

“A ruse? To what end?” Entryua cocked his head.

“It might be an underground organization whose true purpose is helping the **Empire**’s people flee in a situation like this.” Kyte was immediately stirred by his own theory. “It wouldn’t be strange to think they could have anticipated liberation would come, and set up such an organization beforehand!”

“It *would* be strange to think. I think your theory needs work,” replied Entryua calmly.

“Aren’t you the one who said anything is possible?”

“Suppose so,” Entryua shrugged.

“If you think it isn’t a ruse, then why do you think the secessionist would be sheltering an Abh?”

“Us **territorial citizens** , we’re leery of the Abh. The leeriest of us become card-carrying secessionists, and the hopelessly leeriest of them run with extremists. If I recall, the extremists I investigated way back complained that the **Empire** , quote, ‘wouldn’t clamp down.’”

“No! That can’t be!”

“It’s daffy, that much is true. But look at it this way: The **Empire** , it’s not interested in our little world. They don’t really *react* much, at least, not enough for the secession movement to gain much traction.”

In fact, I wager these new conquerors will give the extremists much more meat to chew on, Entryua mused. These jokers seemed like a much worthier adversary in the extremists’ eyes than the apathetic Empire could ever be.

“But if the **Empire** isn’t interested in surface societies, why do they clearly

want to conquer every planet?”

“Because they don’t want us out in space, of course. Isn’t that obvious?”

“I have my doubts that that’s the only reason.”

“What other reasons could there be?” Entryua responded lightly.

“I just don’t think it’s possible they have no other motives, but now’s not the time to be getting into this.” Kyte took off the cell phone terminal from his waist. It was fitted with accessories that went on Empire-made **memory crystals** .

“The **memory crystal** with the investigation data, if you please,” he asked of the sergeant.

“Yes.” Reluctantly, the sergeant handed Kyte the **memory crystal** .

“Oh, let’s add in how the Secessionist Party might be a ruse,” he smiled, as though he’d hit upon a good idea.

“That possibility is near zero, though,” Entryua pointed out.

“All the better, then.”

“Why’s that?” Entryua couldn’t pick up what Kyte was sending out.

“The military police regiment might have many personnel, but they’re not well-versed in this land’s circumstances. They’re probably looking for a target to hit that stands out. So if we give them that intel, they’ll busy themselves with searching Secessionist Party premises for a while. And in that time, we catch the Abh.”

Seeing Kyte’s proud expression, Entryua’s mood plunged ever downward. *I think I may’ve just accidentally increased the “student” population of those democracy reeducation camps...*

Chapter 2: *Dihérhoth* (On the Run)

“Please, enter. The place is shabby, but make yourself at home,” said Marca.

“Oh, I’m so sorry it’s ‘shabby,’” scowled Undertaker. “I like it this way, I’ll have you know.”

“This house is yours, Undertaker?” asked Jinto.

“Sure is.” Undertaker nodded.

It was in a city-tree a mere ten blocks from The Rimzale. Specifically, Undertaker’s house was on its third floor.

Jinto followed Marca and Undertaker inside. Lafier soon entered as well, as did Min, Bill, and Daswani after her.

“So lax,” sneered Bill. “If we wanted to pull something, you wouldn’t have stood a chance, just now. Your back is defenseless.”

“Ah, right.” Jinto hadn’t thought to guard his back, so he nodded his thanks. Of course, he should have been the last to enter.

“You think that’s good enough to be her guard?” Bill continued

Jinto just shrugged. He wasn’t her guard. If anything, she was his. But Jinto didn’t feel like explaining that to him.

Speaking of Lafier, she really was treating Undertaker’s home like it was her own bedroom. Unbidden, she’d taken the most comfortable-looking seat, the leather chair, for herself.

“Hey, that’s MY chair. The owner’s throne.” In his resentment, Undertaker jabbed Lafier with a finger.

Lafier deigned to look at him, but didn’t respond.

“You’re our hostage, Abh. Just think, normally you’d be tied up rolling on the floor, and all your pleas would fall on deaf ears...”

Lafier listened to the man go on as though he was spinning a curious yarn. Her expression was not that of an avid student, but rather of a researcher observing a peculiar organism.

“Okay, I know what you want to tell me. You want to say you’ve come here of your own volition, and that you’ve got a gun. Yet come what may, I’m gonna be treating you two as hostages. And the only reason you fired that gun earlier is ‘cause I asked you to show me your marksman skills with that miniature cannon of yours, got it? ‘Cause your skills are nothing to sneeze at. We could never beat you, even if we formed a firing band. Even so, I...” Undertaker found his voice turning weaker and smaller the more he mouthed off.

“...If you like that chair, I’d be pleased as punch.”

Jinto watched Undertaker slump meekly onto the couch, and worried he might break into tears. But Undertaker refrained from crying, which was a relief. Jinto took the time to examine the room closely.

Marca had called it “shabby,” but it wasn’t really. There wasn’t much furniture, so it looked quite spacious. No table, just a few chairs. There was a picture on the wall, an abstract piece that evoked fire issuing from above.

“Did you paint that, Undertaker?” Jinto asked.

“Yep, that’s all me. Did a good job of it, didn’t I?” For a second, Undertaker smiled, but then he remembered to suppress it and complain. “For heaven’s sake, you two do know you’re HOSTAGES, right!? *HOSTAGES* ! We’re not celebrating your damn birthdays here! Don’t act like we invited you over for a spot of tea!”

“Jinto, deary, please sit. Ruffling Undertaker’s feathers is a great pastime, but we’ve gotten bored of it,” said Marca.

“I didn’t mean to ruffle any feathers,” said Jinto. “I just thought it was a nice picture, that’s all...”

“Yeah, well, hostages are usually a tad too worried fretting over their precious lives to appreciate fine art,” said Undertaker.

“There’s room for debate there. I don’t know if I’d call that ‘fine art,’” Min remarked.

While Undertaker talked back to Min, Jinto took the seat next to Lafier’s.

“So, what now?” Jinto caught Marca’s eyes.

“Come morning, I’ll be having you stowing away in the load-carrying tray of a freighting vehicle and heading to a certain place outside the city.”

“I’m a delivery car driver,” said Bill. “Every day, I carry meat from the synthetic meat factory in a town called Dee Segohn. That’s why I know how the checkpoints are set up. The occupiers know my face now. They won’t think to peek into the flatbed.”

“If you’re delivering meat, then it’s gotta be a freezer van, right?”

“Yep. But don’t worry: It’ll be empty when we leave from here, so the refrigeration won’t be turned on.”

“Phew. I don’t particularly enjoy getting packed in ice.”

Jinto pondered. Escaping the city by slipping into some cargo was a good plan. If Lafier sat in plain view, she’d attract notice for sure. She could dye her hair, but if they took her hat off, they’d see her *froch* .

The only problem was how much they could trust these people. Certainly, if they hid with the cargo, they’d be hard to spot. On the other hand, they’d also have no idea where they were being taken. For all he knew, they’d exit the cargo hold only to find a flank of soldiers with guns pointed squarely at them.

“I’m sorry, but we’re gonna have to pass. We can’t put that much trust in you.”

“You can’t trust us? Why? You think we’ll sell you out to the army?” asked Marca.

“I mean, we are your ‘hostages,’ aren’t we? You didn’t think we’d have faith in our ‘captors,’ did you?”

“And that’s just how it should be!” Undertaker nodded, as though to say Jinto had hit the nail on the head.

Marca facepalmed. “We’d never ally ourselves with an occupying force.”

“Why not? It’s been bugging me, actually: Why DON’T you cooperate with them?”

“Because what we’re after is independence from the **Empire** . ‘*Independence* ’ being the operative word.”

“That only strengthens my case...”

“I won’t lie, I was full of hope when they took the planet. Yet now it’s clear as day they have no intention of leaving us be. So why do you think we’d buddy up with our conquerors?”

“Yeah, they’re even nastier than the Abhs,” said Bill. “At least the Abhs just let us be.”

“That’s not the worst of it!” said Min, his emotions on his sleeve. “The bastards shaved off my hair! Just because I’d had it dyed blue, the nerve of them. It wasn’t out of some weird admiration of the Abh! It just balanced out my face’s color scheme with my moustache!” he added, stroking his red and yellow moustache.

“My business is as good as finished, too!” said Undertaker, wringing his hands.

“Your business?” Jinto meant to ask Undertaker what grudge he held against the enemy, but Marca started speaking before he could.

“In any case,” she concluded, “now you see how little love is lost between us and that blasted army. Besides, the Abh may have been taken by surprise, but I don’t see them falling behind in the theater of space. Even if we did ally with them, nothing good would come of it.”

“So you have faith in the **Empire** .”

“In the **Empire** ’s force of arms, yes,” she corrected him.

Jinto folded his arms. “I can’t tell how serious you are about your own objectives anymore. Do you really think you can successfully secede from the **Empire** , given how powerful it is?”

“We have to hold out hope,” said Min. “The **Empire** may not be terribly interested in **terrestrial worlds** at the moment, but we can’t be sure that state of affairs will last forever. We have to assume it won’t. If the Empire made some unreasonable demand of a terrestrial world, what means do we have to resist them? They could even rain antimatter bombs on us if they were so inclined.”

That doesn't add up, thought Jinto. If they wanted to bombard the surface of Clasbule with antimatter bombs, the fastest way to justify it would be to force through independence. It'd work wonders to attract the **Empire** 's notice.

Seeing Jinto's expression, Min said, "We've got a persecution complex, is what you want to say."

"No, that's not it."

"Then what?"

"All I want to say is you guys are like kids who want to run away from home just because you fear abuse from a parent that's never laid a finger on you, not even knowing that if you do run away, the harshest punishment you could receive is when you'll inevitably be taken back home to those parents."

Min narrowed his eyes. "You... I've never been so insulted in my life."

"I didn't mean anything by it, honest. If you're offended, I apologize."

"I'll accept your apology. But my opinion isn't changing."

"Right. I don't want to nitpick your ideology," he said, trying his best to console him.

"Glad to hear it. Be careful how you speak and act from here on out."

"I will."

"That aside," said Marca, "what will you do? If you don't want to go with our suggestion, I'll have you stay here for the time being. It'd be dangerous to walk about town. There are soldiers examining the area."

"Yeah, that much we know."

Undertaker leapt up. "Like hell they can stay here! This is my house! You want me to play host?"

"You're going to have to. You have rooms you're not using. They'd be no impediment to you."

"They're not exactly the loveliest of house guests — *especially* this little brat," he said, jabbing Lafier again. "She seems to have mistaken me for some kind of servant of hers."

“There’s no helping it.” Marca switched to Clasbulian. “You’re the only one of us who lives alone. How would I explain bringing them over to my house to my husband or daughter?”

“Just tell them they’re your long-lost younger siblings,” Undertaker answered back in Clasbulian.

“I’m not going to lie to my husband.”

“You’re hiding the fact you’re an extremist from him!”

“Which isn’t technically lying. I haven’t told him I’m *not* an extremist.”

Hearing this exchange made Jinto realize just how tiny this organization was. The grandiose sounding “Clasbule Anti-Imperial Front” seemed to consist entirely of these five.

“Undertaker is understandably worried,” said Min in solemn tones. “If the enemy soldiers ever discover he’s hiding an Abh in his house, he doesn’t know what they’ll do to him.”

“I’m not worried about that!” said Undertaker, but it was obviously just bravado.

It was then it dawned on Jinto that he’d neglected to ask something crucial. “Will you be with us on the freezer van’s flatbed?”

“We can’t NOT be there with you,” said Bill. “The van seats two. If all five of us try to cram ourselves onto those seats, they’d suspect us for sure.”

“You should’ve led with that little tidbit,” Jinto smiled. “In that case, we can trust you. We’ll be gripping our guns at the ready the entire time we’re together in there, but don’t think anything of it.”

“Then it won’t be clear which of us are the hostages!” lamented Undertaker.

“When do we depart?” asked Lafier, breaking her silence at last.

Marca checked the clock. “Three hours and seventeen minutes from now.”

“I haven’t had enough sleep.” Lafier addressed Undertaker. “This is your house, correct? I trust your guest bedroom is clean? I’d like to rest, so lead me to it.”

“I’ll replace the sheets with fresh ones, so could I kindly ask you to wait a few moments?” said Undertaker, his face a painting of despair.

Chapter 3 : *Raïchacarh Üécr Sauder Sfagnaumr* (Clash at the Sfagnoff Gate)

In the high-density area that sprawled between the **fleet** and the **Sfagnoff Gate** , innumerable pricks of shining light were gathered.

“What’s that?” **Commodore** Tlife pointed to the flock of lights on the **map of flat space** using his **command staff** .

“The chances are 0.9997 in 1 that it’s an enemy fleet,” answered **Kilo-commander** Cahyoor calmly.

“Thanks, genius, I know that!” Tlife barked. “But haven’t we put on a show of our force of arms for them?”

“Yes, sir, we have. Our march was more than sufficient for that,” nodded the **Chief of Staff** .

“Then the enemy must be aware of our military might. They must be.”

“If they didn’t get the hint, then we should send them a **connecting vessel** and tell them.”

“The enemy has no hope of winning. They *can’t* have any.”

“Any commander in their right mind would come to that conclusion, sir.”

“Then why!?” Rather theatrically, he paused for effect. “WHY are they loitering over there!?” At that moment, something else began to give him doubt. He turned to the Chief of Staff:

“By the way, you said there was a 0.997 in 1 chance it’s the enemy, right?”

“I did, sir.”

“What’s the 0.003 in 1 chance?”

“That that information is a deception. Or that the sensors all failed at once. Alternatively, that it’s an unknown natural phenomenon, or an assembly of heretofore unidentified intelligent lifeforms. It could also be...”

“Do you honestly think any of those are real possibilities?” said Tlife, taken aback.

“Each of those possibilities is exceptionally unlikely on their own, but taken together...”

“Okay, fine, I get it. Forget I asked.” The **Commander-in-chief** placed his chin on one of his hands and paced the **Commander’s Bridge** .

“*Lonh* (Your Honor), I thought you yearned for combat,” said Cahyoor upon seeing Tlife’s crabby mood.

“Oh, I do,” Tlife admitted. “I just don’t enjoy fighting with nagging doubts. What do you think they’re doing here, Cahyoor?”

“I see three possible reasons,” said Cahyoor, ready to rattle them off. “Possibility 1, the enemy thinks they can, in fact, win.”

“But how? In the face of this overwhelming gap, how could they possibly?”

“To split Possibility 1 in two, first of all, perhaps the capabilities of the enemy’s ships far exceed our initial expectations.”

“Are you saying we’ve failed to fully grasp the hypothetical extent of the enemy’s technological knowhow?” Tlife was less than pleased to learn there was a chance the **Empire** had been beaten to the technological punch by another interstellar power.

“What else would you expect from the officers fit solely to feed the cat?” Cahyoor retorted expressionlessly.

“You’re right!” said Tlife. “The **Information Department** are all just a bunch of cat handlers! How daft of me to forget that fact.”

Communications Staff Officer Nasotryua looked resigned and said nothing.

“But I, personally, appraise the **Information Department** slightly higher than that. The chances that that is what happened are almost nil. As such, if in fact the enemy believes they’ll win, they may be looking down on the **Star Forces** . That, or the cause might just lie in their commander’s mental state.”

“Battling a madman wouldn’t be very elegant, would it?”

“As for Possibility 2,” Cahyoor continued, ignoring his **Commander-in-chief** , “this could well be a trap.”

“What kind of trap?”

“For example, they might be having a large fleet lying in wait in the normal space by some nearby **gate**, have their overly small forces engage in combat, hand us a few victories in combat, and pretend to have been driven back into fleeing.”

“Where’s the trap there, exactly?” asked Tlife, flabbergasted.

“The trap being, in our blind zeal chasing down the fleeing ships, they ambush us as soon as we recklessly enter the **gate**.”

“What did you say?” Tlife felt pity. No matter the circumstances, a **starpilot** so incompetent as to lack due vigilance when entering a **gate** would never be adorned with a *ptorahaidaisaumh* (commander’s insignia). “Do they think me that senseless?”

“They have no way to know that you, specifically, are this **fleet**’s **commander-in-chief**, *Lonh*. It isn’t personal. Rather it would stem from their general attitude toward the **Imperial Star Forces**. There’s no telling whether or not they believe in our deep-seated reputation.”

“The essence of the Abh is in their overweening pride and recklessness,” said Tlife. Those words were famous even among the Abh themselves; so famous, in fact, that one needed only to hear talk of the “reputation of the Abh” to recall them. “We may be a smidgen haughty, I’ll give them that, but reckless we are not.”

“Too true, sir. Our war history bears that out. If they’ve done their homework on our past battles, they’d surely think twice before implementing such an uncertain strategy.”

“If, that is, your hypothetical trap is the one they’ve laid,” said Tlife. “The enemy commander should be taken alive. We need to reeducate him about warfare from the ground up.”

“A splendid idea, sir,” said Cahyoor, though as coolly as ever. “In any event, seeing as we would never fall for such a crude trap, there’s no particular need to come up with counter-strategies.”

“Agreed,” said Tlife.

“Possibility 3, the biggest of the three, is...”

“That’s a bad habit of yours,” said Tlife. He did think highly of Cahyoor, but he didn’t like how pretentious he could be. “Why didn’t you lead with the biggest possibility?”

“I apologize, sir,” said Cahyoor perfunctorily before continuing. “They are the United Humankind, or at least, their main force is. And the United Humankind’s military command is known to often lack a certain flexibility in their orders. Perhaps the enemy commander has been ordered to use what forces they have to defend the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** to the last. If their commander took such a directive to heart, then gathering their forces in this sector is the most logical course of action.”

Tlife folded his arms. “And you’re saying that’s the highest probability.”

“Yes.”

As usual, Tlife began pacing again. The more he mulled it over, the more convinced he became that there was nothing behind the enemy’s actions — that they were merely attempting to resist with what forces they had. Just like Tlife himself had been sent with what forces he could muster. Tlife had the luxury of retreating if he wanted, but the enemy didn’t. That was the sole point of difference between them.

The question of why the enemy had sent such a small force to invade **Empire** territory remained, of course. It was probably a diversion. But that was something for **Military Command Headquarters** to consider, not him. He was dissatisfied that he wasn’t at the main battlefield, but happy that he had a fleet he could command at his discretion.

“Yes... yes, that’s it!” Tlife raised a fist overhead. “I can feel all of my doubts disintegrating into the atmosphere like so much space dust, and without a trace left! My heart has vacated the riverbank of uncertainty, and finally found its way to the assurance of victory! I know when I need to be grateful, and now is one of those times. **Kilo-commander** Cahyoor, I thank you!”

“I am honored,” said Cahyoor, taking the **Commander-in-chief**’s vote of gratitude exceedingly dispassionately.

Then, Tlife stopped in his tracks, and looked at the **map of flat space** . “I must say, though, I feel sorry for them.”

“This is not the time to spare the enemy your sympathies, sir,” said the **Chief of Staff** .

“You’re right. We warned them. We won’t hold back!” Tlife decreed, gripping his **command staff** . “We’ll take them in a pincer attack.”

“I’m against that idea,” said Cahyoor bluntly.

“Why?” It had taken Tlife this long to build up that sense of exaltation, and now his shoulders drooped.

“The enemy is too close. They must have caught wind of our movements by now. If we tried a pincer attack in these conditions, not only would it be not as effective, they could very well divide and hit us individually. We probably wouldn’t lose outright, but it would result in needless losses.”

“Chrir (SHREER)?” Tlife wished for the **strategy staff officer** ’s opinion.

“I’m afraid I have to agree with the **Chief of Staff** ,” said Chrir, to her vexation.

“I see.” Tlife felt it a shame, yet he understood that the **staff officers** ’ opinions ought to be respected. Even as Commander-in-chief, Tlife worried himself over all the everyday decisions — not even being on the battlefield would free him from them — the staff officers set various virtual scenarios and conducted battle simulation after battle simulation. As such, if they’d determined that a certain strategy would merely lead to unnecessary casualties, then he had no reason to doubt it.

Crestfallen, Tlife’s shoulders drooped. “There’s no getting around it. We may just have to attack them head-on.”

“Indeed. I believe that is the soundest stratagem, sir,” said Cahyoor.

“Display the battle formation planes.”

The **map of flat space** disappeared, replaced by the hypothetical formations.

Within the **Star Forces** , an **offensive half-fleet** was typically composed of three *saubh acharr* (offensive squadrons), one *saubh mésgér* (convoy squadron), one *saubh bhotutr* (strike squadron), one *saubh dicpaurér* (supply

squadron), and three **patrol ships** under the direct command of a *raichaicec* (commander), plus a few *longiac* (communications ships).

At present, Tlife had four offensive half-fleets at hand. Those four were lined up on the side, poised to shoot out into the enemy. At the head of each offensive half-fleet was a convoy squadron, shields against enemy **mines** . After that came the strike squadron. Comprised of **battle-line warships** , each strike squadron was a bow firing **mines** . The **strike half-fleet** , *Basc-Gamlymh* , was placed so as to cross the four offensive half-fleets laterally, thereby bolstering their strike capabilities.

Meanwhile, each *saubh glar* (commander's squadron) had an offensive squadron following on its heels. These were the spears that would skewer the enemy at battle's end.

As for the fearsome **reconnaissance half-fleet** *Ftuné* , it would divide its main forces into three and hide between the other groups of ships.

The supply squadrons belonging to each of the **half-fleets** would tail from behind alongside the **supply half-fleet** *Achmatuch* .

A supremely textbook battle formation, devoid of pretense.

"Very well," said Tlife. "Arrange them at once."

"Yes, sir," Cahyoor saluted.

From the flagship *Cairhdigh* 's **space-time bubble** , several communications vessels emerged, relaying orders to each class of **Headquarters** . At the same time, the enemy's own small-mass **space-time bubbles** , also likely communications vessels, began to fly into a whirlwind of action.

"Enemy **space-time bubbles** splitting off!" shouted the *casariac ragrhotr* (surveying staff officer), rousing Tlife's attention. Countless small **space-time bubbles** issued from the bubbles lurking at the center area of the high-density sector, rushing toward Tlife's fleet.

"There is a 0.99996 in 1—" Cahyoor began.

"Enough probabilities!" Tlife cried.

"They're enemy mines, sir," he said calmly, as though he hadn't noticed he'd

been shouted down.

“I KNOW that!” he snapped, but his expression immediately changed to a smile. “So, it’s begun.”

“Indeed.”

So the curtain rose on the first full-blown battle in this great war — the **Clash at the Sfagnoff Gate** .

“Commence the *hocsatiocss mésghotr* (defensive mine battle)!” ordered Tlife.

A volley of **mines** fired from the **patrol ship Cairhdigh** , which was the cue for the battle-line ships under its command to commence the **mine battle** . There was a large gap between the range of **mines** fired from the high-density sector and those fired at that sector. The enemy mines fired from the sector would reach the *byrec tlaimr* (Tlife fleet), but they couldn’t shoot the enemy from their current position. As such, this attack was aimed at the enemy **mines** themselves.

Both groups of mines drew nearer and nearer at dizzying speeds.

“Contact made with **space-time bubbles** . Azimuth of 305. Distance: 65. Area of contact expanding,” reported the **surveying staff officers** .

The red blips that represented enemy **mines** and the blue blips that represented allied **mines** mingled in an interweaving maelstrom.

Following the orders input into the **computing crystals** , their mines attempted to fuse with the space-time of their enemy counterparts, while the enemy mines attempted to flee their embrace. For the enemy, there was no point if their mines crashed against **mines** that would perish before reaching their fleets anyway.

And yet, the enemy **mines** , chased off and intercepted, were cornered into reluctant **space-time fusion** . When the **space-time bubbles** fused, they annihilated, venting large quantities of **space-time particles** in the process. Localized high-density sectors were born, and subsequently faded away. **Flat space** undulated, and **space-time particles** diffused in surging ripples, which often shook other **space-time bubbles** .

The unscathed **mines** that barreled through that barrage hurtled ever closed to Tlife's fleet. Naturally, they had been broadly reduced in number, but there were still enough not to be taken lightly.

It was the *laitec* (escort ship) unit's job to meet the mines at the pass. Escort ships were equipped with numerous mobile small-caliber cannons; one *symh* corps of six ships formed a single **space-time bubble**, and each of those bubbles stood against the wave of **mines**.

The escort corps' **space-time bubbles** advanced, striving to fuse with the **mines**'. Now those mines refrained from skirting away, themselves aiming to fuse. The purpose of the initial volley was in fact to destroy the escort vessel unit. The instant the **mines** fused with their space-time, they were greeted by innumerable **lasers** and streams of antiprotons. Some mines managed to take escort vessels down with them, but most merely ended up pointlessly increasing the mass of the escort corps' **space-time bubbles**.

Within the seething expanse of **flat space**, the distance between foes steadily closed.

"Distance from enemy: 142. Enemy vanguard now within our range of fire," said the **surveying officer**.

"Copy. Change the **mines**' target to the enemy vanguard," Tlife commanded.

The new volley of **mines** didn't spare their enemy counterparts a single glance, instead thrusting toward the enemy fleet at all speed. Their obstacles removed, the group of enemy **mines** flocked around the escort vessel unit in great herds. Ultimately, reports of vanquished escort ships turned incessant, and the **mines** began approaching the **battle-line warships**.

"Distance from enemy: 100."

"The time has come," said Tlife, eyes on Cahyoor. "Sic the *Ftuné* on them."

The **reconnaissance half-fleet** *Ftuné*'s **commander** was a *roïfraudéc* (associate commodore) by the name of *Spaurh Aronn-Saicpat Nimh Laitpanr Painaigh* (SPORR AHROHN-SEKPAHT PENEHZH, Great Duchess of Laitpanh). The House of Sporr was a large family that boasted a level of social prestige next to the **imperial family** of Abliar's in rank, containing over five hundred individuals of

noble rank . The *Nimiéc Laitpanr* (Great Duchess's Estate of Laitpanh) was almost synonymous with the noble Sporr family, held aloft by its succession of heirs. But that wasn't all. The *Nimhynh Laitpanr* (Great Duchy of Laitpanh) included three inhabited planets, and was therefore recognized far and wide as the **territory-nation** with the greatest wealth in the **Empire** .

In other words, she was the head of the most affluent, most storied house among all **nobles** — which caused the *Ftuné's almcasariac* (senior staff officer), **Hecto-commander** Cfadiss, to always wonder why she didn't just retire from the **Star Forces** and enjoy the high life.

That she'd joined the **Star Forces** to begin with, that was a given, as the duty of a **noble** . The officer just couldn't understand why she stuck around after fulfilling said duty. He tried thinking of it as *her responsibility* , or *her mission in life* , but observing her behavior, the words *her hobby* always sprang unbidden as a wrench in the works of his rationalization.

The reason Cfadiss had transferred over to the *Ftuné's headquarters* was because his predecessor had to take impromptu *cagsomhoth* (maternity leave) due to a sudden case of falling in love. In addition, nobody on the inside was deemed sufficiently qualified for promotion. Less than a month had passed since then, yet Cfadiss still wasn't used to the atmosphere in this **headquarters** .

And the reason for that is her , thought Cfadiss, gazing at the *Raichaicibach* (Commander's Seat). It sported a lavish, elaborately embroidered baldachin, which was supported by four pillars of marble white, each with exquisite and minutely detailed engravings. As hard as it was to believe, according to rumor, the embroidery was done by hand. This decoration alone would be tough to acquire through three whole years of an associate commodore's salary. Of course, **starpilots** with **star fiefs** went without pay.

Cfadiss shifted his gaze to the space behind the **Commander's Seat** . The **imperial coat of arms** (the eight-headed dragon known as the *gaftnochec*), the *glac iadbyrer* (half-fleet banner), and the symbol of the House of Sporr, the *gatharsec* (golden crow), were arranged in a triangle shape on the wall. The golden crow was at the bottom of the triangle, but it was a size bigger than the other banners, as though to underscore that it was the most important.

Once again, Cfadiss's eyes came to the **Commander's Seat** . *How hopelessly out of place* , he thought with intensity.

The **twin-winged circlet** of the **imperially certified starpilot** ill-suited the assiduously braided, scarlet-blue hair more fit for a palace banquet. Unbecoming, too, was a **military uniform** on her while she was so lazily reclining; In that pose, she could very well have been lying sprawled on some luxurious chaise. It was certainly true that starpilots of imperial appointment enjoyed various privileges. Decorating one's **Commander's Seat** using personal funds was one of them. But decorating it to this extent could only be called self-indulgent.

Soon after taking the post, he admonished her to "Act a little more like a proper **commander** , please. It will boost morale," only to be shot down with a "No thanks."

*I'll just count my blessings that there isn't some handsome boy servant offering her some chilled **apple cider** on a silver platter ...* Cfadiss shuddered at the thought.

*No... don't tell me she expects that role of ME, **Hecto-commander** Cfadiss Üémh Üéspir Séspir, a clapaimh (staff officer insignia)-decorated cizéc(knight second-class)!?*

Cfadis banished the absurd notion from his mind. Yet in the end, he simply couldn't come to grips with his commander...

"*Lonh* ," he said. Might as well break the ice; he had nothing better to do at the moment anyway.

"What is it?" Her red pupils flitted inside their almond-shaped slits. The Sporr family feature, the *cilæmh pïana spaurr* (crimson eyes of Sporr). Her eyes were the deep red of a giant star in its final stages.

"Are you acquainted with Lonh-*Læber Sfagnaumr* (the Honored Marquess of Sfagnoff)?"

"Sure. *Simfé* (noble society) is a small world."

"What are they like?"

“He’s a louse,” she said, summing him up in so many words. “I can’t bear the thought of letting my ships get hurt to save somebody like him.”

“Huh!?” Cfadiss was so dumbfounded he forgot to chide her.

“But don’t worry. I won’t be mixing business with private affairs.”

Cfadiss stared at the baldachin, and gave careful consideration to the mentality that led to the words “*my ships*.” No mixing business with private affairs? Really? His misgivings filled him right to the eyeballs, where they shined.

“That look is insubordination against a superior officer,” she said, responding irritably to his deprecatory mien.

“Please accept my apologies,” he said, though he remained unconvinced.

At that moment, their orders came.

“An **inter-bubble communication** from **Headquarters** .” The **communications staff officer** turned around from the **console** .

“Read it aloud,” said Sporr.

“Yes, ma’am. ‘Overrun them.’ End of communication.”

“My, my. This is my first time working with **Commodore** Tlife; I commend him for his fine, *concise* orders. Now, *noctamh batta* (complete mobile-state) for **space-time bubbles** 1 through 6. Assemble a single column for each squadron and move to the front of the fleet.”

The *Ftuné* was made up of the **commander’s squadron** , in addition to six *saubh usaimr* (reconnaissance squadrons) and one **supply squadron** . A **squadron** ’s name contained a number given it by the **Star Forces** . As such, its official name contained a long number like “607.” That was less than convenient, so **Headquarters** allotted reconnaissance squadrons the numbers “1” through “6,” with the supply squadron as number “7.”

Even the Abh placed importance on functionality from time to time.

The **space-time bubbles** that had been formed three ships to a bubble (with those ships in turn keyed to a battle-line warship) split off into individual units. In doing so, their speed was multiplied by roughly 1.73, and so the lines of

space-time bubbles overtook the battle-line warship, followed soon by the escort vessel unit.

“**Commander’s squadron , stationary-state** . Transmit *agac asparhotr* (signal of assembly). Assume Massed Battle Formation 3.” If the prospect of bearing the full brunt of the enemy’s onslaught had her perturbed, she certainly didn’t show it. Her commands came with aplomb.

The three patrol ships of the headquarters squadron had formed a triangle, and needless to say, at its head sailed the **flagship** *Hairbyrch* . Behind that triangle, five lines were forming.

“Number 4 is being slow,” Cfadiss pointed out. Even though the other squadrons were beginning to move laterally in front of the escort vessel unit, Squadron 4 was still puttering near a battle-line warship.

“I’ve never liked a laggard,” Sporr tut-tutted. “But it’s fine. They’ll follow us eventually. Let’s strike using the other five **squadrons** .”

“But—” Cfadiss had been about to scold her when he thought better of it. It was, after all, a not illogical conclusion. Fussing too much over concentrating troops and waiting for Number 4 would be handing the enemy time. Moreover, with the lack of defense for the escort vessel unit, it would expose it to enemy fire. It was true that at the moment, they ought to value speed over other factors.

That being said, Cfadiss couldn’t be sure his commander hadn’t made that call based solely on simple sentiment. “The five **squadrons** have formed ranks, without Number 4,” Cfadiss reported.

“Tell the **captains** the following: **complete mobile-state** . Course: 310. Continuously transmit the *agac* (signal): ‘Follow me.’”

“Yes.” Cfadiss relayed her orders to the **communications staff officer** . With that, the reconnaissance half-fleet *Ftuné* was on the move again. In that direction lay the enemy’s vanguard, stretching wide on both sides. The enemy began focusing its **mine** fire on *Ftuné* .

Cfadiss switched his **circlet** to external input mode and attuned to the *Hairbyrch* ’s detectors. Immediately, he frowned.

The **mines** were attempting to worm their way through at a rate of around one round every five seconds. The patrol ship *Hairbyrch* 's mobile cannons destroyed the mines with all their power and all their fury. Yet, if even just one round connected, they wouldn't emerge unharmed, no matter how thick the ship's armor was.

Just like the majority of **soldiers** in the **Star Forces** , Cfadiss had no real combat experience. This was his first-ever taste of mortal fear. Cold sweat ran down his eyebrows from the underside of his **circlet** .

He looked at his commander. *The nerve of this lady! She's HUMMING! Does she even understand our situation? We're in the middle of a relentless exchange of mine fire!*

"Lonh !" Unable to bear it any longer, Cfadiss had a proposal for his superior. "Should we not conduct a **defensive mine battle** ?"

"Where was your former post?" asked Sporr as she fiddled with her **command staff** .

What does that have to do with anything? he huffed inwardly, but he thought he might as well answer her. "I was the **senior staff officer** of *Saubh Bhotutr Cigagona* (Strike Squadron 184)."

"Is that so. Then you may not be aware. You see, **patrol ships** don't carry a single round of **mines** that would be used for defense. What few mines a patrol ship carries are all for destroying enemy vessels. Now don't forget."

"But—"

"No buts. What would become of us if a **patrol ship** crumbled to this level of fire? We are the *Ftuné* !"

"Augh..." At a loss for words, Cfadiss finally noticed that Sporr's **circlet** had been set to exterior space sensory mode.

Dammit, putting on a brave face for us . Cfadiss had wanted to momentarily switch back to personal space sensory mode, but he decided he could hardly do so now.

"An **inter-bubble communication** from Squadron 1 **patrol ship** *Ceubyrch* ,"

reported the **communications staff officer** . ““Serious damage sustained. EM cannons, front-facing mobile-cannons inoperable. Evacuating toward rear.””

Sporr didn’t so much as twitch, not even at this news. She didn’t even stop humming; She simply gave a light little nod.

The enemy vanguard had begun to diverge to either side, opening the way for the *Ftuné* . That was a wise choice on their part. After all, the vanguard was probably the escort vessel unit, which was hardly a match for a patrol ship.

Cfadiss felt a bit mischievous. He wanted to test just how far the *Honorable Associate Commodore* ’s composure ran. “The enemy vanguard is now conducting evasive maneuvers. Do we pursue them?”

“Are you stupid?” said Spoor sharply. “Or are you just playing stupid?”

“My apologies.” Cfadiss was surprised by the heat of opprobrium in his superior’s words.

“You haven’t answered me yet. Which is it?” she pressed, giving him no quarter.

“I, uhh... I was playing stupid.”

“And why did you do something like that?”

“That’s, uhh...” He couldn’t tell her that he was trying to trip her up, so he spluttered awkwardly.

“You were trying to gauge how dumb your superior is,” she declared.

“No, I would never...”

“Then what is it?”

“I’m so sorry!” he said at last. “It’s just as you surmised, *Lonh* .”

“Then I’ll look the other way, but only just this once,” she said. She was surprisingly magnanimous. “See that it doesn’t happen again. If you pull that again, I WILL pick on you.”

“I’ll make a mental note.”

“Stay this course. Our only target is the **battle-line ships** . Leave small fries like **escort vessels** for the folks in the back.”

Finally, the *Ftuné* easily passed through the gaps in the enemy vanguard. **Squadron 4** was tailing along like proper at the end of the queue. From the *Ftuné* 's front left, a succession of **space-time bubble** flocks came rushing toward it.

“Judging by mass, they must be **assault ship space-time bubbles** !”

“Take a mental note of this, **senior staff officer** : it's times like these that a **patrol ship** 's mines are deployed.” Sporr raised her **command staff** overhead. “Left side, commence **mine battle** !”

Each ship in the *Ftuné* loosed their **mines** , and those herds of mines aimed for the flock of enemy assault ships. The red blips pinpointing the locations of enemy **space-time bubbles** perished one after the other in flashes.

“They're coming from the right. Three **patrol ship space-time bubbles** !” **Command staff** on her cheek, Sporr gave it but a moment's thought. “Don't let them gear against Number 4. Our course is just right.” As though to make up for their blunder earlier, **Squadron 4** responded swiftly. Column migrated to column, forestalling the enemy ships.

For a while afterward, there were no enemy ships that could contend with the *Ftuné* . Yet the intensity of fire increased, and the *Hairbyrch* **space-time bubbles** filled with debris and charged particles. A point-blank shot intercepted by a mobile cannon exploded, and fragments exposed to antimatter mist heated up and drifted.

So this is blitzing. Cfadiss quaked.

“I'm bored,” said Sporr out of nowhere. “Aren't you bored, **senior staff officer** ?”

“Huh?” Cfadiss couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“I said, this bores me,” she repeated. “Every day, it's always the same old boring desk work, and now that I'm finally in battle, they won't even let me get into it. Why did I ever become **imperially certified** ? I bet **captains** have lots more fun.”

“Is that right?” The captains were being chased by returning fire, enemy assault ships joining the spray of **mines** . Cfadiss, of course, also had work

experience on a ship's **bridge** , so he could imagine how bloodthirsty they were. Even the training exercises were so intense that he'd forget to breathe, and now they were embroiled in actual fighting.

"See, my dream was to be a **patrol ship captain** and square off with the enemy that way. But when I was a captain, there was no war, and now that there is a war, this is the boring role I'm stuck with. I can't even retire until the war's over. I wonder if I've any luck at all."

Cfadiss sighed in his heart. *I knew it. This IS a hobby to her.*

"I believe I told you that look is insubordination," she charged, wise to him.

A fresh supply of troops came bolting for them. One assault ship fused with the *Hairbyrch* 's space-time. A brief **alarm claxon** sounded in the **Commander's Bridge** , followed immediately by the tremors that came with the firing of the **EM cannon** .

The assault ship burst and shattered in an instant, bathing the *Hairbyrch* 's sensors with a spray of charged particles that dwarfed any mere **mine** blast's. It was akin to a solar wind at point-blank range.

Next to a scowling Cfadiss, Sporr hid a slight yawn with the back of her hand. "Ugh, it's just so dull," she muttered.

Tlife extolled her to high heaven. "A magnificent display, **Associate Commodore Sporr!**"

The enemy vanguard had split into two, scrambling the core of the enemy line into a tumult. At the center of that confusion, the *Ftuné* maintained its massed battle formation, and slowly continued flying straight ahead.

"Shoot every **mine** you've got right here!" Tlife pointed at the rift in the enemy vanguard with his **command staff** . "You can't let them close back together again. Don't leave the *Ftuné* to die!"

"Enemy **space-time bubbles** , azimuth: 010. Distance: 30. Will intersect with our course. Around 300 in number!" The assembly of **space-time bubbles** that appeared behind the battle-line warship unit attempted to immobilize the head of the *Ftuné* .

“They’re likely the enemy’s main force!” Cfadiss could virtually hear the blood drain from his body. “They’re pouring all of their backup forces at us. Commence evasive maneuvers at once!”

“Please, **senior staff officer** , I’ll ask you not to raise a fuss on my **bridge** .” She pointed to the space behind the **map of flat space** with her **command staff** . “Crunch the numbers. I want to know if we’ll make it in time.”

Countless blue dots — allied **mines** — came hurtling at maximum velocity.

“Yes, ma’am.” *Nobody’s raising a fuss, least of all me!* Through his anger, he input the directives into the **computing crystals** .

Red dotted lines appeared from the enemy lines, while blue dotted lines appeared from the herd of **mines** . They intersected with the front-right area of the *Ftuné* ’s future position.

“Stay the course,” Sporr commanded.

“Yes.” Though Cfadiss nodded, he’d not been made at ease just yet.

Allied **mines** flew past the *Ftuné* from its right, slamming into the enemy ships. The *Ftuné* ’s front-right had turned into a swinging dance hall, with **mines** attempting to fuse with the enemy ships playing hard to get. The enemy lines were in disarray as **space-time bubbles** floundered in their death throes, touching off localized high-density sectors all around.

Phew... Relieved, Cfadiss relaxed his shoulders. It was only then he realized how tense he’d been.

The enemy ships that had slipped away from the dance floor were hot on the *Ftuné* ’s heels, but they too were made to scatter one after the other. The center of the high-density sector was close now. The enemy unit of battle-line warships was before their very eyes.

“The enemy **battle-line warship** unit is making every effort to obstruct the *Ftuné* . They pose almost no threat to the main units,” said Cahyoor, analyzing the situation.

“All right. All ships prepare to attack,” said Tlife. “The *Rocérh* will wipe out their vanguard on the right. The *Üacapérh* will exterminate it on the left. The

Byrdaimh and *Citirec* , they'll follow me. And no dallying! Otherwise you're gonna let the *Ftuné* take all the good bits!"

The enemy battle-line ships were beginning to retreat.

"You're too slow," Sporr murmured pityingly. Then she stood up. "Let's go crush those ships on half-**squadron** units. **Senior staff officer** !"

"Yes." Cfadiss took a step forward.

"I dislike toiling over the little details. I'd like you to point each **squadron** to their target."

"Yes." *If you're so dreadfully bored, then why don't you do it yourself?* But Cfadiss bottled those thoughts up and set about allotting each squadron to the enemy battle-line warship **space-time bubbles** .

"That's right, we don't need any to ourselves," she said.

"Understood." Having finished the task he was given and routed the designated targets he'd input to the **communications staff officer** , he had a question for her. "Have we become backup forces, too?"

"No. I'll be taking *that* ." She gestured toward the **map of flat space** . It was a **space-time bubble** that had been stamped with the provisional number "661," and situated all the way in the back of the battlefield.

Cfadiss referred to the course of the battle, and soon discovered that **Space-time Bubble** 661 had yet to fire a single round of **mines** . "That is believed to be a large **transport freighter** or something in that vein. Might it not be advisable to ignore it for now?"

"It could be yet more reserve forces using that as camouflage. It might be passing itself off as harmless, only to come for our heads at the very end. And we can't have that, so I'd like to strike their front lines."

"Yes." *That may very well be the case*, Cfadiss thought.

"Just received confirmation: All **squadrons** have received respective target instructions," said the communications officer.

"Excellent." Sporr nodded, raising her **command staff** overhead with evident mirth. "All ships, fan out! The real party starts now, and you'd better brace

yourselves for some fireworks! We are the *Ftuné* (Goddess of Dance), so show them how you command the stage!”

The rectangle that was the *Ftuné* came untied. Units of three patrol ships formed triangles, vertical columns, even diagonal columns, each prowling after its own prey.

If they strayed too far from each other, **inter-bubble communication** would become unavailable. As such, from here on out, **Associate Commodore** Sporr would fight as the joint commander of the flagship and its two attendant vessels.

“Relay the following to the **captains** . Veer to course: 015. Maintain **complete mobile-state** .”

The patrol ship *Hairbyrch* led two other patrol ships, zooming down from **flat space** from the high-density sector to the low-density sector where **Space-time Bubble 661** idled.

“**Space-time Bubble 661** now retreating,” said the *casariac rilbicotr* (navigation staff officer). “No other readings. **Space-time fusion** possible at 07:18 by ship’s time.”

“Shall we assume assault formation?” asked Cfadiss.

“No need. We’re just going to keep moving forward,” said Sporr, tapping her cheek lightly with the **command staff** .

A while later, the navigation officer had a report. “Ten minutes until **space-time fusion** .”

“Prepare for **battle in normal space** .” She issued her command almost as though she was talking to herself. Then she looked at Cfadiss. “What do you think?”

“About what?” said Cfadiss, confused.

“The enemy hasn’t transmitted an *agac rétgacotr* (signal of surrender). If it were really just a large **transport freighter** , they’d be surrendering about now. Looks like my hunch was right on the mark.”

“But they still haven’t fired any **mines** , not even now. How do you interpret

that?”

“Beats me,” said Sporr, dismissing it in so many words. “They must be dealing with their own set of circumstances.”

“**Space-time Bubble 661 now splitting its space-time !**” shouted the **navigation staff officer** .

“See? Here it comes,” Sporr nodded with a smile.

“Six **assault ship space-time bubbles** . Course: 345. Distance: 16. Approaching from in front. Relative speed: 375 **astro-knots** .”

“What did you say!?” Sporr’s smile stiffened. “They’re not **mines** ?”

“No, ma’am.”

Sporr bit her lip; something had her less than pleased. “*Casariac tlachotr* (gunner staff officer), tell me how many **mines** we have left.”

“This ship contains four; the *Baugbyrch* , four as well; and the *Hasunbyrch* , five. Thirteen in all, ma’am.”

“Thanks, I can do simple addition. Commence anterior **mine battle** . Fire all rounds and mow them down!”

The three patrol ships fired their **mines** out, and they split off from their time-space.

Thirteen against six. They had more than twice the number advantage. The enemy’s **space-time bubbles** didn’t stand a chance. Those bubbles were likely to be assault ships, which were quite weak to **mine** offensives.

The three patrol ships kept cruising as though nothing had happened.

“**Senior staff officer** ,” said Sporr.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“What do you think is the greatest sin a **starpilot** can commit?”

“Insubordination against a superior officer, I would think.” Cfadiss had answered in an ingratiating way without even meaning to, and he tumbled into a bout of self-loathing over it.

“No! The greatest sin is stupidity,” she said, surprising him. “Think about it. You can feel a great sense of responsibility, and you can carry out orders faithfully, but if you’re an idiot, then there’s nothing to be done. And what kind of fool would send six **assault ships** to bat away a trio of **patrol ships** ?”

“I see.” His commander understood the reason behind the glum mood, and Cfadiss nodded.

“I may be glib, but I’m no fool. I will never send my subordinates to meaningless deaths.”

“Yes.” *But everybody operates under that same belief* , he thought to himself. That being said, Sporr’s command style was indeed outstanding. Partly owing to his inexperience aboard a patrol ship unit, he hadn’t yet carried out much of any of his work duties as **senior staff officer** .

“My **headquarters** doesn’t need any idiots. This here **Great Duchess of Laitpanh** chooses her playmates. She just can’t choose who she plays against.”

Stared at by the **crimson eyes of the Sporr** , Cfadiss broke into a cold sweat. “I’ll work on becoming a more competent playmate.”

“You certainly have the potential.” Sporr’s lips curled into a faint little smile.

“One minute until **space-time fusion** !” said the **navigation staff officer** .

“Still no **signal of surrender** ,” added the **communications staff officer** .

“**Navigation staff officer** !” Sporr looked away from Cfadiss’s face. “Make it so that all three ships fuse with them at the same time.”

“Roger that.”

“Transmit the following to all ships. As soon as our space-times fuse, fire the **EM cannons** .” She was already immersing herself in her *frocragh* spatio-sensory perception in anticipation of the **battle in normal space** . Her eyes closed, **Associate Commodore** Sporr smiled, as though expecting some auspicious turn. “Now then, what’s waiting for us inside? I’m getting excited!”

“Ten seconds to **space-time fusion** . Eight. Seven. Six. Five...” the navigation officer counted down. “Four. Three. Two. One. **Space-time fusion** !”

The warning sound that accompanied the firing of the **EM cannon**

reverberated through the ship's bridge.

Cfadiss greatly expanded the scope of his *frocragh* . Now he could sense the enemy ship in front. It was giant, but it was alone.

“The **signal of surrender** !” shouted the **communications staff officer** . “It’s coming in via *droch daimr* (electromagnetic communication)...”

“Cease the offensive!” Sporr didn’t bother hearing out the rest. Her eyes flared open, and she stood up. “Call all ships to cease the offensive! Firing at a ship that has surrendered will dishonor the name of Sporr!”

*Could’ve said it would dishonor the name of the **Empire** , or the **Star Forces** , even of the *Abh*, Cfadiss mused.*

But her orders hadn’t made it in time. The *Hasunbyrch* fired its **EM cannons** . However, the shell self-destructed before it could reach the enemy ship.

“For heaven’s sake, why didn’t they send it out via **inter-bubble communication** . Did they really think they could get away?” she grumbled. “Transmit the following to the *Baugbyrch* . Raid, inspect, and take the enemy ship. Then have the *Hasunbyrch* follow me.”

The resident of **Space-time Bubble 661** was a single large transport freighter. After confirming that, the flagship *Hairbyrch* split off from this space-time alongside the *Hasunbyrch* .

“The enemy **battle-line warship** unit has been near-totally wiped out,” reported Cfadiss.

“Oh.” Sporr seemed to think little of that news. Yet he could clearly tell she was concealing her disappointment.

“Your orders with regard to our course, ma’am,” asked Cfadiss.

“Course: 160, at **complete mobile-state** . We’re going back to where my ships are.”

“Yes.” Cfadiss relayed the orders to the **captains** .

He felt as though his opinion of his commander had improved considerably in a short space of time... but then he rationalized that as a momentary temptation by some dark force. Cfadiss had two, no, three things to get off his

chest.

“That look is insubordination against a superior officer,” she said, her **command staff** pointed at his face.

“Yes, ma’am.” Cfadiss concluded that at this juncture, he’d better keep quiet.

Sporr was lost in thought, but when she noticed that he was still casting an interrogative gaze her way, it seemed she succumbed to the urge to explain herself, albeit only a little. She ruffled up the scarlet-blue hair that had been so diligently braided. “My hunches are off the mark sometimes, you know.”

The battle was over now. The only agents left on the battlefield were either allies, or surrendering enemies.

“A **connecting vessel** has arrived from the *Ftuné* ,” reported **Kilo-commander Cahyoor**.

“Oh?” Tlife nodded. “So, what’ve they got for us?”

“It seems they’ve taken the enemy’s bureaucrats prisoner.”

“Superb! That’s fantastic... but, why exactly were there bureaucrats on the battlefield?”

“It appears to be customary in the United Humankind for bureaucrats such as media spokespersons and battle cheerers to accompany soldiers into battle. They were in a large **transport freighter** near the **Sfagnoff Gate** .”

“Hm...” The way the UH did things was totally inscrutable to him. Tlife was pacing the bridge, but he halted in place once he realized no amount of contemplation would clear up their mysteries. “Oh well, whatever. We won.”

“Yes. Our victory was assured.”

“Too assured to take any thrill in it, but I’m glad in any case. Order all units to amass.”

“Roger.”

“Plus, let’s have the *Ftuné* do one last thing. After resupplying, they’re to leave for the **Sfagnoff Gate** at once. If there aren’t any forces left to contend with, they are to annex control over the **marquessate** ’s astrospace. Who’s

worked the least throughout the battle?”

“Each **half-fleet** has fulfilled their responsibilities admirably...”

“I know that. I don’t mean to reprimand anybody, so just tell me.”

“If I’m forced to say...” Cahyoor cocked his head. “The *Byrdaimh*’s kill rate was quite modest.”

“I see. Then leave the *Byrdaimh* to do all of the cleaning up.”

“Understood.”

The main casualties of the **Tlife fleet** that were ascertained at the end were as follows:

Ships sunk:

24 **escort ships**

17 **assault ships**

1 **patrol ship**

Serious damage:

51 **escort ships**

47 **assault ships**

5 **patrol ship**

Slight damage:

95 **escort ships**

117 **assault ships**

19 **patrol ship**

7 **battle-line warships**

Counting only sunken and heavily damaged ships, there were 145. Since the ships that were only lightly damaged could be repaired by *daüsiac* (construction ships) even while mobilized, these 145 ships were the only ones recorded as lost in the **Tlife fleet**’s register of vessels. Though these were by no means minor figures — especially to the people aboard those ships and their families

— they presented no impediment to the fleet's overall martial power.

By comparison, of the 900 ships in the UH Peacekeepers' Dispatch Fleet A, only 27 were operable, and all 27 had surrendered, to be plundered and looted by the **Star Forces** .

It was an overwhelming victory for the **Imperial Star Forces** .

The heavily damaged ships received temporary repairs, ships that could no longer sail under their own power were towed by construction ships, and they all left for the **imperial capital** , with the captured enemy ships taken there as well.

When the first stage of battlefield processing was complete, two rounds of **mines** were fired from the flagship *Cairhdigh* . Instead of antimatter bombs, however, these contained bouquets of flowers.

The moment their **space-time bubble engines** ran out of fuel and the **mines** turned into space-time particles and scattered, **Commodore** Tlife ordered a moment of silence for the dead, both allies and enemies.

As the majority of the dead were enemy soldiers, this gesture was as good as a declaration of victory for the Abh.

Chapter 4: *İucrabh Frybarer* (Battleground of the Empire)

“You think we’re delusional, don’t you?” said Marca.

“Huh? What makes you think that?” said Jinto, playing innocent.

They were on a mountain a thousand or so *üésdagh* from the city of Guzonh. Bill wasn’t present, as he was on the job, and if he up and disappeared in the middle of a delivery it’d raise some eyebrows. Besides, he had a living to make. With Bill absent, it was the four remaining members of the Claspule Anti-Imperial Front (Marca, Undertaker, Min, and Daswani) who joined Jinto and Lafier on the side of the mainline as they all transferred onto the mechanical walker that was now climbing up the mountain.

The eight-legged walker bore the weight of all six, and scaled the slope using what little footholds there were. Those footholds did seem to link into a sort of passage up, though: a trail where the otherwise rampant vines and assorted trees didn’t grow.

It was a rough ride, reminiscent of a non-gravity-controlled spaceship. While the attitude control mechanism tried its best to keep their seats level, it occasionally failed to cope with the degree of the slope, causing them to shake up and down. Even now, Undertaker was blue in the face struggling to keep the contents of his stomach from going home to Sfagnoff’s sun.

Meanwhile, Lafier, having been raised in space, was cool as a cucumber. Jinto, for his part, did feel sick in the stomach at times, but it wasn’t too bad.

Marca pointed to Lafier with her chin: “You’re thinking there’s no way the **Empire** would ever recognize our independence, even if we’ve taken this young lady as a hostage.”

“So you know?” Lafier seemed relieved. “I was concerned we would be forced to deceive all of you.”

“Then, like, why are you bothering to take us hostage?” asked Jinto.

“For a ship,” said Marca.

“What we want are spaceships.”

“But, Min said...” *...that what you want is independence* , Jinto was about to say.

“It’s a different tack,” said Min matter-of-factly. “We have two tacks open to us.”

“Right. Min’s of the belief we should grab independence in one fell swoop, while I think we should get there step-by-step. No matter the circumstances, the **Empire** will never hand us independence for a single life. He’s the delusional one; I’m the realist.”

“I heartily disagree, and I’ll tell you why...”

“If you wish to ride a spaceship, then you can just become an **imperial citizen** ,” said Lafier, putting a damper on their impromptu duel of strategies.

“See, this is why the little Abh lady gets my goat. *Urp !*” Undertaker clamped his mouth and resisted the urge to hurl before continuing. “We don’t want to *ride* in spaceships — we want to *own* them. That, *urp* ...that’d be real freedom. And not some shoddy jalopy that can only fly within the star system, either. We want ships that can go interstellar.”

“That is what we call impossible,” said Lafier, airily laying down the truth before Jinto could stop her. “Every **interstellar ship** in the **Empire** is property of **Her Majesty the Empress** . They are in the hands of the Empire itself. Even people of high noble rank don’t personally own their interstellar ships.”

Marca narrowed her eyes. “But there were so many different kinds of *gareurec* (company) and **grandee** ships at the **spaceport** . You can’t pull the wool over my eyes.”

“They’re on loan,” Lafier explained. “Borrowers can choose whatever size ship for however long they’d like, but it’s the *Rüé-casobérlach* (Imperial Merchant Ship Group) that holds authority over personnel affairs.”

“I don’t believe it... Listen here, I’ve looked into **imperial law** . There’s nothing about possession of **interstellar ships** being forbidden!”

“When it comes to relations between the **Empire** and the **noble** classes, much

is unwritten custom. You would never know it from reading the law.”

“*Urp* ! Damn **Empire** ; how secretive can you get!?”

“No one is keeping it a secret,” said Lafier, taken aback. “It’s simply that even if you knew that, nothing would come of it. Is that not true?”

“Then what, *urp* , what about our hopes and dreams!?”

An uncomfortable silence followed Undertaker’s remark. Nobody had any words. The air reverberated only with the mechanical *GREESH, GREESH* of the ever-ascending walker.

Jinto couldn’t stand it any longer. “Uhh, so... what now? If you don’t want us as ‘hostages’ anymore, just tell us and we’ll be...”

“Shut up.” Marca put two fingers on her forehead.

“Uhh...” Jinto’s conscience panged. “I didn’t think that was your *actual* goal... I mean, you never exactly went into detail about what exactly you were planning...”

“I told you to shut up.”

Min stared at Jinto. “This would mean that you believe that straight independence for the star system would be easier to obtain than ownership of spaceships, correct?”

“Well... I never thought you were being *for real* , you know...?”

“You didn’t think we were being ‘for real’!? Hmph! I’m not interested in being your clown.”

“Would you shut up!?” Marca clapped her hands to bring attention back to her. “Look, it’s fine. There’s always an exception!”

A spherical building came into view beyond the road. It glistened on the side of the mountain, reflecting the light of Sfagnoff’s sun.

“Hey, uhh, is that where we’re going?” Jinto pointed to the building, hoping it would mend this unpleasant atmosphere.

“It was,” said Min. “It’s my holiday house, and we WERE going to keep you two locked up in there, but is there still any point?”

“You should give that matter serious thought. I don’t particularly care either way,” said Lafier.

“You Abhs really are arrogant, you know that?” said Undertaker, suddenly forgetting his nausea.

“She’s really unbearable sometimes, but please, don’t let it get to you,” Jinto said in her defense.

“I was trying to be NICE!” It appeared Lafier didn’t much care for Jinto’s efforts to smooth things over.

“Let me tell you,” said Jinto into Undertaker’s ear, “she has no self-awareness, either.”

“I feel your pain,” said Undertaker, looking at Jinto with the most sympathetic eyes.

“What are you telling him?” frowned Lafier warily.

“Look!” Marca shouted suddenly. From the direction she was pointing, two objects had emerged from the shadows, and came floating toward them.

“Min, did you buy those, or...?”

“They’ve nothing to do with me,” he said, on the verge of panic.

While they were busy staring, the two floating objects alighted on the walker’s front and back.

Lafier read the text: “United Humankind Armored Air Mobile Personnel Transport Vessel.”

The hatches to each of them opened, and about ten soldiers shuffled running from each.

A commissioned officer who looked to be their commander raised the volume of his machine translation device before saying “Who are you, citizens?”

“No, who are YOU!?” barked Min, who stood up out of his seat.

“Apologies. I am Military Police Major Aranga of the United Humankind Peacekeepers Sfagnoff Land Dispatch Corps RC Division Military Police Regiment. Now that I’ve introduced myself, may I ask you to follow suit?”

Min pointed to his holiday house. “I’m the owner. Thought I’d host a get-together over some fine food with my friends.”

“You are a member of the Secessionist Party, one Min Cursap, correct?”

Min winced momentarily. “I’m a former member. I left the Party three years ago.”

“You are named ‘Min,’ though, correct, citizen?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Citizen,” Aranga announced, “you are under arrest. We also have some questions for your friends.”

Min’s face went pale. “But why!? On what grounds are you...”

“A large stockpile of weapons was discovered in your holiday house. We would very much like to ask you all about it.”

Min turned to the rest to explain himself. “They’re hardly a ‘large stockpile.’ A **needle gun** , a **paralyzer gun** , nothing much, really...”

“Why in blazes...” Marca shook her head, as though completely lost.

“There are extremely reasonable suspicions that you Secessionists are in fact a cover-up organization working as reactionaries on behalf of the **Empire** to resist freedom. I would simply like to hear what you have to say on the matter, and in great detail. As you can see, resistance is futile,” he said, gesturing toward all of the soldiers with guns trained on them.

“Man, have they got that backwards,” muttered a teed-off Undertaker.

That said, given that they were being detained in the company of an Abh, there was nothing they could say to get them to believe their actual aims. They had been chased into a corner, and things looked exceptionally bad.

Of course, in terms of jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire, Jinto and Lafier could not be outdone.

Jinto looked her way. She was gripping something in her right hand. Two **magazines** for her **phaser** .

Lafier transferred one of them to her left hand.

There was a slight but audible *bzzz* .

Suddenly, Jinto understood. *Good god — Lafier wants to start a war right here!*

Jinto was just about to reach out a hand, but Lafier never gave him the chance; she crossed her arms in front of her chest, and quickly extended them like the flapping of a bird's wings.

The twin **phaser magazines** swung in opposite directions, tracing parabolas in the air.

Lafier's ability to adapt to differing gravity levels was something to behold. Her aim with the **phaser magazines** erred not. One hit the armor of the transport vessel in front, while the other got sucked into the still-open door of the other behind them.

A giant *THWOOM* rattled them all to their cores. The twin flashes of light were followed by the intermingling commotion of the explosions, the shrieks, and the roars of indignation.

"What have you done..." Min murmured, in blank amazement.

"RUN!" cried Lafier, leaping out of the walker without delay, already wielding a **phaser** in her grip.

But Jinto knew the program by now. He flopped to the ground with the duffel bag in his arms, and the other four stumbled over themselves after them.

"Over there!" Lafier used the **phaser** like a **command staff** , pointing toward a clump of bushes.

The band of six rushed straight into them.

Aranga barked some kind of command. At once, hails of gunfire wrecked the walker and knocked down several trees.

With a single shot, Lafier expertly picked Aranga off. "Hurry!" she urged.

Jinto ran for his life, fending off the tangle of vines and branches all the while. Right behind him, trees got blown away or set aflame by enemy fire. The damage to the environment pained his heart, the selfsame heart that felt like he was probably the next on the destruction menu.

“You goddamned Abh!” Jinto heard Min swearing. “Now I’m a wanted man!”

“Silence. You may complain to me later!”

Indeed, this was not the time or place for a heart-to-heart. The soldiers were gradually regaining their footing, and they burned for vengeance.

“Blast it all! Over here!” Min pointed.

Min was likely the one among them with the best idea of the local geography, after all. The strange bedfellows therefore looked to him as their guide, and dashed into that thicket.

“Look!” Excited and wound up, the typically mute Daswani pointed up.

There, the Air Mobile Personnel Transport Vessel that had survived Lafier’s assault hovered shakily. The turret on its landing glared contemptuously down at them, and nary a second after its muzzle was trained on the six, the surrounding trees burst into fire.

“Here!” Min beckoned from a gap in the flames, before vanishing from view. Jinto headed over, and was met with an opening gaping just wide enough for a person to pass through.

“Right...” Jinto stuffed Lafier into it, then dove in after her.

Down the surprisingly smooth tunnel they slid. At the end they each felt a floating sensation, their fall broken by something elastic.

“Make way!” came Min’s voice. Jinto tumbled frantically toward its sound. He could also hear a series of *thunks* , one per falling object.

“Oww,” groaned Undertaker.

Jinto finally remembered his **phaser** , and retrieved it from the bag to set it on ILLUMINATE.

They were in a cave, about a person’s length in diameter. A large buffer cushion was situated nearby — it seemed that was where he landed. Undertaker and Daswani were still holding each other in an embrace atop it. Then the two of them hopped off, their breathing still ragged.

“Is everyone here?” asked Min.

“Seems that way,” said Marca.

“Then come with me.” Min pointed toward the cave’s recesses.

“Ah, before that...” Jinto shot the cushion with the **phaser** .

A gooey liquid began pouring out of its ripped form, and it swiftly shed its elasticity.

The six pushed their way through to the inner depths. Jinto had to walk alongside Min at the head of the pack in order to light the way. “What is this place?”

“It’s a lava tunnel. The planet’s a young one. Not even a billion years back, rivers of lava ran all over the surface. This is what remains.”

“But what about that chute we fell down...?”

“An escape route I dug in case of an emergency, naturally. But never mind that.” Min raised his voice. “I hope you know you’ve done a number on me! Now they know my name! And as an Empire collaborator, of all things! What a hideous disgrace.”

“I apologize,” said Lafier’s quite composed voice from behind. “It’s truly unfortunate you’ve all been embroiled in this. Regardless, we cannot allow ourselves to be captured so easily.”

“Years back, there was a guy who jumped from a second story into a bed of thorns,” recounted Undertaker in melancholic tones. “No fire or anything, either. ‘Course, poor guy got pricked everywhere, so they carried him to the hospital. Well, the wounds weren’t too serious, but the guy had ‘em all over. Think he was grunting and groaning over being covered in tissue regeneration stimulants. When I went to see him, I asked him what he was thinking...”

“What’s this about all of a sudden?” asked Marca, audibly irritated.

Undertaker ignored her. “You wanna know what came out of his mouth? He said he couldn’t remember the specifics, but he thought it was a ‘good idea’!”

“And!?”

“That’s it. It just came to mind, that’s all.”

“Feh... I know what you’re getting at,” Marca sighed deeply. “Why did we think taking an Abh hostage was a good idea? I’m going to be dismissed as cell leader now.”

“If we even make it out of this alive,” said Min.

Soon they came upon a fork in the path. “To the right,” Min indicated. “It’s this way to the main ‘river.’”

After they walked down the right path for a time, they could make out very orderly footsteps sounding from all the way toward the entrance.

“They’re here,” whispered Marca.

“Jinto, cut the light!”

“Right.” Jinto complied.

From then on, they had to feel their way onward. Eventually, they reached yet another branch point. Min chose the way without hesitation.

“Will we be able to escape if we continue down this passage?” asked Lafier.

“Yeah. So long as we make it to the main stream, we can enter other tributaries from there, and there are several openings back out to the surface.”

“In that case, you four had best go on without us. We shall keep them at bay.”

“What!?” The halting of feet.

“We cannot allow any more trouble to befall you on our behalves. Now go.”

“You really know how to rip a person’s self-respect to shreds, don’t you? You two are our HOSTAGES. On what planet do the hostages save their captors, huh?”

“No, Undertaker,” Min chided him. “She’s right. At this rate, we’re done for. Those bastards mean to chase them to the ends of the world.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Lafier. “Now go, and make haste.”

“I’d like to give the Abh a piece of my mind on lots of things, but you do seem to know how to take responsibility,” Marca sighed.

A brief silence fell upon the dark.

“Okay, all right. Let’s go. We can talk her head off all we like, but we all know the little lady won’t waver.”

“That is correct,” said Lafier.

“I stay, too,” said Daswani, a man of few words.

“I thank you, but I see you aren’t armed. You would be of no use to us here. Moreover, this is a battleground of the **Empire** . It would not behoove us to keep you at our sides.”

“Come along, Daswani. The little lady’s right.”

“God, this is humiliating,” grumbled Undertaker.

“Hurry! The enemy approaches.”

The acoustics made it impossible to gauge how far they were, but it was clear from the sound of their footsteps that they were closing in.

“Okay. If you live to see another day, let’s meet again,” she intoned nervously.

“I must express my thanks one last time.”

“Oh, stuff it already,” snapped Undertaker. “We kidnapped you! *Kidnapped* you!”

And on that note, the four made their exit.

“Jinto, are you there?”

“‘Course.” Jinto drew nearer to the **royal princess** . “You’re not gonna send *me* off, are you?”

“No.” He could practically hear the smile in her voice. “Your marksmanship is horrid, but you’ll still be of some use. At the very least, you’ll make for a fine bullet shield.”

“For crying out loud...” he grinned wryly. “You’ve got a real talent for cheering people up, you know that?”

“Your **compuwatch** and **circlet** .”

“Ah, right, of course.”

Jinto set his **phaser** to the lowest output and lit up his immediate vicinity.

Then he fetched his **compuwatch** and **circlet** , and with them every other **phaser magazine** they had, from inside the duffel bag. They split the eight magazines two ways.

“How wise it was not to bury them,” gloated Lafier as she equipped her **circlet** with a triumphant look.

Once again, Jinto could only smile with bitter amusement. Lafier had every right to be a sore winner.

He turned off the light and switched it to FIRE, then knelt on one knee and awaited the enemy.

The cave was quite confined. A shoot-out wouldn't hinge on manpower. The supply of soldiers would give out before their supply of **phaser cartridges** dried up.

And yet...

“It's bad news if they use heavy arms against us. The cave'll collapse on us.”

“You needn't worry,” said Lafier, brimming with confidence. “The **Kin of the Stars** could never die in an earthen tomb.”

“Can't even tell if that's a decent point at this rate...” Jinto shrugged in the darkness. He felt terribly at ease considering they'd be fighting to the death in mere moments.

Chapter 5: The *Logh Labyrena* (Maddening Maid)

“Must’ve gotten to them before us.” Entryua lit himself a smoke.

Another kind of smoke was issuing from the wreckage of the UH Armored Air Mobile Personnel Transport Vessel before their eyes. It wouldn’t have been out of place to spot at least a few wounded, but there were none to meet the eye. Odds were they’d been carried off to the field hospital.

Three soldiers stretched a rope around the perimeter of the vessel, glaring at Entryua with furrowed brows.

“How did they know to find them here?” puzzled Kyte.

“That’s what I want to know. Why don’t you go ask those soldiers for us, huh?”

“Right. Of course.” Kyte walked up to them.

Only about an hour had passed since they deduced the members of the Clasbule Anti-imperial Front Guzonh Cell’s membership from the hotel manager’s deposition.

Investigators wasted no time checking related sites, such as their residences and places of work. And one of those sites was the holiday home of one Min Cursap. At present, not even a single one of the cell members had been spotted in any of those places, let alone the Abh.

Kyte dashed back over. “Min Cursap apparently used to be a member of the Secessionist Party, and a very high-ranking leader at that. Then, a cursory search turned up a large stockpile of munitions...”

“What did you say?” Entryua scowled. They’d already looked into the gist of what there was to know about the cell members through the **computing net** .

“He was a Secessionist Party member three years ago.”

“That fact must not have been seen as very important.” Kyte shrugged. “May I continue?”

“Go ahead.”

“As I was saying, Min and several of his companions appeared while they were cordoning off the area. And when they questioned him...”

“It turned into a fire fight.” Entryua gave their surroundings another once-over. The trees that had been shot were still smoldering, and the parts of what used to be a walker were strewn next to the transport vessel.

“And what a fire fight it was.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“So where is this Min? Was the Abh among his companions?”

“Regarding that...” Kyte hesitated to say it. “It seems that since they let them slip away, they don’t know for sure.”

“They let them slip away!?” Entryua shouted at Kyte hotheadedly, but then he remembered that one, Kyte wasn’t his subordinate, and two, it wasn’t Kyte’s fault. So he settled on cynicism. “You lot, you’re not even really all that, are you? You’ve got all of the equipment, but that’s about it.”

“I’m too ashamed for words.”

“So where’d they run to, anyway?”

Kyte gestured toward the soldiers. “It’d appear they don’t know the details, since they were deployed here after the fact.”

“You people have no coordination.”

“Level C clearance is needed to access that information.”

“And you haven’t got Level C clearance?”

“I do. I’m going to take a peek now.”

“Well, good.” Entryua dropped his smoke’s embers onto the ground and stamped them out before lighting up another.

Kyte peered into his transceiver’s screen and whispered something. Subsequently, the information displayed, and he read it aloud. “Min and six companions fled underground from Mark RC193-401 at 08:17 military time. Four people under Military Police Major Aranga died, and 12 were injured. Eight have begun tracking them under the command of Military Police Sublieutenant

Muhammedov. At 08:30, Military Police Command requested backup from the District Management Headquarters. In response, three infantry platoons under Lieutenant Sleet were dispatched at 08:55. Said reinforcements arrived at the scene at 09:14, and are currently tracking them down on foot...”

“What’s this ‘military time’ business? Is it different from our time?”

“Yes. Right now, it’s 09:35 military time.”

“It’s slower by 21 minutes, huh...” Entryua stretched. He’d been working for too long. His back hurt. And now that he thought about, he hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in days.

“What do we do now? Do we head underground as well?”

“Can’t say that’s the brightest idea. We’d just get in the other soldiers’ way.”

“Then do we give up here?” Kyte gave him a puppy dog look.

“No, we’re not throwing in the towel now.” He had only a half day left to spend with this guy, he reasoned. “They’re hiding in the Guzonh Caverns. Criminals and adventure-seeking kids’ve been disappearing into them for who knows how long. It’s a regular stomping ground for us police. So much so, we’ve taken to calling the cops in Guzonh ‘crawlers.’ They’ve got to have fairly detailed info on the place.”

“Then...”

“Yep. If they grab the Abh and her gang in those tunnels, then there’s nothing we can do. But we can get to them before they do. Your friends’ve got odor or heat detectors, right?”

“I’d be shocked if they don’t.”

“Then they must know where the Abh’s gone. Can you find out where the soldiers who tracked them are right now?”

“Yes,” Kyte said with enthusiasm, “of course.”

“Great. Let’s chase that lead, then.” Entryua took a deep breath. “Just to warn you, though — if there’s no Abh among them, I don’t much care, got it?”

Luminous letters floated in the dark. They were using the **compuwatch**’s heat

detector function. It wasn't as accurate as a dedicated heat detector device, but it did show them a rough estimate of their distance, their bearing, and the size of their heat signatures.

"They're close," Jinto breathed. "1,000 *dagh* away, if that."

"Uh-huh."

The enemy stalked ever nearer without any illumination. And why would they use any? It was obvious they had night vision goggles or something of the sort. In other words, the enemy could see them. Lafier had her *frocragh*, but that did nothing to tip the scales.

He could hear a *bzzzz* where he knew Lafier was. He sensed her move. The next instant, countless lines of fire clove through the darkness! Since they were holed up in the inner part of the branching point, bullets didn't come flying their way, but they did punch into the cave's edge, causing small explosions. Shards of stone rained down on them.

"Take cover!" said Lafier, voice strained.

The moment Jinto obeyed, a hell of an explosion rocked him — the **phaser magazine** that Lafier lobbed had released all of its energy instantaneously. The dark yielded to the dazzling light, and the temperature within the cave rose several degrees.

The firing lines broke off.

"Come on, run!"

Jinto dashed for the depths. In the momentary light, they could make out the wide-open mouth of the small cave. Yet as they raced, darkness enclosed them once more.

"Stop!" said Lafier, upon reaching a spot by the small cave's mouth.

"You gonna attack 'em here?" His voice quavered. He thought himself pathetic, but then he thought twice. It was just him being human.

"Yep. You had best take a knee and ready your gun."

"You got it." Jinto did exactly that. Lafier reached a hand to adjust his gun's aim.

“When I give the signal, aim up and down and don’t stop firing.”

“Aye aye. Though I’m not super confident shooting at targets I can’t see.”

“You’re such a lousy shot that whether or not you see them has no bearing.”

“Thanks for giving it to me straight,” he said, deflated.

“Now!” Having detected them with her *frocragh*, Lafier began firing.

Jinto pulled the trigger with abandon, waving the gun up and down.

A shriek. *Ah, did I just shoot a dude?*

Maybe this was what they called the battlefield mentality. No rage, no guilt. If he had to name what was impelling him to pull that trigger, it was fear.

The **phaser** itself wasn’t visible in the dark. The points of light that hit the victims’ bodies were. That light illuminated still more enemy soldiers that were being sent spinning. Their positioning allowed them to fire comfortably, but the enemy was not afforded the same, a gap very much borne out by the fruits of battle: a pile of corpses.

Jinto was racked by nausea. Of course, just because the enemy had disadvantageous positioning didn’t mean they had acted as targets and nothing else. The gleaming lines of fire chipped away at the granite in the cave walls. Rapid fire sprayed a point not even ten *dagh* away from him.

The cave’s edge was alive with gunfire.

Jinto took aim and strafed, firing continuously. The soldiers’ guns glanced away, accompanied by screaming. Perhaps their arms had joined their guns in flying off.

The inside of his mouth was bone-dry.

*Man, I’d give my **noble rank** for a glass of cold water right now.*

This he thought with all seriousness, for that was all his **rank** meant to him.

The cave was lit by the dim glow of death. He could just make out an enemy hand move. Something came flying through the air.

“Jinto!” Lafier kicked his right flank.

Jinto immediately understood why she had. He rolled into a small grotto. Lafier slid in after him.

“C’mon, deeper!” Jinto twined bodies with Lafier and raced for the inner recesses.

Suddenly, a blast wave bowled them over from behind. Jinto pitched forward and tumbled twice over. He had failed to take into account how **phaser magazines** were nothing more than substitute bombs. They were virtually party poppers compared to real deal hand grenades.

The wave of intense heat squashed down on their backs.

“Hot hot hot!” Jinto gritted his teeth.

Though they were on their stomachs, still they crawled forward. The crashing of copious rubble rumbled to their rear. It was a cave-in.

“Quick!” Jinto somehow managed to get to his feet, and helped her up.

The collapse continued apace. The igneous rock, which had become brittle due to weathering, was coming off the walls, plummeting down onto Jinto’s shoulders.

Finally, a pause in the crumbling.

Jinto looked back, but unfortunately could only see pitch darkness.

“What’s the situation?” asked Jinto, relying on Lafier’s *frocragh* .

“We’re sealed in.”

“For real?”

“Why would I lie?”

“Right, right.”

Jinto set his gun to ILLUMINATE. The grotto was totally sealed. The ground above them had probably given way.

Jinto wasn’t sure how to interpret this turn of events. Maybe he should thank his stars this had saved them by keeping the enemy away. On the other hand, it was more than possible that this passage had no exit; for all he knew, this was their living tomb.

“In any case,” said Jinto, “let’s keep going and see what’s down there.”

“I see no other choice.”

That was when Jinto noticed he’d lost the duffel bag. *Oh well* , thought Jinto resignedly. He’d transferred the important things like cash and **phaser cartridges** to his **pocket** anyway.

Jinto switched out the used-up **cartridge** for another, and started down the pitch dark path.

“Enemy fleet found! Azimuth: 105-010. Distance: 0.12. Relative speed: 217.5 *üésdagh* . Ship number: around 20.”

Cfadiss had picked up the planet of Clasbule using his *frocragh* . The group of **patrol ships** in the **reconnaissance half-fleet** *Ftuné* was also close by. So, too, was the shadow of the enemy vessels rising up to face them. The enemy ships were clearly aiming for what lay behind the *Ftuné* — which was to say, the **Sfagnoff Gate** .

“Verification of enemy ships complete. They are thought to be 12 large-scale **transport freighters** , one **patrol ship** , and six **assault ships** ,” said the **gunner staff officer** . Our chances of victory are 0.987 in 1.”

“Do we advise them to surrender?” Cfadiss asked his **commander** , **Associate Commodore Sporr**.

“No need. They would if they wanted to. And they must already understand what’s in store for them,” came Sporr’s reply.

“Never mind that; Prepare for **battle in normal space** . Massed Battle Formation 5.”

“Understood.” Cfadiss translated Sporr’s commands into reality.

Yet the enemy ships didn’t budge. They came creeping up the spatial warps created by Clasbule’s gravity.

“A transmission from the enemy,” reported the **communications staff officer** . “It’s a holovision transmission. Time gap: 0.23 seconds.”

“Connect them.”

A video link was established on the **Commander's Bridge** . Cfadiss was surprised. He had been expecting a high-level enemy officer, but here instead was an Abh male. Though his garments were dirty, and he wasn't wearing a **circlet** , the *froch* on his forehead, coupled with the iridescent blue hair and the face of beauty, betrayed his Abhness.

"Oh, so you're the **commander** , **Great Duchess of Laitpanh** ." He flashed a wan smile. "Fancy we should meet under such circumstances."

"It's been a while, **Marquess of Sfagnoff** ," she greeted him, inclining her head. "I never would have expected you to send a communication from aboard an enemy ship. What in heavens has transpired?"

"To my great shame, I've been taken prisoner. They told me they'd kill a child before my very eyes if I didn't send the message."

"I see." Sporr's eyes turned grim and severe. "Please, then, your message."

"There are 21 Abhs in this fleet. My family, my **servants** , and the **starpilots** of the **liaison fleet** . If our lives mean anything to you, then you will refrain from attacking. We also demand safe passage through **flat space** ."

"If we were to abide by those demands, what will become of all of you?"

"I imagine we'd be sent to a prison camp or somesuch, **Great Duchess** . In any case, they've been chased into such a desperate corner that they have no choice but to trust demands like these will hold water," he continued with a rather detached air.

"How fascinating."

"Truly, it is," nodded the Marquess. "Now, I bid you farewell, **Great Duchess of Laitpanh** . Fulfill your duty. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, **Marquess** ."

The hologram cut out.

"I really hate him. The **Marquess** ." Sporr bit the joint of her pinky, and stood up from her special-ordered chaise. "**Communications staff officer** ."

"Yes."

“Connect me through to them.”

“Through holovision, ma’am?”

“Sound-only is fine.”

“Roger. Preparations complete. Please speak.”

“This is the **Commander** of the **reconnaissance half-fleet** *Ftuné* , **Associate Commodore** Sporr,” she intoned imposingly. “Let the tolerance and generosity of the **Star Forces** be known, for we will give you a chance to surrender. We shall wait until the distance between us reaches 0.08 light-seconds. Needless to say, this is contingent upon you not laying a finger upon our compatriots. Allow me to stress, again, the magnanimity of the **Star Forces** . For should you waste this chance to surrender, then we have an even sweeter fate prepared. That is, you will get to reflect on what an honor it is to die alongside **Abh nobility** as you disintegrate into elementary particles! The atoms that composed your bodies will probably even fall back onto the **terrestrial worlds** that were your homes, after a few hundred million years of riding the galactic vortex.”

A solemn silence gripped the **bridge** .

“Now transmit the following to all ships under my command. You needn’t cipher it.”

“Roger. Preparations complete.”

“We will begin the attack at 0.08 light-seconds’ distance. Once the assault has begun, you may ignore any **signal of surrender** from the enemy. Crush them completely. Show them no mercy, not even with *üicoc* (lifeboats). I shall take all responsibility and all of the blame!”

“Please wait!” Cfadiss stepped toward the **Commander’s Seat** .

“What, **Senior Staff Officer** !?” she said, her shoulders squared haughtily.

“Shooting an enemy that has surrendered would damage the reputation of the **Empire** and of the **Star Forces** .”

She glared at him with her blazing crimson eyes. But Cfadiss had to stay his ground. “And it may not be my place to say it, but it would also stain the **crest** of the **Golden Crow** .”

That seemed to have worked the effect he wanted. Sporr leaned against her **Commander's Seat** — crestfallen, Cfadiss perceived — and appeared to give the matter more thought.

When next she laid eyes on Cfadiss, a bewitching smile graced those venomously red lips. A shiver ran down the **Hecto-commander**'s spine. It was no doubt the smile a cat would make when playing with its prey, if cats had slightly richer facial expressions.

"You're right, **Senior Staff Officer** . There's no beauty in assaulting an enemy that's surrendered. Let's not."

"I am grateful you have heeded my counsel," he answered warily.

"Incidentally, it's my prerogative how the prisoners of war are transferred, isn't it?"

"Yes. You are the highest-ranking commander here, *Lonh* ." Cfadiss couldn't fathom why she would ask a question whose answer she already knew.

"Lovely. What is your estimate as to the enemy's numbers?"

"With 12 large-scale **transport freighters** , I imagine there around 25,000 of them. That is, assuming their main cargo is people."

"I see. They could fit on a *Tars* -class **transport freighter** , couldn't they."

"They could, but..." Cfadiss furrowed his brow. He was only getting more and more confused; what was she scheming?

Tars -class ships were small-scale transport freighters that accompanied reconnaissance half-fleets. There were also *rébhath* (troop ships), but those housed 1,500 at the most. Even if they were to save on living quarter expenses by inducing cryogenic sleep on all of the new passengers, they would be able to fit in no more than around 10,000 people. If 25,000 people were to board, it'd be physically filled to capacity. Moreover, transporting prisoners of war required the presence of an appropriate number of **escort NCCs** aboard.

"Run the numbers, will you? We will be bringing 25,000 aboard a *Tars* **transport freighter** . How long will it take, by ship's time, to get them to the **imperial capital** Lacmhacarth traveling through **normal space** ? And you needn't

spare any thought to deceleration. I don't mind spending all of our fuel accelerating at two *daimon* of G-forces."

"Traveling only through **normal space**?" he asked back in spite of himself.

"Correct. Now calculate."

And so he was forced to start crunching the numbers.

"Distance from the enemy now 0.1 light-seconds," somebody reported expeditiously.

Using his **compuwatch**, Cfadiss summoned up detailed specs of the *Tars* class, and determined the acceleration duration and final velocity in view of the mass of 25,000 people and the food and water they would need. Making sure to apply the rotation speed of the galaxy in his calculations, he divided the distance to the **imperial capital** by the speed, then factored in the time dilation rate...

The result was just as absurd as he expected.

"It would take around 58,300 years..."

"Is that so," said Sporr. "I don't believe our prisoners would be too elated to discover it will take that long."

"I should think not..."

"Then let's make it a shorter, faster trip for them. They won't need a **space-time bubble engine**, nor a *roilagac* (attitude control engine). Nor any **crewmembers**. While we're at it, let's do them the favor of removing the **gravity control system**. Though even then it'd be too heavy, wouldn't it? Have you included food and water in your calculations?"

"Yes, one year's worth, and then a hydroponic plantation facility of the smallest possible dimensions would need to—"

"Oh, there won't be any need for hydroponics. Get rid of it for them, won't you?"

"I could also remove their food, drinking water, and air purification system if you wish?" said Cfadiss, reluctantly setting foot on her train.

“Don’t be stupid. They’d *die* if we did that. We could never be so cruel... Now then, the ship must have gotten quite light by now.”

“Not appreciably lighter than before, I think...”

“Be a dear and run the numbers.”

Cfadiss did so. “It will take about 49,100 years.”

“See? We’ve saved them nearly 10,000 years. That’s an appreciable difference, and I won’t hear otherwise.”

“Well, that is true, but...”

“**Communications Staff Officer !**” Sporr raised her **command staff** and let fly her orders. “I have a message for all ships. No ciphering. I’m amending my orders. You are to absolutely respect any inclination on their part to surrender. However, those who surrender only after battle has commenced will be taken to Lacmhacarth through **normal space** only. The **transport freighter** that is to ferry them must, with an eye toward necessary time saving, be divested of frivolities such as its **space-time bubble engine** , **gravity control system** ,and its **attitude control engine** . No **crewmembers** are to board, either. The prisoners shall be given one year’s worth of food and water for their trip. The amount of time it will take them to arrive will vary depending on the number of prisoners, but as of now it’s estimated at around 49,000 years. In addition, the maximum occupancy of the transport freighter in question is 1,500. That is all.”

“Please wait, *Lonh* !”

“Silence, **Senior Staff Officer** ,” she asserted. “This is my final decision. I will consider any further words of counsel as insubordination.”

“What a *logh labyrena* (maddening maid)...” he blurted out.

Sporr put the back of the hand that was holding her **command staff** to her mouth and laughed a mighty, boisterous laugh. “Ho ho ho! I do like the sound of that title for me!”

Cfadiss was at a loss for words.

“Distance from the enemy now 0.09 light-seconds.”

He stood stock still, focusing on the enemy ships he could sense through his

frocragh were steadily increasing their relative velocity as they approached.

Then, abruptly, the increase in their relative velocity slowed. In fact, the only fleet accelerating was now the *Ftuné* .

“The enemy has ceased accelerating,” reported the **navigation staff officer** , lending yet greater credence to what Cfadiss’s *frocragh* was telling him.

“The **signal of surrender** , ma’am,” reported the **communications staff officer** with audible relief. “The enemy is requesting to be treated ‘with magnanimity.’”

Phew . Cfadiss exhaled the hot air that had built up in his lungs.

“But of course,” said Sporr, nonplussed. “I never fail to treat prisoners of war with the utmost lenience.”

If what she had in store for them before was lenient, then I’d hate to be treated “with magnanimity,” thought Cfadiss.

“Lest you worry, we will be transporting them through *flat space* . I of course guarantee them a pleasant journey. If they’re well-behaved and luck is on their side, they might even eventually tread their homelands through a prisoner exchange, and without even needing to get atomized first!”

“Allow me to relay,” said the communications staff officer, who then faced the **console** and began the transmission.

“Senior Staff Officer .”

“Yes?” Cfadiss replied nervously.

“I hate fussing over the little things. I’ve no desire to bother you, but...”

“Understood. I shall allocate ships to raid and commandeer the enemy’s vessels at once.”

“So quick on the uptake.” She tapped her cheek with the tip of the **command staff** . “But always remember: I also hate being interrupted. Particularly when I’m giving orders.”

“I apologize.”

“Now then, make it so. Allot Numbers 1 and 2.”

“As you command.”

“The other **squadrons** will take control of Clasbule’s skies. Is that agreeable?”

“As you command,” repeated Cfadiss with a salute.

Two hours later, the reconnaissance half-fleet *Ftuné* took position 20 *saidagh* above Clasbule. Upon conducting surface recon, they discovered to their surprise that there were still several UH land war units deployed. It appeared that the troops aboard the captured freighter were a small part of a larger force.

The *Ftuné* was not built for land war — though it’d have no trouble turning an entire planet into a lump of lava — so they advised the enemy troops to surrender from their station above, demanding order be restored to the **territorial citizens** . However, due to some powerful jamming, that message got scrambled, and they couldn’t be sure it had made it to the surface. The *Ftuné* awaited the arrival of the land war units even as they prepared against potential attack from the surface.

Sporr sighed. “They sure don’t know when to give up, do they? And *nahaineïocs* (war on a terrestrial world) lacks all elegance, too. But I can’t complain. Because fortunately, I won’t be the one wielding command!”

Chapter 6: The *Bhoüécoth* (Great Chase)

The rattling din of tremors was followed by a fresh hail of stone shards.

“Looks like they haven’t called it quits yet,” said Jinto, picking up his pace. “They’re planning to blow up the blockage so they can get at us!”

“We ought to thank them for making us a path back,” said Lafier.

“You know, as long as I’m with you, I’ve got nothing to fear. The universe is filled with hope.”

Over an hour had passed since the battle. The two were still trudging through the cavern, with all of its many twists and turns. They could tell it was sloping upward now, albeit only slightly.

Which means we’re headed towards the upper reaches, thought Jinto.

They were tracing a line back up a tributary of the lava rivers that flowed across the planet several hundred million years ago. Once again, their ears were met with that familiar clamor. It seemed as though the path had not yet been cleared. Meanwhile, the passage was getting narrower, and Jinto was feeling steadily more restless. He couldn’t help but entertain the possibility that they’d soon hit either a dead end or a place too narrow for human traversal.

Sure enough, they reached a point where they could no longer walk side by side. Jinto led the way and they advanced ever further, but they were losing confidence; was there any actual point to this long march of theirs?

At last, the **phaser** shed light upon the end of the road. Gripped by despair, Jinto stopped in his tracks.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lafier.

“It’s a dead end. There’s nowhere to go from... wait, hold on...” Jinto craned in to give it a closer look. It looked awfully *smooth* for a natural formation. Sliding his hand across its surface, he could tell it was, in fact, a crystal stoneware wall. He could even make out a seam running vertically down its center.

“This thing’s a DOOR!” Jinto shouted, astonished.

“A door?”

“Yeah. That’s all it could be.” Jinto tried rubbing the door, pushing at it, and more, but it didn’t open.

“There’s something over there,” said Lafier, clasping him by the shoulder and pointing toward the door’s right.

He shone the light where she indicated, and found there some **controls** , along with the words FOR EMERGENCY USE. Timidly, Jinto pressed the button.

The door split open, and a vertical line of light trickled through. That line would soon become a rectangle of light, which grew wider before their eyes. Jinto squinted against the dazzling brightness, and took a cautious step.

Lafier followed, and scanned their surroundings. “Where are we?”

“Don’t ask me...” Jinto whispered, scarcely believing.

“Looks like an amusement park.”

Easy-listening tunes were playing in the background. A sprawling flower bed lay in front of them, and beyond it, a short building made of stone. The shrill voices of children were audible from somewhere in the distance. On the footpath that ran the length of the flower beds, people were walking alongside various cartoony animals: bears, dogs, cats, elephants, serrows, walruses... each one was human size, and bipedal. Moreover, they were conversing with the kids, and performing tricks. They saw a deer sitting on the lawn giving several children a listen, and in another spot, they saw a lion juggling flaming torches. They were probably animatronics, but they could also be people in costumes. The horses were the only quadrupedal species among them. More were carrying children than not, and so they seemed to function as the park’s means of transport. A fox in clown getup crossed right in front of them while riding a unicycle.

Jinto watched the fox go by, and gazed up. The metal framework went quite high, as did the ceiling made of a semitransparent shroud, most likely **synthetic resin** . Friendly-faced animatronics were dangling from the ceiling as they lifted excitable tots up and down. It was when he noticed each sported eight appendages that he realized they were spiders.

When he looked behind them, he found the door had already closed shut. THIS DOOR IS OFF LIMITS was written in large text.

Jinto glanced Lafier's way, and beamed. "You look like trash!" And at that moment, that was all there was to say, for they were covered in grit and mud from head to toe, to say nothing of their dishevelled hair.

"You all the more," she replied as she patted at her clothes. "You look like someone rescued you from a garbage chute just as you were about to get disposed into space."

"I can imagine," said Jinto, who patted the pebbles and assorted filth from his hair.

A child holding hands with a rhino pointed toward them.

"What a rude little snot, pointing and laughing at a **royal princess** like that."

"He was laughing at you."

Even under army occupation, the amusement park seemed to be thriving. A sense of security was simmering inside them. With this many noncombatant **terrestrial citizens**, particularly children, the UH wouldn't go all out on them.

"C'mon. If we're lucky, we may just come by some new clothes."

"Right."

But just as they were about to set off —

"Please stop," came a voice from above. "You have entered the park from an entrance other than the proper, prescribed entryway. Kindly wait as our security personnel come to ask you about your situation. If you do not comply, be advised that we may report you to the police."

They looked up toward the voice's source, and there hung a giraffe's head. Though its shoulders were around the same height off the ground as a human's, its neck exhibited the primary feature of the giraffe in spades.

"Not happening!" Jinto urged Lafier to follow him as he booked.

"PLEASE STOP, PLEASE STOP, PLEASE STOP..." The giraffe waddled awkwardly after them.

“Attention, customers,” sounded the parkwide announcement. “A state of emergency has arisen. We repeat, this is a state of emergency. We truly apologize for the inconvenience, but we will be closing GUZONH DREAM PARK temporarily. You will be refunded. Please line up at the exit and leave the premises. As long as you conduct yourselves in an orderly fashion, no harm will come to you. Kindly follow the instructions of the staff, and exit calmly and safely. We sincerely await your next visit. We repeat: This is a state of emergency...”

“What is this ‘state of emergency’?” asked Lafier.

Jinto looked at the gun in his hand, then at the giraffe chasing them. “If it’s not us, then I couldn’t tell you.”

In Clabule’s infancy, this place was a lake of lava. From that lake flowed two rivers. The wider river carried large quantities of boiling hot rocks from the lake, while its less impressive counterpart merged with other lava flows and poured into the wider one in the end. When the planet “reached puberty,” the supply of lava ceased, and the lake dried up. The lava either chilled and hardened right there in the lake (thereby contributing to its diminishing size), or it got carried away by the rivers. The lava that hardened after drifting away became parts of Clabule’s crust. After that, it became surrounded by precipitous cliffs, making for an enormous cavity.

Then humans arrived, built cities nearby, and racked their brains for ways to make use of this giant hollow. Turning it into farmland would require laying paths for the agriculture-bots, but the amount they could expect to harvest from the land wasn’t enough to make those costs worth the trouble. After much wrangling, a plan emerged to make it a zoo. One could create a sealed environment simply by covering the hollow with a circular roof. They would split the area into two separate areas, rainforest and grassland, and then populate them with flora and fauna that had never been transplanted to Clabule. The proponent of this idea was lauded and praised, and the matter was settled: a zoo would be constructed there. A company was created, and funds collected, to realize their vision. Nothing stood in the way of their project — or so most believed.

The stormy patch came to pass when the roof was completed. The age-old

notion that trapping animals in cages was unethical returned in vogue, and commanded a significant chunk of public opinion. The counterargument that the enclosures wouldn't be overly cramped fell on deaf ears, ignored as a trifling distinction. Ultimately, the choice was made to employ cartoony animatronics in place of real living animals; the academic undercurrent of the project had been forgotten somewhere along the way, as much that is related to things "academic" tends to be.

With the exception of a handful of animal ecologists, the citizenry was largely satisfied with this outcome. After all, actual animals didn't do tricks (since training animals was nothing more than a crime of anthropocentrism), nor could they hold a conversation with children. To top it all off, they exuded intolerable bodily odors, and resorted to violence whenever they found something to their distaste. It was far easier to feel safe leaving the little ones with animatronic friends than with beasts of nature. Those who deposited their children could either devote their efforts to work, or enjoy more adult avenues of entertainment.

At present, the 70th anniversary of Guzonh Dream Park's founding was close at hand.

"They're here! I was so on the money I could hug someone," said Inspector Entryua inside Guzonh Dream Park's administrative office. "But something's off. There's not enough of 'em."

"We've found the Abh, though!" said Kyte, eyes starry.

"True enough."

Meanwhile, Guzonh Dream Park's manager, who had had to return the admittance fees today's customers paid, stared at the screen with annoyance. "Honestly, I've got a feeling we're going a bit overboard here. They're still just kids, aren't they? Though they are a bit old to be regular clients, I'll give you that."

"That 'kid' meted death on my comrades-in-arms," said the Military Police Lieutenant, grim in the face. "They are brutal killers."

"Uh, huh..." The manager shot Entryua a questioning look.

“Like I said, you’ve got no reason to worry. I’m sure the occupation will pay for any losses.”

“Well, I’m not so sure. Who knows how long they’ll even be sticking around, what with recent events...” The manager was about to continue that train of thought, but then Kyte’s eyes were on him, and he clammed up.

“What?” said Entryua, curious.

“Around a half hour back, the radio-wave-controlled birds started going on the fritz, you see...” he elaborated, glancing intermittently Kyte’s way as he spoke. “So I had the technician look at them, and he told me the machinery was flawless; it’s the radio waves that’re getting jammed. And wouldn’t you know it, the wireless is out of commission, too.”

“And?”

“Inspector,” Kyte cut in. “We have no time. Let’s go get her in cuffs.”

“Please don’t rush this. We can’t round them up until all of the customers have evacuated. They’re armed, remember?”

“But what if they hide themselves within the crowd and escape!?”

“Look, we’ve got surveillance cameras on them, and I’ve placed some of my people at the exits. Now then, Mr. Manager, hit me with the rest.”

“There’s not much else to add,” he said, disinclined to continue but compliant all the same. “Apart from my own speculation, that is. Who’s jamming the airwaves, I ask you? There’s only one solid possibility. Why’re they doing it? Again, there’s no two ways about it. So I have trouble believing you haven’t already pieced it together yourself, Mr. Inspector.”

“I was out of the loop. Stuck here the whole time. Come to think of it, I haven’t gotten any reports from my people in a hot minute. It just hadn’t been *that* long since the last word, so I didn’t think much of it...”

“Well, thanks to them, we’re forced to give the machines simple instructions through voice command. See for yourself.” The manager poked at the screen. “See the giraffe chasing them? You might think you want to see the video feed from its eyes, but look what you get.” The manager changed the channel, and a

cloud of dust appeared on screen.

“You know something, don’t you?” said Entryua, his eyes on Kyte. “Was there some kind of hiccup up in space?”

“I know nothing of this,” Kyte denied, defensively. “I was with you the whole time, Inspector. Don’t you see we’re in the same boat?”

“But I saw you taking a peek at your portable computer from time to time,” said Entryua. “Maybe you got notified through it. About the radio jamming, and what’s behind it.”

“That is a matter of internal military communications. It has nothing to do with you, Inspector,” replied Kyte, his expression looking stiff indeed.

“Is that right?” Entryua adopted a gentler tone. “I seem to recall that you’re expected to keep reporting to your brass about how the search is going. Yet now that the Abh’s turned up, you didn’t even try to report in. Tell me, what’s that about? I’ll tell you what I think. It’s because you know you can’t. Give it to me straight, Lieutenant old pal. I trust you do know the reason why. And if you try to hide it, well, me and my people, we’re going to start feeling a mighty urge to slack off on the job.”

“Do you mean to threaten me!?” Kyte turned white-faced and hot-blooded.

“Damn right I do. Intimidation’s a tool of the trade for us. Most suspects aren’t usually very cooperative, if you catch my drift.”

“Fine,” said Kyte, his expression intense and upset. “I did receive additional word at 11:55 military time, which is to say, thirty-seven minutes ago. I was told that radio interference would be conducted starting at 12:00 military time, and that while sending notice or orders would be unavailable for the time being, I was to continue my current mission.”

“And the reason behind the jamming is?”

“That, I don’t know. I honestly haven’t been informed. You’re going to have to believe me.”

“I see,” said Entryua, narrowing his eyes.

No, he didn’t seem to be lying. It didn’t matter how different their culture or

upbringing was — he was quite confident he could tell whether somebody was lying by looking at them. But while this was disappointing news for Entryua, he could infer even without a clear-cut answer from him.

“The Abh’re back, aren’t they?” he muttered.

“Please wait!” said the white rhinoceros.

“Please wait!” said the emperor penguin.

“Please wait!” said the puma.

Jinto and Lafier were surrounded on all sides by charming animal friends. Since there were no children left to entertain, it appeared they had no other tasks to fulfill.

“Step aside!” Lafier thrust her **phaser** at the head of a beaver.

“Please wait!” said the beaver, with its adorable buck teeth.

“You aren’t sentient creatures, correct?” asked Lafier.

“Yes, that is correct. We have no free will.” The beaver closed one eye.

“However, we ask that you keep that fact from the children. It would shatter their dreams.”

“We’ve no choice. Jinto, we’re destroying them.”

“Got it!” Jinto yelled. “Can’t say I’m too thrilled, though; They’re so endearing.”

“I’m none too thrilled, either,” said Lafier, though she didn’t hesitate to shoot the beaver down. “Sadly, we’ve no other options. If we linger here, they’ll come for us. Besides, you weren’t fussed when you were shooting at other human beings.”

“Only because they were shooting at us, too. And most importantly, they weren’t all that cute, either.”

“Warning!” said the animals simultaneously, raising their voices. “We are property of Guzonh Dream Park, and if you destroy us without cause, you will be committing vandalism, as well as charged with indemnities for all damaged goods. Incidentally, the average price for one of us is...”

“Then you’d best retreat while you’re still intact!” she said, slicing the puma to rounds. Yet the animals didn’t flinch at the death of a comrade; on the contrary, this simply allowed them to tighten their circle around them even closer.

“Sorry about that...” said Jinto, who’d shot down a hyena, though given that the hyena was the one most often made to play the villain, he didn’t feel too guilty over it.

“Nooo!” shrieked the manager, cradling his head as he witnessed his valuable assets become so much scrap.

“See, I told you they were brutal killers,” said Kyte, his face the picture of smug.

But the manager wasn’t paying him any attention. “Run away from the intruders! Function 24 is rescinded!” His orders reached the animatronics through the parkwide announcement speakers.

The animatronics turned their backs to the interlopers. When he saw that the two of them ceased firing in response, the manager’s shoulders relaxed with relief.

“Have the animatronics withdraw,” said Entryua. “They’ll only get in the way of the arrest.”

“We can’t through voice command. Either the technicians will have to go to them directly, or we have to direct them through radio command. But never mind that, Mr. Inspector,” said the manager, glowering at Entryua angrily, “What are you still doing here? Go and catch them already, please!”

Entryua shrugged. “That’s why I told you to let me place some of my people by the emergency exit. You were the one who was against it because it could ‘damage the park’s reputation.’”

“Okay, I was wrong, I admit it. So please...”

“We can’t go in until the parkgoers have evacuated. We’re the cops people love and respect, and we aim to keep it that way,” said Entryua, who then pointed at one of the screens.

It was the terminal screen of the **computing crystals** pertaining to visitor management, and it showed that there were still one hundred and twenty parkgoers left. That number hadn't changed much in some time, either. For one reason or another, the hundred and twenty stragglers seemed reluctant to exit.

"But there aren't any near them," the manager fired back.

"He's right," said Kyte. "Let's move to apprehend them at once. Because we can't use phones, communications will take that much longer."

"And whose fault is it that we can't drop them a line?" said Entryua, who pushed his smoke into the ashtray. "Though you have got a point there. I guess we do go and get 'em now."

"Let's," nodded Kyte vigorously.

Any sign of humans in the vicinity vanished while the two were playing tag with the park's menagerie. The mechanical fauna was still present, but it didn't try to approach them. That said, they didn't avoid them, either.

"Sorry," said Jinto, who almost bumped into a squirrel.

"No, I apologize," said the squirrel, which continued on its merry way.

At the moment, the duo were stuck in a veritable labyrinth. On each side of the lane, store display cases vied for their attention. The cases contained all sorts of products, including clothing, convenience goods, and stationery, all bearing animal designs. Tending shop were the animatronics.

Jinto stopped by the front of a clothing store, and glanced at his filthy **jumpsuit**, but he quickly gave up on the idea. They had no time to spare appraising articles at their leisure, or to change. The layout of the alleyways was complex, and they still hadn't managed to stumble upon a wider path. By looking up at the ceiling, they could tell they were near the center, but they hadn't the faintest clue in which direction lay the exit.

The animals minding each store were scrutinizing them rather fixedly, but they never appealed to them to purchase their wares.

"Wait," Jinto told Lafier, who had begun to outpace him.

"What?"

“I just thought of something. Let’s ask the animals where the exit is.”

“Good idea,” she concurred.

Jinto drew toward an otter-staffed shop selling miscellaneous merchandise.

“Welcome!” The otter spread its stubby arms invitingly.

While Jinto didn’t give the variety of commodities on offer much of a scan, he did notice they all bore otter designs.

“What will you be purchasing?”

“No, uh...” Jinto faltered.

“Ah, yes, I understand. Anything is fine as long as my picture’s on it. Here, take our featured product.” It picked up a nail file in its paws. “The price point’s reasonable, and it works like magic. Not to mention you could always use another nail file, since they’re easy to lose, plus...”

“That’s not what I’m here for,” Jinto interrupted. “I’d like to ask you where the exit is.”

“What did you say!?” shouted the otter. “You’re leaving so soon? Please, stay and enjoy the day with us just a little while longer. You could at least stand to take a look at the nail file. Has something got you in a hurry?”

“Haven’t you heard? The park’s temporarily closed.”

“You jest. Guzonh Dream Park is open 24 hours...”

“I said temporarily. Are you gonna tell me or not?”

“How cold. I suppose it can’t be helped. Go straight down this lane...” And so the otter gave him the directions.

Jinto thanked it and took his leave. “It’s over there!” he told Lafier, and together they once again trotted forward.

Suddenly, the rip of an explosion.

“They must’ve missed the emergency exit **controls**,” said Jinto.

“Who the!? Who’s the idiot that...!?” cried Entryua inside the command car.

He thought some subordinate of his had been careless enough to jump the

gun and start the attack. Then it dawned on him that no officers were equipped with explosive weapons. Or at the very least, his people weren't.

Then, could it have been the Abh? Was she trying to massacre officers who wielded only **needleguns**? But that didn't make sense, either. It hadn't come from the direction the Abh currently was thought to be.

At last, he remembered the other guys who were after the Abh. "Looks like your comrades are here," said Entryua, glancing at Kyte.

"Is that so?" The military police lieutenant hung his head.

Entryua thought about calling it a day then and there. He'd been less than enthusiastic about this whole venture to begin with, and if the police did lay off, they'd be detained by the occupying army anyway. They were talking about one or two petty car thieves here. In the end, he could afford to forget about getting them under their custody...

No! We can't back down now! They'd come this far, come so close... or, more accurately, they'd put up a net around where those soldiers were chasing them toward, but in any case, he couldn't stand idly by and let perfect strangers take the credit while the suspects were so tantalizingly in reach.

"Hey, pedal to the metal!" he said, jabbing at the driver's back.

"There's nothing for it, Inspector," said the young officer. "These cutesy-wootsies don't seem to know traffic laws!" And even as they spoke, a blissful looking tanuki came very close to smashing into them.

"Because we're not on the road!" Entryua banged his right shoulder against the back of the seat. "If it was going to be like this, I should've taken a hoverboat!"

"Do we call for backup?"

"You think we've got that kind of time, dummy!?"

A big BOOM from behind. A patrol car was sticking out of a building from the front. Meanwhile, the tanuki peeped with evident concern.

Entryua heaved a sigh. This was turning into more of a laugh-and-cry procedural drama than he'd been anticipating.

“EMERGENCY, EMERGENCY!” shouted the speakers frantically. “Customers still within the premises, please hasten to the exits. We can’t be held liable for your safety any longer. As for the parkgoers, no, the trespassers who blew up the emergency exit, we ask that you refrain from making a commotion on park grounds, and to exercise discretion with your acts of destruction! For heaven’s sake, what could possibly warrant going to such extremes!?”

“Over there, Inspector!” Kyte pointed forward.

There stood a young pair, a boy and a girl. The girl’s hair was black, but she had on an Abh **circlet** .

“Go, go, go!” Entryua roared. The sooner he was free of this farce of an errand, the better.

“They found us!” Jinto froze in his tracks.

A row of **hovercars** crossed over toward them. Lafier tried to brandish her gun, but Jinto had snapped to, and seized her hand. “No! Not here, at least! Let’s go back to the market area!”

She cocked her head, doubtful, but soon she nodded assent. The pair turned on their heels.

“Wait right there! This is the police!” a menacing voice resounded through a megaphone.

Jinto wondered how many people in the whole galaxy would actually stop when told to.

“Inspector, we can’t go any farther!” The command vehicle came to a sudden stop. It was true that the “road” in front of their eyes could hardly be called a road at all. Not even three people could walk side-by-side down the lane safely, let alone a car. If they were to cut a swath through the shops, it would be a different matter, but an officer of the law beloved by the citizenry would never do that.

“Employees, evacuate as well!” continued the announcement. “Those with Level 3 or higher technician qualification, adjust as many animatronics as possible for automatic storage. If you’re in either Area 6 or 7, evacuate regardless. Get a move on! C’mon, get! Bloody hell, what’s it all come to!?”

“Everybody out!” said Entryua, commanding his officers to alight from the cars.

He took the initiative and issued the same order to the subsequent patrol cars as well. Not being able to use phones was frustrating.

A police squad of twenty formed a line on the street. The suspects weren’t in plain view, having seemingly ducked into either a store or a side street somewhere.

“All hands, ready, aim.”

The officers whipped out their **needleguns**, and switched off their safeties in unison. Kyte took that as his cue to do likewise and set his own weapon to fire.

“Now, after them!” Entryua rushed into the maze of alleyways.

Military Police Lieutenant Kyte and the twenty-strong police squad followed in after him.

“Sorry, coming through!” said Jinto as he climbed over the display case of a turtle’s parlor.

The turtle simply shrugged without a word.

“You will forgive us,” said Lafier, as she too climbed over it.

The turtle quickly made its way past the side of the horned owl sitting with its back to the turtle’s.

“Bad children!” said the owl, whose merchandise they’d just rendered in disarray. “Bad children! You’re being very bad!”

“Sorry!” said Jinto, without looking back.

“May I draw your attention to something?” said Lafier through pants and gasps.

“What?”

“We’re going down the same path as before.”

“I mean, what else can we... oh.” Jinto remembered now. “The enemy soldiers are here, too, aren’t they.”

“You forgot? You are so easy-going it’s impressive. You have my admiration.”

“...Thanks...”

“Well if it isn’t you! Weren’t you going to leave?” said the otter from before.
“Might as well have you buy something now, if you don’t mind!”

“Got any hoverboats or spaceships?” Jinto asked while rushing past storefronts.

“Of course we do!” answered the otter enthusiastically.

“Say what?” Before he knew it, Jinto was looking over his shoulder.

The otter waved a toy spaceship in its hand. It probably had one or more otters on it, too. Behind the otter, the distant forms of police officers came peeking into view.

“Crap.” Jinto veered right, where there was a conveniently-placed side path. This time they wouldn’t have to rough up any stores.

“Lafier, this way!”

“Huh? Where are you headed, sir!?” shouted the otter, rearing up.

“So you won’t come quiet, huh!?” The officer’s voice pelted them from behind.

That lane didn’t connect to any lateral paths. Right in front of it sprawled a lawn, and beyond it they could make out a stone building. Jinto was suffering from some mild agoraphobia, since in a wide-open space, he felt as though bullets and lasers could come flying from any direction. Yet this was the only option left to them.

Argh, give me a damned break, Entryua seethed. My daughters are reaching sexual awareness age, and here I am, dashing like mad chasing perps on foot like some caveman. Why’s it gotta be this way? If the phones were online, I could’ve avoided this travesty. I could’ve laid back in the command car, split everyone into teams of two to search the maze, and then come running right when they’d been smoked out.

He sized Kyte up beside him. Though he was technically older than him, bodily he was still young, so he wasn’t breathing heavily. He was truly jealous in that

moment, even rueful.

He swerved in his tracks by gripping a pillar of the store at the corner as he ran. He saw them. The backs of his quarry.

“Give it a rest!” Entryua took a knee and assumed firing stance. “Stop or I shoot!”

But by the time he heard his words of warning, Jinto had already slipped away from the path. Naturally, they had no intention of stopping. They hid in an alleyway blind spot, but the moment they did, they snapped to a shout from their left.

A green-brown uniform. An enemy soldier. An adversary even more of a hassle to deal with than the police, but this soldier was alone.

Lafier took him down in a flowing martial arts throw before he could fire. “Jinto, we must hurry. That soldier was one of many who have spread out to search for us. The others have been signaled.”

“Don’t need to tell me that...” Jinto picked up into a run once again.

Their destination for the time being was the stone building. Though he had a bad feeling that its stone walls would serve as much protection as construction paper against the enemy’s boulder-shattering crusher-bullets, it was probably more reliable than the marketplace.

However, they hadn’t even made it halfway across the lawn before another enemy soldier appeared. Lafier didn’t stop running as she mowed down the soldier brandishing their gun in a standing position.

Jinto gripped a **phaser cartridge** from his **pocket** and set it to grenade mode. He could feel it chirping its countdown in his hand. *CHEE CHEE CHEE CHEE...* He’d cultivated his pitching arm in many a match of *minchiu* , but given the distance, he couldn’t be certain his lob would reach that far.

Which is why, when the soldier joined clods of dirt in the air, he reassessed the power of his throw. Unfortunately, these soldiers neither quailed nor flinched. Fresh infantry came out of the woodwork, one after the other.

Lafier, for her part, stayed a step ahead, firing her **phaser** over her shoulder

with her right hand while never taking her eyes away from their destination. Despite the fact that she wasn't even looking at her targets, her aim was always true, thanks to her *frocragh*. In this situation, her spatio-sensory perception manifested like a feat of sorcery. An Abh with a **circlet** equipped had as good as 360 degree vision — she could sense motion in her surroundings through ultrahigh frequency waves. As such, she had no need to stop or turn to take aim.

Still, the bullets came hurtling their way, and with ever swelling intensity. A cloud of dust struck a mere five *dagh* away from Jinto.

We're almost there...

Lafier stamped in through the wide-open entrance.

All right, my turn now.

He got within arm's reach of the entrance.

"What in the hell!?" Entryua reflexively ducked for cover, face-down on the ground.

It was when they'd almost cleared out of the alleyway in hot pursuit of the Abh that the firefight unfolded — a shoot-out the likes of which Clasbule had never before seen.

Guess that's the difference between a police force and a military. He knew it was pitiful, but he was too scared to even raise his head.

"Retreat!" ordered Entryua, plucking up his willpower. His voice, too, was nearly drowned out entirely by the gunfire. "We're heading back. This is no place for police."

"You can't be serious, Inspector!" Kyte objected. "You're giving up!?"

"What do you think!?" Entryua barked back. Though he was just as much lashing out against his own cowardice. "What exactly do you want us to do, huh, buddy!? Cuz if you ask me, we'd just be a bunch of brats swearing we're strong to career boxers as they're slugging it out. I don't know what it's like on *your* world, but on this planet, police aren't trained or equipped to survive an active warzone. Now listen good, cuz let me tell you, no matter how many cops

you get killed in the line of duty, society won't value their capture any higher. And if you wanna catch the Abh that badly, I suggest you go join your little friends."

"Urgh..."

A round of crusher-bullets pierced through a handful of shops and flew inches beside Entryua, demolishing an animatronic.

"Your aim is goddamned terrible!" Entryua cursed them out, knowing full well they couldn't hear him. Then he faced his subordinates to address them.

"What're you doing!? Fall back! Retreat to the cars. Keep your heads low and run. Damn it all to hell, coming to a place like this was a mistake!"

"Jinto, come quickly!" Half of Lafier's body was poking out of the doorway, and she made ample use of her **phaser** to defend him.

Jinto slid in through the door hands first.

"Welcome!" It was a restaurant. The server rabbits flapped their ears in salutations. Needless to say, there were no customers, no other humans.

Jinto swiftly scanned their surroundings. There was another entryway at the other side. It probably led to the kitchen.

Lafier was still returning fire.

"C'mon!" he said, dragging her by the sleeve.

"Okay." With three final barrages of gunfire, she ran deeper inside.

"Hello, how many in your party? I'll lead you to your seats," said one of the rabbits.

"Thank you, but there are many empty seats, so that's fine," he said, before heading for the kitchen.

"Sir, you can't go there!" The rabbit tried to deter him.

Meanwhile, the enemy was positioning themselves and making preparations outside. Jinto noticed through the window and screamed: "GET DOWN!"

The only one that understood was Lafier, but that was to be expected, considering the designer of the animatronics' artificial intelligence could have

never foreseen a gun battle.

It was a savage assault. The stone walls weren't as paper-thin as Jinto had feared, but they weren't sturdy enough to withstand the attack. The walls came crumbling down while stone shards sprayed through the air. Crusher-bullets flew in from the where the walls collapsed, filling the restaurant with fiery death. Rabbit heads and parts tumbled across the floor.

"Warning!" Several rabbits looked out from the holes in the walls. "We are property of Guzong Dream Park, and if you destroy us without cause, you will be committing vandalism, and be charged with indemnities for all damaged goods. Incidentally, the average price for one of us is—"

The roar of the enemy's firearms blew away the rabbits and their futile warnings.

"Lafier, are you okay!?"

"Of course I am, a **Kin of the Stars** would never..."

"Gotcha," Jinto cut in. He started crawling along. "Now let's hurry!"

"Okay."

"Sir." A rabbit looked down at him. "It's dangerous here. We believe it may be in your best interest to evacuate."

"Thanks for the heads-up. I had a feeling the place wasn't the height of safety." It lifted Jinto's spirits to exhibit the will to crack wise even during a nightmare like this.

Right after their exchange, the rabbit took a bullet and fell to ruin.

"Dammit!" Jinto's high note proved brief, for now he was enraged. While he knew he'd been guilty of destroying a hyena, it was still a thing of woe to watch a being that traded some words with him get blasted apart.

The motion sensor door opened up for the two, and Lafier followed Jinto into the kitchen. The kitchen was unscathed, practically a world removed, but they couldn't use it indefinitely. They got on their feet and ran between all of the cooking bots.

Another door, another room. They found themselves in a hallway, likely

employee-use-only, with a number of doors on each side.

Suddenly, Lafier collapsed in a heap on the spot.

“What’s wrong!? Are you hurt!?”

“No...” A weak smile, so weak as to ill fit an Abh. “How pathetic of me. It seems I’m exhausted.”

“Wait, don’t tell me you’ve got a *weakness* ?” he said, though he commiserated. Abh bodies weren’t used to running for long stretches, especially not at twice the gravity level of their everyday living environment.

This was Lafier, though. There was no question she’d pretend to be doing fine while burning through every last drop of energy in her.

How many hours had they been running? Three? Four? They’d stopped at points, and walked some stretches, but most of the time they’d jogged, and over the course of the last half hour, they’d been scampering with all of their might. Of course, Jinto could hardly be described as a monster of stamina himself. He hadn’t noticed earlier by dint of all the mortal peril, but he was so tired he could throw up at any moment.

“But we’ve still gotta go.” Jinto gulped down his nausea and fashioned a smile. “C’mon, I’ll give you a shoulder.”

“Thank you.” Lafier offered a hand.

Jinto helped her up and carried her arm on his shoulder. “Better yet, I’ll give you a piggy-back ride.”

“Don’t mock me!”

“That’s the Lafier I know,” said Jinto, relieved. Obviously, they couldn’t sprint anymore. They were going as fast as they could, but that was no faster than normal walking speed, or maybe slower.

“Hey, the enemy’s gotta be pretty tuckered, too,” said Jinto, trying to cheer both himself and Lafier up.

The soldiers had chased after them on foot through that cave, and with all that heavy equipment weighing them down, at that. Of course, land wars were their expertise, and as such they must have undergone training to prepare them

for lengthy foot marches while bearing heavy equipment, but he chose not to dwell on that inconvenient factoid.

Besides, when he focused on the sensation of Lafier's weight on his shoulders, his train of thought shifted tracks entirely.

She would never have leaned on his shoulders in the past, not this easily. She would've obstinately insisted Jinto take the navigation log and go it alone.

His heart rejoiced.

Chapter 7: The *Üamh Gymehynr* (Horse of Dream Park)

They went through the closest door on the left. To neither's surprise, it was another kitchen, but more of a café's than a restaurant's. For one, it was much narrower than the other one, and secondly, the cooking bots were smaller models.

The building shook. Enemy gunfire pressed unrelenting. But they couldn't hope for better; what Jinto feared most was them storming in. If the troops swarmed them, they'd have no leeway to fight back.

"Sit." There were no chairs, so he sat her down alongside the wall.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna play at burglar."

"We have no time."

"I know, but it's a necessary evil." Jinto searched the place for a bottle of spring water, and handed one to Lafier. "We need to hydrate."

Still leaning against the wall, Lafier took the bottle in her hands and started drinking. Some of the pure spring water trickled out of her lips and wet her clothes.

Jinto also drank about half a bottle's worth of the stuff. It was as though the water got sucked up before it even reached his stomach.

Lafier savored a moment. Then she said: "If the *üass béïcaiberér* (grand chamberlain) were here to see this... It would cause a seizure."

Jinto took two *sineucec* (drinking glasses) from the tableware washer as he asked: "Really particular about etiquette, I take it?"

"Yep. I got scolded constantly. However, seeing as I'm able to conduct myself with the utmost grace in a space-time that demands it, I think the chamberlains wouldn't fret too much."

"I'll take your word for it, though sadly, I still haven't come across the patch of

space-time you speak of. In which reality do you conduct yourself with the utmost grace?" As they spoke, Jinto inspected the niche-like depressions along the wall.

"Shut up, I'm always the picture of grace."

"Yeah?"

"Say one more word and I'll rip you to pieces."

"Well, I can't have that." Jinto dared not defy her.

He placed a **glass** on the niche that read "GRAPE-FLAVORED CONCENTRATED SUGAR WATER" in Baronh. The liquid in question trickled into the glass.

He gave it a taste. It was grape-flavored concentrated sugar water all right. It smelled of grapes. Its texture felt viscous in the mouth. And it was so sweet it'd make an ant balk.

It was undiluted concentrate mixed with either booze or carbonated water. Normally, he'd have hated it, but right now, it tasted strangely good.

He filled the other **glass** and handed it to Lafier. "Drink."

Lafier took a sip. "In another time and place, I would've felt slighted by this."

"What our systems need right now is sugar."

"I know." Lafier gulped down the thick concoction in one go. Then she washed out the aftertaste with more spring water.

"Let's go," he said, offering a hand up.

"You needn't lend me your shoulder now. The sugar has had its effect." Yet she staggered on her feet, and she had to keep herself up by leaning against the wall with a hand.

"You can be the Abhest Abh ever, there's no way your metabolism's that fast. Don't push yourself so hard." Once again, he lent her a shoulder.

"Uh-huh..." She was still thirsty, so she started walking while drinking.

An explosion flared far too close for comfort, and the door into the hallway buckled.

There was no one in the café on the other side — neither animatronics, nor, of course, people. He was glad; nobody would be accosting them over something or other.

They exited the establishment, out onto a wide path of soft stone. Jinto took Lafier's gun, and gave her spring water to hold instead.

Lafier took another sip, shook the remaining bottle, and pulled an inquisitive expression.

Jinto shook his head.

Lafier threw it aside. The **synthetic resin** bottle dropped to a useless little thud and rolled away.

"If that **chamberlain** saw you do that just now..."

"The consequences would be far graver than a mere seizure." Lafier squinted gleefully.

A horse approached them from in front: "It's naughty to litter."

"Sorry," Jinto apologized in spite of himself.

"Are you tired?" The horse about-faced and began walking with them.

"Yes. Very," he confided.

"Would you like a ride?"

"You'd do that for us?" said Jinto, startled. He looked the horse in its forehead, which sported a star.

"I would. It's my job, after all."

"Thank you so much. But we're more than just tired. We're also in a hurry."

"I can help with that, too."

"Sweet." Jinto gave the **royal princess** a hitch up the horse's back, and handed back her gun. Then he straddled it behind her.

"You're quite heavy, little ones. You're actually grown-ups, aren't you?" it grouched.

"We're just kids with weight problems."

“I sometimes give rides to pairs of smaller children, but two kids that’re this big at the same time is a first.”

“Can’t hack it?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I absolutely can.”

“Great. Take us to the exit, if you don’t mind.”

“Without telling your mommy or daddy?”

“Daddy’s at home. For us both.” He had no idea how many hundreds of light-years away the **imperial capital** Lacmhacarth and the **Countdom of Hyde** were, but he spoke naught but the truth.

“Then we’re off.” It broke into a trot. Lafier held onto its neck, while Jinto grabbed the reins. The horse’s speed was on par with a dead sprinting human’s, so they could probably gain quite some distance.

The building they’d hid inside was extensive, but soon its edge came into view. Lafier straightened her gun arm. They arrived in close proximity to the building. Ten or so soldiers were lying in wait, but it appeared the sight of the two cavaliers took them by surprise. They were a second slow to react. Invisible beams of light promptly burst from her muzzle. In the blink of an eye, they passed through a narrow gap, and a similar building obstructed them on the right hand side.

“Can you pick up the pace a bit!?” Jinto asked their steed.

“It’d be no trouble for me, but it’d be dicey for you.”

“We’ll be fine, trust us.”

“If you say so. Tell me if you ever think it’s unsafe.” With that, the horse sped up to about 500 *üésdagh* per hour.

Unsafe was right. Unlike a **hovercar** or a **connecting vessel**, a horseback ride came with a great share of shaking. Jinto stuck his feet into the stirrups and struggled to stay mounted.

“Jinto, you’d best lean back,” said Lafier.

He gripped the reins for dear life and bent backward. He could swear he felt

the laser graze past his chin.

Upside-down soldiers started firing at them from an upside-down world, shooting blindly from their cover behind buildings.

“Ahh!” His chest felt constricted. He could do nothing but hold on, and that powerlessness redoubled his terror.

Lafier’s **phaser** gouged at the corners of the buildings and took out enemy troops.

They passed by yet more buildings, and since the enemy fire died down, Jinto exerted himself and sat back up.

A hemispherical facility greeted their eyes. The horse ran past it and turned right.

“Not there!” Jinto panicked.

There were soldiers to the right. And while they were considerably far away, he had to suppose they were well within shooting range.

“How come? I’m taking a shortcut,” the horse objected.

“Just not there!!”

While he bickered with a horse, one appeared from behind the hemisphere.

The space was akin to a plaza, with a fountain at its center, and surrounded by facilities of various shapes and configurations. To their right was a three-story town of pink coral, with an avenue as straight as an arrow. Meanwhile, soldiers lined up far down their current avenue, sending bullets their way all at once.

Lafier herself had already started shooting. Jinto extended his own right arm (the fact that he hadn’t dropped his gun deserved some credit, if he did say so himself) and pulled the trigger.

For a moment, the fruit of their deadly exchange was unclear, but the enemy had numbers on their side, and the horse was in any case exposed to a dense hail of fire. Luckily, they didn’t score any direct hits, yet the vicinity bloomed with discharges and detonations. The stench of gun smoke curled across showers of soft stone shards.

“It’s gotten harder to run. What’s going on over there?” said the horse, not knowing just how valid its concern was.

“Faster!” Jinto screamed, during a pause in the crossfire.

“Even faster? All right, here goes.” The horse accelerated into a headlong gallop. In so doing, it cleared two thirds of the plaza space without sustaining any fire.

“Jinto!” Lafier yelled in warning. “To your right, on that roof!” Thinking fast, Jinto grabbed onto the saddle’s cantle and leaned hard left. Lafier resumed fire just as a shot darted toward them. It grazed his sleeve, ripping it and leaving a welt.

“Crrhh!” Jinto gritted his teeth.

“More from behind!”

Jinto turned to look, to find three enemies in pursuit on horseback. They must have learned from their example and struck a deal with some wandering steeds.

“I can’t manage all of them; you have my faith,” said Lafier.

“You say that, but...”

The improvised cavalry clearly weren’t trained for equine endeavors. Firing intermittent shots while also clinging so as not to get bucked off proved mostly ineffectual. That being said, they were closing the distance little by little.

Naturally, Jinto too had no training to guide him, and even so much as bringing his gun to the ready was fumbly in this awkward position.

Jinto tucked the gun into his armpit, and retrieved a **phaser cartridge** .

“Lafier, close your eyes.” He tossed it. Due in part to his unsteady position, it didn’t come close to the enemy.

Right before it dropped, Jinto shut his eyes and faced away.

A dazzling gleam.

When again his eyes opened, he caught sight of two of the enemies fallen from their mounts, rolling and clutching at their eyes.

“I told you, no littering!” the horse admonished.

“Sorry. I’m a rotten little brat.”

The single remaining enemy ceased in their tracks.

“There, see it? The exit,” said the horse. A row of about twenty glass doors lay open for them.

“I can’t go any further from this point,” it added, coming to a stop.

“Thank you!” Jinto jumped off.

“C’mon, Jinto!” Lafier launched into a sprint. It seemed as though this time, the sugar really had bestowed her the strength to go on.

“I look forward to seeing you ag—” Then the horse took a crusher-bullet right to the abdomen. Searing fumes shrouded its saddle while electric sparks charged through the air.

“Looks like I’m malfunctioning...” It slowly fell to its knees as its legs broke down.

“I’m so sorry!” Jinto gripped at his chest.

“Hurry!” Lafier picked off the last of the makeshift cavalry.

“Yeah, I get the picture.” Jinto dashed for the exit.

They came to a small sort of hall. It housed some shops and guide maps, and there were ten stopped escalators before them. Needless to say, no other people were present. Jinto searched the sides of the exit.

“What are you doing?” questioned Lafier, her voice severe, as she’d already stepped foot onto the escalator.

“Just give me five seconds.”

There was no guarantee he’d come across what he hoped for, but there they were: three buttons, the **controls** under the words EMERGENCY SHUT-OFF DOOR. Next to them hung a notice reading, “WARNING: Activating without just cause will lead to criminal charges.”

The controls were a tad difficult to work (probably in order to prevent mischief from prankster children). Jinto followed the instructions and pressed

Button 3, then 1, then 2. The buttons glowed when pressed, and then they started blinking on and off.

“Warning. Activating the shut-off door without need will hold you subject to criminal and civil affairs liability. Please confirm the situation is an emergency...” came the robo-voice, but Jinto paid it no heed. There was no time. He slammed his hands against the buttons.

“Danger! The shut-off door will now close. Please get away from the door. Danger! The shut-off door will...” The glass doors closed shut at once. A steel door dropped down from above and caused the ground to quake with a THUD.

“All right, we’re good to go!” Jinto ran up to her.

The staircase was lengthy, with at least five stories’ worth of height in all. They rushed up them without pause, and panted by the door.

“Are you okay?” asked Jinto, concerned.

“Uh-huh.” She was pale in the face, but she had enough left in her to give him a grin.

“Let’s head into town again. We’ll go back into hiding. I bet you anything the **Empire** ’ll be back in no time.”

The exit was unmanned. They stepped through it into the open. The daytime sky was without a cloud. Outside the exit, the ground slanted in a slight incline, shining hazily. The path stretched about as wide as the small plaza, and at its top, it divided in two. But they hadn’t even reached that far before hovercars appeared from both ends to block their way.

“Police!” Jinto looked back, and witnessed the darting figures of police officers.

“Don’t move!” The officers fired warning shots.

Lafier’s right hand made to move.

“No,” said Jinto, grabbing her by the wrist.

“Why!? You want to surrender here?”

“Yep, we’re surrendering!”

They were flanked on both sides, and besides, the cops in front were hiding behind their cars. There could be no victory.

“**Terrestrial citizens** are better than the alternative,” argued Jinto. “Better than falling into enemy hands.”

“But what if they hand us over!?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. But if we fight here, we die. It’s that simple.”

Lafier bit her lower lip, and dropped her gun.

A man exited the hovercar at the center. A man with brown skin and a smoke in his mouth.

“Name’s Entryua, and I’m an inspector with the Lune Beega Police. Now, I’d like to hear from you two about a grand theft auto incident that occurred some five days back.”

“Are we under arrest!?” cried Jinto, glowering at the inspector.

“Oh, so you speak Clasbulian?” Entryua beamed. “That’s a relief. Haven’t studied Baronh since school, so I’m pleased as punch you and I can have a chat in Clasbulian. And to answer your question, you’re not under arrest. You’ll be coming along with us voluntarily for a bit of questioning. We don’t even know who you really are, so we can’t issue warrants for your arrest, see. Though we probably *could* just arrest you on the spot for property damage and unauthorized possession of weapons.”

“We plead self-defense.”

“Thought you would, which is why I didn’t throw murder on the list. In any case, I think it’d be in your best interest to take a ride with us.”

“And we’re NOT under arrest, right?” Jinto pressed.

“Nope. Not as of now, anyway. So no cuffs, and no straightjackets.”

“What about the property damage and unauthorized possession?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, we’ve got an arrangement or *somesuch* with the **Empire** , so it’ll be the court that decides. I know your extenuating

circumstances. So believe me when I say that at the moment, I've no desire to arrest. Now have we understood each other?"

Jinto nodded slowly.

"Good, that's good. Can I get you to ditch the gun?" he said gently.

He let it go, dumping it on the ground alongside the single remaining **phaser cartridge** .

Lafier still gripped hers.

"Now for the young Abh lady."

"You can do it, Lafier," Jinto said in hushed tones.

"I shall trust your judgment," she told him, and she put it down.

Entryua, relieved, ordered a subordinate to take their firearms. "Now put your hands behind your head and come here. If you behave, we won't have to get rough."

Jinto did as he was told. Lafier also complied, albeit grudgingly.

"Don't be naïve, Inspector!" Another man had exited the car, but this one was wearing a green-brown uniform. The uniform of a UH military officer.

"You tricked us!" Jinto tried throwing himself at the cop they'd given the guns.

In that moment, the tension ran high.

"Wait! You've got the wrong idea!" said Entryua. "Calm down and let me explain!"

Jinto froze in place.

"This is Military Police Lieutenant Kyte. He's cooperating with us," he rattled on. "Listen, we aren't toadies of the occupiers. At the end of the day, I'm the one in charge here. So if you listen to what I say, there won't be any problems."

"Lunacy!" Kyte pressed a gun against the two. "There's absolutely a problem. We haven't even checked to see whether they're totally disarmed yet! How can you trust them so easily?"

“Inspector *Entryua* ,’ was it?” said Lafier. “I don’t know whether it means anything to the people of the land, but I swear upon *bar lupainec* (the honor of the Abh) that I have no other weapons on me.”

“Yes, I trust you, I really trust you,” said Entryua in clumsy Baronh.

“NO!” Kyte disheveled his blonde hair. “Look here, Abh, if you want us to believe you, then remove all of your clothes and lie on your back. We’ll give you a thorough pat down.”

Jinto stepped in front of Lafier to defend her. “As if! We’re not here to humor your stupid power play...”

“Out of the way, you idiot slave!” Kyte suddenly pulled the trigger.

“Augh!” Jinto felt a searing heat in his left shoulder. His vision swam.

“JINTO!” Lafier caught him in her arms.

Fortunately, Kyte’s gun was a **phaser** . It hadn’t drawn much blood. However, he was assailed by intense pain, and beaded with greasy sweat. The light of the world dimmed for a moment.

“YOU WRETCH!” Lafier exploded with the wrath of a solar flare. “YOU SHALL PAY!!”

Chapter 8: The *Üadrhoth Sathotr* (Dance of Victory)

Entryua watched Kyte's scandalous behavior with speechless bafflement. The man had transformed before his very eyes. His timid personality had all but evaporated like a puddle under a blazing sun, and a sadistic smile turned his formerly handsome visage into an ugly perversion.

"And how do you propose to make me 'pay,' you Abh scum?" Kyte scoffed. "If you really care so much for your little pet, then why don't you get on with it and do as I say? It's not like you sub-humans have any scruples or shame. You're just a loathsome homunculus, you depraved scum Abh."

The Abh lass embraced the youth in her arms and stabbed at Kyte with a glare not unlike a **laser**. She didn't avert her baleful stare as she laid the lad down.

"N-No..." the young man could be heard mumbling.

Entryua was struck with admiration. *I don't believe it... The Abh girl means to scrap with Kyte bare-handed!*

The boy cottoned onto her intentions, and desperately attempted to keep her from going. He tottered over to cover her. The Abh girl's shield.

At that instant, Entryua had decided whose side to take. And it just so happened to be consistent with the mandates of Clasbulian law.

Entryua pushed a **needlegun** to Kyte's temple. "Enough!"

"What are you doing?" Kyte panicked. "Are you afraid the Empire will retaliate? Then you needn't worry. Our fleet may have suffered a temporary defeat, but our invincible land war unit is unscathed. We shall continue to defend and maintain this surface world until, by the favor of the powers that be, we secure all of space once again. So stick by the side of justice without fear —"

"Oh, that's exactly what I'm doing," Entryua interrupted. "I don't give a rat's ass who rules space. But on this planet, it's Clasbule's law and justice system that ought to prevail, and your actions right now fly against them. It's a shame, too; I was starting to feel for you."

“I’m just dealing with a fraught situation with the proper rigor!”

“Now I know why the police on your world were so hated.” Entryua then addressed his subordinates: “Hey, take this pinhead’s gun, would you!?”

His order was executed by the closest officer.

“You’ve made a terrible mistake, Inspector! Our proud army will surely punish you!”

“Abh girl,” said Entryua, ignoring Kyte’s forewarning. “It’s as you can see. I apologize for my mismanagement as the boss here, but I’m still going to ask you to come with me. That young man needs first aid.”

Her shadow-black eyes regarded him.

Such a pretty young thing... Entryua marveled. She was covered in dirt, but that only highlighted her shining beauty all the more. The pride and dignity that kept her from taking a single step back even amidst a sea of strangers and hostiles were clear to see in the glint of her eyes. He’d previously pictured the Abh as lofty beings perched beyond the clouds, but at least with her, the stateliness with which she carried herself had kissed the surface as well.

Can’t blame him at all for being so loyal, he mused, glancing at the boy who had been shot. For better or worse, he was the typical city boy that didn’t exist among first-generation settlers. Which was to say, he had a weakling, vaguely unreliable air about him, which wasn’t dispelled by the fact that he’d come to this point by surviving a firefight that had even the police too frightened to act.

Kyte’s mad laughter rang through the scene. “You can cover for the Abh all you like, Inspector! I’ll just have her dragged out of your detention center. Don’t forget, the Abh is MINE. I’ll be taking a whole host of soldiers straight to your doorstep, so don’t think for a second you’ll get away with this, Inspector!!”

Dammit, that rotter’s right, he admitted to himself. *Aizan’ll hand her over to the occupiers quicker than breathing. But wait — that might not necessarily be the case. After all, if he’s got one good point, it’s how quick he is to adapt, and now that the Abh’ve returned, he won’t be quite so keen to butter up to this upstart army anymore. That said, by now the “liberation army” must’ve noticed they’re not particularly welcome here, and so their manners’ve turned rougher*

as of late. They might just be willing to blow up a police force or two. But us guardians of the law could hardly sit idly by as these rabid mutts have their merry way.

“Inspector *Entryac* ,” said the Abh. “I am choosing to believe you.”

“Good. In that case...”

“However—”

Entryua was never to hear the rest of that sentence. Three streaks of white smoke traced arcs in the air and exploded at Entryua’s feet. Entryua leapt back. “Who the!?”

“Mist shells!” shouted an officer, frantic.

Just before getting engulfed in the mist, Entryua spied a **hovercar** ride rushing over the embankment.

Jinto had no idea what just happened; before he knew it, his surroundings were suffused by a thick fog.

Looks just like the scenery of the river in the realm of the dead, like Grandma used to say, Jinto recalled. Guess it’s true after all, huh? Which means I’ve gone and snuffed it. Or have I? I can’t even tell. I mean, I can still feel Lafier’s warmth on my back... Is she dead, too? Or might I still be one for this world?

“Abh! *Laimh* !” A voice from beyond the mist addressed him by the word for **imperial citizen** .

Jinto started. It was Min’s voice.

“Don’t dawdle. Come! There’s no time to waste!”

Jinto slid an arm around Lafier’s shoulders and pressed forward.

“Don’t fire! We might shoot each other by accident!” Entryua yelled.

The hovercar began levitating within the fog. Jinto stuck his head through its open door. In this situation, Lafier of course pushed Jinto in and tried turning back.

“Where are you going!?” He grabbed her wrist in the nick of time.

“Let go of me.” Lafier was on a tear.

“There’s NO TIME.” Marca, who was beside Jinto, helped him pull her up into the car. “We’re set, Bill!”

“Time to cheese it!” Bill exclaimed.

The hovercar got rolling. In the space of mere moments, it wove through the officers and sprinted down the road.

“Let go of me, Jinto!” Lafier writhed in his right arm. “I have something I’ve yet to do!”

“Ow ow OW! Hey, I’m wounded here! A bit softer with me, please,” he said, scowling from the pain in his shoulder. “Besides, what’ve you gotta do, anyway?”

“What do you think?” she said, her ire more than plain. “I’m going to take the man who harmed you, and turn him into fuel for the **plasma** winds of space! A poetic end for him, I should think!”

It wasn’t a bad feeling, seeing her blow her top over him and him alone. But he couldn’t exactly let her slake her thirst for revenge. “But we’re not in the **vacuum of space**,” said Jinto, to calm her down. “He’d at most turn into a charred corpse smearing a decent length of the ground, which isn’t the most poetic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Good. That would be the most fitting death for him.”

“How would you even manage it unarmed?”

“I’d snatch a weapon!” she asserted categorically.

“So reckless,” Undertaker sighed.

“Now now, be precise with your words,” Min chided. “What he means by that particular choice of words is that you ought to take greater care in your deeds.”

“You can take your time killing his ass later,” Jinto told the **royal princess** .

Lafier’s eyes widened with shock. “You are a cruel and brutal man — I don’t count ‘taking my time to kill people’ among my hobbies!”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Listen, you two,” said Bill from the driver’s seat, his voice weary and fed up.

“I hate to butt in on your delightful little chat, but do you feel like closing the door for me? The Abh’s footsy’s stuck in it!”

“Feh! I suppose I must.” And with that, Lafier correct her posture in her seat. Then she looked at Jinto’s left shoulder, her expression turning concerned for the first time. “Are you okay, Jinto?”

“It’s just a scratch,” he said, acting tough, while at the same time chagrined she didn’t ask sooner.

“It’s not just a scratch,” said Marca, also glancing at the shoulder. “Your collarbone’s popped clean off. If we don’t treat it quickly, your whole left arm will need regenerating.”

“Please,” said Jinto, scowling once again. “I don’t need to hear the details. I feel like I could faint any second.”

“You can faint. Daswani, dress it for him,” said Marca, switching seats with the big lug.

Wordlessly, Daswani stopped the bleeding and applied local anesthesia to Jinto’s shoulder, then rubbed on some regeneration stimulant. Next, he wrapped his arm in bandages and sprayed it with a hardening agent, thereby holding it in place. Jinto endured.

“I feel like you’ve got something to say,” said Undertaker. “And if I had to guess, it’d maybe be words of thanks, or maybe words of thanks, or maybe even words of thanks.”

“I thank you a million fold,” said Lafier.

“Thanks for treating my wound.” Jinto rubbed his shoulder, whose pain had dulled. “But you’re still planning to hold us hostage, aren’t you?”

“Of course we are. We still want our spaceships,” said Marca, as though it’d been foolish to ask.

“Well I’m against it.” A shudder went down Undertaker’s frame. “I don’t need any more misfortune in my life.”

It was then Jinto realized their unfavorable position. No weapons left.

“I don’t get it. Why didn’t you run?”

“We did run. But the situation changed.”

“What do you mean?”

“A while after we left the caves and Bill picked us up, there started to be radio jamming,” she explained. “Seems the soldiers at the checkpoints withdrew to the city center, too.”

“Which’d mean...”

“Just look at that,” she said, pointing out the window.

Six points of light left complex traces in the night sky as they repeatedly assembled and separated.

“Only the Abh do those kinds of meaningless maneuvers.”

“They’re not meaningless,” said Lafier. “That’s the **dance of victory** . A show of force to send the message that they’ve taken over the skies. That’s how you learned of the **Star Forces** ’ return, is it not?”

“What an obnoxious custom. Very Abh-like,” Bill remarked.

“Then the **Empire** ’s retaken the planet!” Jinto rejoiced.

“Not yet on the surface, they haven’t. But they’ll be touching down any moment.”

“Everybody together! All officers, get in your rides. We’re going after them!” shouted Entryua.

Though much of the mist had cleared, they had to search for their vehicles by memory and blind fumbling. Suddenly, the ground rumbled, and the mist fluctuated.

“What now!?” Entryua was getting sick of this. “Is it *them* ? No one else it could be, huh? All right people, hurry up, unless you’re in for another headache.”

But the sound of their disciplined march came slightly quicker than the cops could manage to depart. “Stop right there,” rang a high-handed voice. “Move and we shoot.”

“You’re talking to the police!” Entryua barked right back. “We were about to

tail the suspects. Don't get in our way!"

"We'll shoot, police or not." Green-brown uniforms appeared from within the fog, eyeing the convoy of cars. "I hear you have an officer of ours?"

Kyte saluted. "Military Police Lieutenant Kyte speaking. And you are?"

"Lieutenant Sleet. Where's the Abh? Didn't she come to this area?"

"She escaped." Kyte knitted his brows and frowned.

"Escaped? You mean to say she got the better of this place's police?"

"They're useless. Nothing more than the lapdog dupes of the slave democrats. I must say, though, that you let her slip away despite your regulation equipment."

"This is not regulation equipment. Due to needing to give chase through the caverns by foot, we had no choice but to stow all heavy weapons behind."

"So you say, but..." Then Kyte realized that the machine translator had been left on.

Afterward, both commissioned officers turned off their translation devices, so he couldn't understand the conversation from there on out. Of course, he had no interest in their game of blame-shifting anyway. That said, he couldn't shake his ominous feeling... which turned into reality in short order.

"Inspector," said Kyte, flashing a superficial smile, "we must chase and catch the Abh."

"We were about to until they stopped us!"

"No, WE will be chasing them. And commandeering your cars to do it."

"You'll WHAT!?"

"Our proud army has no means of transport," added Sleet. "That is why we're in need of you folk's vehicles. We'll take only the drivers among you, and have the rest stay here."

"And we don't get a say in this? By what authority do you—"

"By this authority." Sleet pressed a handgun to the tip of Entryua's nose. "We have no time. Make it snappy."

“You tell him!” Kyte was overjoyed by this turnabout. “Don’t worry, we’ll take you, too, Inspector. You can give us directions. Oh, and I’d like to have you hand me my weapon back, while we’re at it.”

“But how’d you know we were going to be there?” wondered Jinto.

“The chances were fifty-fifty,” shrugged Min. “But it would have been tougher to find you if you ended up exiting through the main cave system. Too many possible exits. That’s why we put up a net for you on the Dream Park side. We knew we were right on the money when they started evacuating people from the park, and from there we could choose the perfect time to strike.”

“Would’ve loved it if you kidnapped us before I got shot.”

“Well aren’t we the little prince,” said Undertaker disgustedly. “I’ll have you know we tread on some damn dangerous ground ourselves.”

“Never mind that, there’s something we’d like to ask the little Abh lady.”
Marca placed a hand on her forehead.

“What?” Lafier looked away from the glorious **dance of victory** unfolding in the night sky to face her.

“Earlier, before we entered the caves. I saw your ear. And it’s been bugging me ever since, but it wasn’t the right time to ask.”

Jinto’s heart raced.

“It only came back to mind after we’d gotten separated. I can be a big ditz sometimes. But I still can’t believe it. I just can’t.”

“What’s the question?” Lafier egged her on.

“Here goes: Are the **Abliar ears** allowed outside the **imperial family** ?”

“They are not,” she replied with clarity.

“I thought so. Then may I ask you your name, Honorable *Fïac* ?”

“I am *Abliarsec Néïc-Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh* .”

A solemn pall of silence.

The militants of the Clasbule Anti-imperial Front were too busy processing this fresh revelation to make a sound. It was Jinto who broke the silence,

concluding that now that Lafier's social status had come to light, there would be no point keeping his own hidden.

"As for me..."

"Nobody asked for your name, **imperial citizen** ," Bill butted in.

"All right then." Jinto clammed up. On second thought, while it was true that keeping it hidden would be pointless, he realized revealing it would be just as much so.

"I did think it was strange," said Min. "I looked into it, and the **Marquessate of Sfagnoff** has two *iarlymec* (noble princesses); the oldest of them is eight years old."

"Oh, things're strange, that's for damn sure," griped Undertaker. "The hell's a **royal princess** of the **Empire** doing in a place like this!?"

"Did you hear that, Jinto?" Lafier's eyes sparkled. "Even **terrestrial citizens** know the difference between an **imperial princess** and a **royal princess** ."

"Hold a grudge much? You're just that type, I guess. It's not like I meant anything by it, so whatever."

"'Whatever' is right; just answer the question," Undertaker grumbled.

"We were aboard a certain **patrol ship** ," said Jinto, taking it on himself to explain. "That patrol ship got attacked. I wasn't a **starpilot** , so..."

"Must've been an **NCC** ," said Bill.

"Nope, not an **NCC** , either. I was just hitching a ride."

"Hitching a ride?" Marca cocked her head. "You can hitch a ride on a **patrol ship** ?"

"I can. Just so happened to be of **noble rank** ," he said nonchalantly. "And as I'm not a **soldier** , I was told to flee from the field of battle. But I can't work a **connecting vessel** 's controls, so Lafier was assigned to me. Aboard the **patrol ship** , she was just another **trainee starpilot** , you see."

"Hold on," said Marca, confused. "You're a **noble** , too?"

"Yep. Least, that's what I ended up becoming."

Bill whistled. “You really don’t look like one.”

“I get that all the time,” he quipped. “Wonder why.”

“Lots of questions today,” said Marca. “But let’s narrow question time down to what I’m more immediately interested in. Our hostages are a member of the **Imperials** and a **noble** . Plus, I’m fairly sure ‘Néïc-Dubreuscr’ is a surname associated with the **monarchy** to which the **Empress** belonged. Am I off the mark?”

“I am **Her Majesty the Empress** ’s granddaughter, and Jinto is the **noble prince of a countdom** ,” said Lafier. “We are not, however, your hostages.”

“I assure you, you are,” she said flatly. “How could we possibly let such valuable hostages go? Forget about exchanging you for spaceships; we might even be able to come by Min’s ultimate dream — independence.”

“I am grateful to all of you,” said Lafier. “As such, I must tell you the truth. Misfortune has dogged all who have attempted to extort the **Empire** to the ends of their days. Referring, of course, to those few who survived to see another day.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Yet another shudder ran down Undertaker. “I’m miserable enough as it is.”

The windows gleamed. The peak of the mountain that towered over the horizon was brightly aglow. Lightning whipped the peak from the heavens above, sending rays of light out into a crazed dance each time.

“Must be the Abhs’ above-surface assault...” muttered Min.

As though any one of them didn’t already know.

“What could they be attacking, in a place like that?” Jinto wondered aloud, spellbound by the sheer spectacle.

At last, the rumble of thunder reached them.

Something dawned on Marca. “Bill, is the jamming still in effect?”

White noise permeated the car.

“Still no good,” said Bill, shaking his head.

“I see. And I thought for sure they were attacking the radio stations.”

“No, you’re probably right. There used to be a really strong signal source until a bit back, but now it’s gone. Looks like they paid the wider-area station a visit.”

“Any other places?”

“Dunno. Weak radio waves are coming in from all over the place. No clue how many sources.”

“All likely the work of *daimbusec* (EM wavebugs),” Lafier conjectured. “The **Star Forces** possess similar devices.”

“**EM wavebugs** ? Bugs that generate EM waves?” said Min, curious.

“They’re self-propagating nanomachines, and they’re a pain to exterminate.”

“Now I know. By the way, I wonder if the Abh will attack the capital?”

“I don’t think they will.”

“You don’t ‘think’?” Min had been expecting a more concrete reply.

“Full-scale land war is the endgame stage for the **Star Forces** . Before reaching that stage, they generally destroy means of communication and transport, or might send in the *byrec üacér* (aerial fleet). I doubt they’d attack the capital so suddenly.”

“Where do you plan to imprison us?” Jinto asked, apprehensive. They could very well be exposed to **Star Forces** fire depending on the area.

“We plan on using Undertaker’s place. You yourself must be well aware—”

“I told you, no way in hell,” Undertaker protested.

“Then we’ll have to make it where Undertaker works.”

“Why’s it always me!?”

“Where else could we? Besides, you want to go tell outside cells about a get this juicy?”

“I say Min’s holiday home’d be way better.”

“Are you nuts?”

“Think about it, they’d never suspect we’d choose to go back right after what

happened...”

“It’s just too much to hope for.” And with that, Marca shot down the idea. “It’s settled, Bill. We’re headed for the funeral hall.”

“I think for the time being, we’d maybe better focus on giving this place the slip,” urged Bill. “It’s the heat. They’re on our tails.”

“Eh cohn! Eh cohn!” barked Sleet.

After the large curves in the road drivers inevitably encountered upon leaving Guzonh Dream Park, the way to the streets of Guzonh-proper continued dead straight. Entering that unbending stretch, the hovercars zipping in the distance would then come into view.

“Do you not have vehicle-equipped weaponry?” asked Kyte.

“No, of course not.” Entryua folded his arms and pressed a foot against the seat in front. “No need. The crime’s not that serious ‘round these parts.”

“That’s a shame.” Kyte pushed the gun he’d regained to Entryua’s head. “In any case, I do believe you ought to adjust your posture, Inspector. You’re our prisoner.”

“Is that right,” he replied, cocking an eyebrow. “I thought you hired me to give directions.”

“DON’T DEFY US!” Kyte shouted in his face. “Just do as we say, you mental slave.”

Entryua concluded that open opposition was inadvisable. After all, he was dealing with an unstable child. If he was stupid enough to persist in stubbornness, then theirs would amount to no more than a spat between schoolboys. Only in this playground quarrel, one of the kids held a lethal weapon.

“As you wish, master.” Entryua dropped the foot.

“Eh brik !” Sleet commanded.

At that cue, the occupation soldiers leaned out the windows and started firing.

“Those aren’t police! The police don’t pack that kind of weaponry!”

Incessantly, the bullets pelted. With explosive power despite their small caliber, the crusher-bullets gouged holes all over the shining roadway. Yet none reached their car. So far, the bullets were only hitting spaces of road that they’d already passed.

“Shouldn’t we, I dunno, go off road or something!?” screamed Undertaker.

“There’d be no point,” said Min calmly. “They must have detectors that allow them to take aim. Going off road would only hurt, by causing us to decelerate.”

“But there’s still that radio jamming!”

“You know nothing. Communications and detectors work over different bandwidths.”

“Fraid he’s right,” said Bill, who picked up speed. “Don’t worry, Undertaker. I removed all of the safety mechanisms for a time like this.”

“But driving straight ahead’s basically ASKING them to snipe us off the road!”

“Aerodynamically speaking, we should be too far away for them to ever hit us,” said Min, as composed as ever. “I don’t know what their guns are capable of, but judging by the fact that we haven’t gotten hit yet, I don’t think I’m mistaken. In fact, the bullets haven’t even reached that close to us.”

“I’m praying you’re not mistaken,” said Marca, who had her hands clasped in front of her chest.

“Have you got anything to add, Lafier? You know, as an expert in war?” said Jinto.

“I’m not an expert on **war in terrestrial worlds** .” Lafier seemed wounded for some reason. “Regardless, I suggest you prepare your **phasers** . At this distance, the damping is not enough.”

“Do you have anything, Min?” asked Marca.

“I do. Should be able to make use of the smokescreen rounds. Former Republic of Camintair military issue, K211 model. It’s made out to have the best EM wave absorption rate in cosmic history.”

“Then why didn’t you pull ‘em out sooner!?” Undertaker blasted.

“Because they took a great deal of effort to acquire,” said Min.

“Now’s the time, if you don’t mind,” Marca ordered.

Min reluctantly drew the satchel closer, retrieved what looked like a can, and tossed it out the window. “I might as well throw these in for good measure.” Min grabbed from the satchel ten-odd disks, each around three *dagh* in diameter, and scattered them over the road.

Bill looked back from the driver’s seat. “What’re those?”

“Sensor mines. They’re designed with killing people in mind, but I don’t see why they wouldn’t work against cars.”

“Holy hell, where the good goddamn did you get this stuff!? You’re nuts for weapons, nuts!”

“Oh, those I made myself. Already tested them, too. They may seem small, but they’re high-performance, and with extremely low incidence of mechanical error,” he boasted. “But never mind that. Bill, can you shake them off?”

“Leave it to me. This baby’s the fastest ground-crawler in Claspule. And we’ve got a lead.”

“Won’t this thing go any faster!?” Sleet shouted at the officer driving.

“No can do,” said Entryua, having the back of his cowering subordinate. “This is a command car. It’s not built to be able to catch up to a speeding car. That’s why we send the patrol cars first.”

“Why didn’t you say that before, dammit!?”

“You didn’t ask,” he said, unruffled.

That was met by a smack upside the mouth, delivered by Kyte with the handle of his gun.

Prick! He was dizzy with fury. He could list a number of things he hadn’t much liked about how they’d treated him, but he never *hit* them. Entryua managed to swallow his rage, and wiped the blood from his mouth.

Suddenly, the car slowed. They looked up, and saw a wall of black

approaching.

“Don’t slow down, it’s just a smokescreen!” said Sleet, nudging the driver in the head.

The command car ventured into the thick black brume, and the vapor, highly viscous, moved in through the windows kept open for firing. Entryua covered his face with his hands, hoping to protect his eyes and nose.

Suddenly, that instant, a merciless KAPOW!

We get hit!? Even as Entryua struggled to make heads or tails of the situation, the car lurched left.

“A mine! It blasted the electromagnet!” With the electromagnet at the hovercar’s front left down for the count, all balance was lost. The horrid screech of metal scraping against the luminescent pavement of the road assailed their ears.

“All cars halt!” ordered Sleet.

“Don’t stop, veer away!” Entryua leaned against the driver’s seat. “We’d just be bumping right into the next ones, you dimwit!”

The driver chose Entryua to obey, and took the car into the field at the side of the road.

The patrol cars that had been following them also ran into disaster.

The one that punched the smokescreen right after the command vehicle got its anterior electromagnets destroyed, the frontal part that had been raised now swayed by wind pressure. It careened sideways and turned over, sliding across the road on its roof. The patrol cars after that one proceeded to collide into it.

To add to the list of woes, those cars that slammed on the brakes even more got hit by rear-end collisions, while others pitched forward above the cars that had stopped, and still others evaded those fates only to eat landmine blasts...

At last, the very last car in the line divined from the noise that something had happened beyond the mists, so its occupants released the wheels, rode into the fields, and thus became the sole car to avoid any damage.

“Quick, get away!” Entryua waved his hands in the air, forgetting the position he was in.

Soldiers and police officers alike came crawling out of their respective wrecks. Police cars had a reputation for sturdiness; regardless of the severity of the damage, there seemed to be next to no casualties to speak of. But they couldn’t afford to dawdle.

The hydrogen fuel of the toppled cars had caught flame, and a blast rocked both soldiers and officers. The crops were also engulfed, and the smoke of the fires mixed with the smokescreen. Entryua coughed violently.

“Accident on the road,” Undertaker solemnly informed the rest.

“Road safety. It’s important,” gloated Bill, his smile a mile wide.

“You’re too right,” said Min soberly.

“Is there jamming still?” asked Jinto.

“Don’t worry, **imperial citizen** . Oh wait, sorry, almost forgot, you’re a **noble** ,” said Bill. “The jamming continues. They can’t call for backup.”

“But something is coming.” Lafier shaded her eyes with her hand and looked into their travelling direction.

The sparkle of Guzonh lay right before them. Some object clad in flickering, twinkling lights was rising between the shining city-trees. Said object took along with it five smaller flying objects.

Then they passed overhead, soaring by without so much as sparing the gang a glance.

When the glowing crest emblazoned on the belly of the largest ship came into view, Marca’s shoulders dropped with relief. “Phew, that had me wound up. It’s just the fire department!”

“Well, that fire is pretty huge. They could probably see it from there,” said Bill.

“Hold on...” said Jinto. “That thing might be a plain old fire ship, but it’s still flying.”

“Duh. It’s faster than over ground.”

“But the enemy was riding in those cop cars just now, right?” said Jinto.

“So it’d seem, but what’re you getting at?” asked Min.

“I mean, if the enemy took to riding cop cars, what’s to stop them from taking over the fire department?”

Chapter 9: *Robiach Saisera* (Space-Soaring Nuisances)

Must've fallen for me or something, Entryua thought as he looked askance at Kyte's emotionless mug, *'cause I can't seem to shake him*.

When the occupying forces commandeered the airborne fire ships and the airborne ambulance ships, he thought he'd finally be free of them, but he jumped the gun. Kyte insisted on accompanying Entryua, and Sleet gave him permission disinterestedly.

The fire ships that were made to land under duress proceeded to leave the firefighters, police officers, and soldiers who couldn't board in their wake. Consequently, the conflagration flared right back to full power. In addition to the single ambulance ship separated to act as a messenger, they established a light-wave communications system unaffected by radio wave jamming five *üésdagh* above the city of Guzonh, desperately scanning for a certain **hovercar** . A group of airborne vessels floated up from the central area of the range of city-trees below, exchanging information with the fire ships using the primitive means of blinking lights.

So over the top , Entryua scoffed. They were just wrestling with a bunch of lowlife radicals over two borderline children, and apparently willing to make use of all of the military power they had stationed in Guzonh to do it.

"Inspector," said Kyte, "do you know why I've taken you here?"

"No idea," said Entryua, his tone drenched with cold hostility.

"To give me directions."

"You're more than aware," Entryua sighed, "that I'm an officer of Lune Beega. Born and raised. Guzonh geography isn't—"

"Not Guzonh. You're going to take me to the Abh."

"Huh?"

A mocking, nihilistic smile. "You're going to take us straight to the pit of hell. I'll make the Abh watch as I kill you, then the mental slaves that obstructed her

arrest, and then the boy she's made her little pet. If the Abh's artificial pseudo-intelligence possesses the faintest trace of emotion, I'm sure she'll feign sorrow."

"I've got next to no ties with the Abh." *The bastard bond between you and me runs much deeper*, Entryua refrained from adding.

"That is why I will do you the service of simply shooting you. That being said, I rather think the people who more broadly supported the Abh shall face quite miserable deaths. Especially that boy. He'll be screaming for a whole night, I wager. As for the Abh herself, I will of course have a more elaborate farewell in store for her."

"And here I thought you were a tad more civilized."

"Oh yes, military law naturally forbids executing prisoners without trial, as well as cruel executions. Yet this is a time of crisis. We haven't even been told where the current location of Military Headquarters is. As such, we must have some room for discretion. Because here, the annoying, sanctimonious types in my country can never know what's happened."

Does he mean business? Or is he just trying to get me quaking in my boots as revenge? Entryua couldn't be sure.

Then he remembered: there was no way Kyte had the authority to decide such a thing. There had to be a commissioned officer higher in rank than lieutenant in the unit stationed in Guzonh.

On the other hand, he didn't know the particulars of foreign military power's operations. And the fact of the matter was that madness is contagious.

A United Humankind Armored Air Mobile Personnel Transport Vessel landed right next to them.

"Over here!" Marca pulled Jinto by the hand, and they hid behind a city-tree.

The hovercar was abandoned as soon as they entered the city proper. Otherwise they would have gotten blown up along with it.

They'd changed out of their dirty clothes; Marca had used her wallet to purchase new garb from the close-by automated clothing store. Their

compuwatches and **circlets** had been stowed away once again, and Lafier now had her *froch* hidden using a wide-brimmed hat.

“Let’s go through the underground,” proposed Min.

“Yes, let’s,” said Marca.

And so the five members of the Guzonh Cell of the Clasbule Anti-imperial Front and their two hostages descended, stepping forth into a brightly illuminated undercity center. It was about the same width as one of the aboveground shine-roads, with automated stores situated 500 *dagh* apart from each other. People were standing alone, and drifting away at around jogging speed.

The seven got on the automated track.

“Things’re really ramping up, huh?” said Jinto.

“You sullied their names. Stomped all over their reputations. It’s no wonder they’re going all out,” said Marca, looking back.

“Might it not be wise for you five to surrender?” suggested Lafier. “We’re the ones that they’re after. After all, I have no desire to embroil you in this.”

“It’s too late for that,” said Min coldly. “At least for me, I’m already hopelessly embroiled. They know my name. And I’ve been worried sick about my family this entire time.”

“Is that not all the more reason to surrender?”

“We can’t let the sacrifices we’ve made go in vain. We want some kind of recompense,” said Marca.

“Independence and **interstellar ships** are out of the question, but the **House of Crybh** will present you with tokens of its appreciation for your deeds thus far.”

“So that’s how the Abh repay their dues,” Undertaker scoffed. “With gobs of gold and shinies.”

“Sorry, but what we want are **interstellar ships**,” said Marca.

A confounded look crossed Lafier’s face. “I’m telling you that simply will not

come to pass.”

“What if they got them on loan?” piped up Jinto. “I dunno what they wanna do with **interstellar ships** , but they probably aren’t gonna pick a fight with the **Empire** , at least, not in the near future. So what’s the problem?”

“You’re right; we could perhaps do it that way,” Lafier nodded.

“If that’s our only choice... Shall we shake on it?” Marca looked at each of her comrades in turn.

“I wanted to try flying an **interstellar ship** myself... but oh well,” said Bill. “Guess I’ll just play a bit with the steering gear when I find the chance...”

“The ship’s destination is based on where the borrower wishes to go, right?” Min asked. Lafier gestured affirmatively. “Excellent,” he continued. “I take it detours are also allowed. I plan to shape an independent interplanetary conflict coalition.”

Daswani nodded wordlessly.

“Might as well have them throw in the gobs of gold and shinies while we’re at it,” said Undertaker.

“That should be much easier compared to the **interstellar ships** ,” Lafier assured him.

“Then make us that promise, Your Highness,” said Marca. “Promise us you’ll lend us one or more **interstellar ships** . That is, without any fees or time limit.”

“That is not the promise I can make.” She furrowed her eyebrows. “I can only promise that I will ask **Her Majesty the Empress** .”

“That’s fine. The Empress is sure to humor the pleading of her adorable granddaughter.”

“If I live to seek another audience with **Her Majesty** , I will ask her without fail.” And with that, Lafier jumped into the automated track going in the opposite direction.

“Come, Jinto!”

“Ah, right!” Jinto took her lead.

Surprisingly, Marca followed them.

“I’m going to make sure you live to seek another audience with her,” she whispered. “So I’m coming with you. We’re the ones who can send you back into space.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jinto.

“Undertaker really is an undertaker,” she answered enigmatically.

“Take a look at that signal, if you would.” Kyte pointed out the window. “That’s notification that the Transit Bureau has been seized. Soon the underground tracks will be stopped, and my army’s battle troops will flood in. The Abh has nowhere to run.”

Kyte kept Entryua abreast of all of the particulars of the progress of their manhunt, though likely only because he had nothing else to do. Every new bit of information would conclude with the words, *“The Abh has nowhere to run.”*

As he listened to Kyte’s rather dead monotone, Entryua felt fear creep across like ice. He knew for sure now. He knew that when they captured the Abh, he would die. It didn’t matter whether Kyte had the authority to do so. There was no question: as soon as he heard news of the Abh’s discovery, he’d take the fire ship to the scene and gun Entryua down with total glee.

He looked down; fires were raging all over the streets. The cars had been destroyed either because they looked somewhat similar to the one hovercar, or because they’d tried to ignore the checkpoint inspection. He could even see the flashes of gunfire.

“Civilians are hereby informed...” The air-mobile tanks were blaring their heavy-handed broadcast as they made their sweeping motions. “...That they are to aid in our search. You must answer any and all questions with the whole truth. In addition, if you spot suspicious persons, notify the nearest soldier. We are looking for an Abh. Civilians are hereby informed that they are to aid in our search...”

“Now look at that, sir.” Kyte pointed to the top of a city-tree. The soldiers were sending coded signals by blinking their handheld lights. “They’re messaging that they’ve searched all of the rooms in that city-tree. They’re

scouring every building with a fine-toothed comb... The Abh has nowhere to run.”

“Searching premises without warrants, huh...? That’s every officer’s dream,” said Entryua, trying his damndest to serve up some sarcasm.

“You’re the only ones to blame. If you had paid democracy and God’s providence the respect they’re due, we would’ve been able to act more gentlemanly. We aren’t an occupying army. We’re a liberation army,” he added wistfully, as though speaking of some lost dream.

“We didn’t ask you to come. Surely you acknowledge that?”

“It’s such a shame, Inspector. I thought we’d come to understand one another.” Kyte’s eyes wandered around the scenery out the window. Then he pointed again. “Look over there...”

The city was in turmoil. The vast majority of the citizens had taken note of the Abhs’ return. They couldn’t help but doubt whether anything good would come of cooperating with the occupiers.

The larger part of the **terrestrial citizens** neither loved nor loathed the occupation forces, viewing them only as quirky guests that had paid Clasbule a momentary visit. Yes, the fact that important government figures had been taken away had wounded their pride. Yes, there were those who had been forced to shave their blue hair, and those whose family members had been sent to camps for “democracy reeducation.” But this series of events was taken as nothing more than a transient natural disaster, with many even enjoying it, albeit as seeds of hatred were shut away in their hearts.

Yet over the past half-hour, those seeds of hatred were budding, and growing rapidly. The army was blocking roads, barging into homes, performing violent patdowns, even opening fire upon trivial misunderstandings... There was now no shortage of reasons to hate them.

“Good citizens, the Abh is to blame for all of this momentary chaos. Search for the Abh. If you can capture the Abh, the peace will be restored.” The voice from above insisted, repeated this was the case, but the hatred of the people was firmly fixed on the green-brown army fatigues. After all, the soldiers with bloodshot eyes and guns at the ready weren’t wearing the black **uniforms** of

the Abh.

They had neither the weapons nor the organized bodies to revolt, yet unlucky and inattentive soldiers were frequently getting ganged up on by mobs and their weapons stolen all throughout town. As for the citizens who lacked confidence in their muscle power, and those who were wiser and more prudent, they instead exchanged information, trying to return home through paths where they wouldn't encounter any soldiers.

That was the course of events in which Jinto's party was mired.

"Over there."

Marca was one of the five among them who had a grasp of Guzonh's geography. Their sense for the places where the enemy was likely to be was impressive. When they did encounter soldiers, they either blended in with the crowd or went down empty paths. They ran down stopped automated tracks, ascended to the surface, and wove their way through the alleys. They even crossed over the open squares by using the sky-corridors that linked adjacent city-trees. One might think they would be running at top speed, but in fact, they walked with deliberate composure.

In areas devoid of other people, they split into two groups, with each pretending not to know the other. Even when they did enter a plaza, Jinto was grouped with Marca and Daswani. Meanwhile, Lafier and the other three traversed the square one step ahead in their own group.

A coughing noise right above their heads — startled, Jinto looked up, to find two enemy soldiers wearing jetpacks. They landed right in front of Lafier.

"Take that hat off, woman!" one demanded imperiously.

Something was pressed against Jinto's hand. Marca was handing him a **paralyzer gun** .

"What're you two goin' on abou'?" said Undertaker, playing the drunk act. "You take a shine ta my niece's hat or somefin?"

"Well it ain't yours ta take," said Bill, feigning drunkenness alongside him. "I's the one 'at bought it for 'er. You got a problem wizzat..."

“Aren’t you being a little too rude to them?” said Min, ‘enraged.’

Now all Lafier needed to do was look frightened, maybe even cling to Bill, and the ruse would be complete.

Needless to say, the Abh princess was far too prideful to put on such an act. All Jinto could see of her was her back, but he could only imagine her eyes screamed *You’re not fit to spit on* .

Jinto and his group briskly slipped off to the side, cloaked in the act that they were simply loath to get wrapped up in this altercation.

“Just take it off! Or do you refuse?” One of the soldiers tried to lift it off her head by pushing against the brim with the gun’s muzzle.

Marca and Daswani moved in tandem to either side. Jinto, too, wasted no time turning right around and thrusting a **paralyzer gun** at the nape of a soldier’s neck. His injured left shoulder throbbed with pain from the sudden exertion, but he endured it and pulled the trigger.

Lafier and the other three with her quickly hit the ground, causing her hat to dance in the air.

“Gwah!” the soldier groaned, emptying rounds fruitlessly into the sky. The other soldier collapsed without a single peep or shot. The band of seven ignored the weapons the soldiers had been wielding, since they would only make them stand out, and made haste to leave the scene.

“Remember that guy who jumped into a bed of thorns?” said Undertaker, upon reentering the underground from the plaza.

“You told us that story,” said Marca impatiently.

“Well, there’s more to it.” Undertaker’s voice grew vacant. “About a month after he left the hospital, he went and did it again. Obviously, he got hospitalized again. Then I went to see him again, and I asked him the same question. Then he said he couldn’t remember much, but he couldn’t think of it as having been a good idea.”

“Uh-huh,” she replied curtly. “We’re almost to the place.”

“We just have to hope no one is there,” said Min, needlessly.

“They’ve found her,” said Kyte, after reading the blinking signals with eyes entranced. “They’ve found the Abh.”

“They capture her?” Entryua thought about the time he had left. *It was a short life. I never got to punch my daughter’s marriage partner’s lights out.*

“Not yet. It appears the report came from a pair of wounded soldiers, that have now been admitted. They found a girl who looked like an Abh. One testified that they saw her spatio-sensory organ. I can’t imagine they’re mistaken.” Kyte’s smile was twisted like a revenant ghoul. “I’ll be the one to capture her...”

He instructed the ship’s pilot to do something. Then, the fire ship turned right around, heading for the northwest area of the city.

The group of spires appeared beyond the range of city-trees. “What are those?” said Kyte, puzzled.

Entryua immediately grasped the true identity of the spires, as well as what the Abh and the crowd working with her were up to.

“Beats me. I told you I’m not well acquainted with the geography of Guzonh,” he lied.

“I’ll find out easily enough just by looking it up.”

“Then that’s what you oughtta do. Don’t lean on me for everything.”

IN LIGHT OF A CONFLUENCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES, THE GUZONH MUNICIPAL FUNERAL MORTUARY WILL BE CLOSED FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.

Undertaker unlocked the lock with practiced hands; it opened without incident.

“When the occupiers touched down, the folks in the government got scared and closed the place off,” said Undertaker, guiding the rest from in front. “So the army probably doesn’t much care about it. They might not even know about it to begin with.”

“But why close it?” asked Jinto.

“They feared they might be mistaken for anti-orbital weaponry,” Min explained. “And if they got bombed, Guzonh wouldn’t come off unscathed.”

“Weaponry?” Jinto was more confused than ever.

When they exited the small building, the landscape opened up. Richly colored spires were lined up on a vast site. He remembered seeing them before, since he’d come to Guzonh while gazing askance at them.

“I’ve been wondering what they were ever since then,” said Jinto, viewing them once again as he quickly paced along the long corridor. “So they were giant graves, huh?”

“Don’t mistake a funeral home for a cemetery,” said Undertaker bitterly. “It’s an inexcusable mistake.”

“Sorry. But then, what are those?”

“They’re caskets.”

“They’re what now?”

“And the cemetery’s over there,” he continued, pointing up at the sky.

“WHAT!?”

“I swear, kids like you are so ignorant of tradition it’s scary.”

“Well I understand,” said Lafier, who gave Jinto a reproachful glare. “You lack in common sense. It’s a matter of course for the remains of the deceased to be set adrift into the **vacuum of space** .”

“What she said. Though the Abh must do it directly from their spaceships, while we’re forced to shoot them off because we’re at the bottom of a gravity well.”

“On my home planet, we either burn or bury our dead,” said Jinto feebly.

“When we touched down onto this planet, I thought it was rather riddled with dirt and dust, and surmised it was due to the war, but those are caskets, you say,” said Lafier, satisfied she understood.

“But if you wanna shoot someone into **space** , wouldn’t it be easier to do it from the **orbital tower** ?” asked Jinto.

“Have you no shred of emotion, young master?” Bill gestured dramatically. “A funeral’s a sacred rite! You’ve gotta be flashy about it!”

“I’d thought of funerals as more quiet, dignified affairs...”

“That is what we call a preconceived notion,” said Min. “The custom probably takes after Abh culture, but we settled this planet from space, too. We wouldn’t be that off base.”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I look down on the idea of setting dead bodies into **space**.” Then Jinto came to a hair-raising realization. “Don’t tell me you’re gonna ‘send us back into space’ *in these things* !?”

“What the hell’re you saying!? You’re backing down *now* !?” said Undertaker and Bill at the same time.

“But nobody told me anything!” Jinto objected.

“I misjudged you, Jinto.” Lafier glowered at him scornfully. “I’d been under the impression that you had better discernment than that. As a fellow Abh, I am embarrassed.”

“Sorry...” Jinto had been battered into submission.

“There’s a problem, though,” said Lafier. Then she addressed Undertaker: “I’m not used to piloting this model of ship. Will I be able to steer it properly?”

Undertaker stared as though she couldn’t be serious. “Not for nothing, Your Highness, but it’s not *for* steering. There’s no need; it just goes up and away. The end.”

The blood drew away from Lafier’s lovely countenance.

“I misjudged you, Lafier,” said Jinto, seizing on this chance. “I’d been under the impression that you had better...”

“Be quiet!”

Don’t even know why I thought she’d do me the favor of letting me finish my sarcastic jab. While Jinto questioned his own sanity, Lafier hit Undertaker with a follow-up question of her own.

“It is airtight, I hope?”

“Course it is. I don’t know what you believe, but rest assured us Landers do know a thing or two about what kind of beast the **vacuum of space** is. It’s even

got emergency oxygen in case somebody who's actually still alive is mistakenly placed inside. Twelve hours' worth."

A door lay at the end of the corridor, and a little past it, a staircase leading down into the basement, a small room furnished with several screens.

"Commence funeral preparations." Undertaker ran up to one of the screens.

"As per the orders of the municipal government, this mortuary is currently closed," responded the machine voice.

"Haven't you heard? The closure directive's been rescinded."

"Cannot confirm that statement's veracity."

"Never like it when machines get antagonistic." Undertaker looked behind him. "Daswani, if you could."

Daswani nodded, took out a *saigéth* (keyboard), and connected it to the **console**. His fat fingers pounded away at the small, compact keys at blinding speeds.

"I'm always telling him, it's faster by voice input, but Daswani's a man of few words," said Undertaker.

"This way, much faster," said Daswani.

"Holy moly," said Bill, astonished. "Have any of you ever heard him string together a sentence that long?"

"He must be feeling charged up," Min remarked.

"By the way, what's its propulsion source? The ship's, I mean?" Jinto was cautious to avoid the word "casket."

"Hydrogen," said Undertaker.

"Hydrogen? As in nuclear fusion?"

"No," said Undertaker, his tone of voice strangely soft. "It's a chemical reaction. When hydrogen and oxygen are made to bond, heat and water are born. That's what it uses for propulsion. Put it simply, it burns hydrogen to fly."

"Jinto," Lafier groaned. "Could you hold me up? I think I'm going to collapse."

“Fraid I won’t be much help,” said Jinto, dumbfounded. “I’m just as likely to faint.”

“Don’t fret,” said Undertaker. “We haven’t had any incidents in a while.”

“In a while?” That was hardly much consolation.

“Sorry, that came out wrong. What I meant is that there hasn’t been a single casualty since the establishment of civilization on the planet. There have been caskets that flew away, though.”

“That’s... awesome.”

“By the way, there’re two types, ones with self-destruct devices and ones without. Which would you prefer?”

“Self-destruct devices!?”

“Yeah, they come back down two hours after shooting them up. That’s when we make them blow up in the air. It’s for funerals where the mourners arrange to reminisce about the deceased yet again while watching them light up the sky as fireworks.”

Jinto paused.

“Give us one that can’t self-destruct, please.”

“Got it. Shame, though. The self-destruct device-equipped ones are the nicer ones.”

“We appreciate the sentiment.”

“Undertaker!” said Marca. “Quit teasing them already, would you?”

“I’ve got a right to settle a score, same as anybody,” said Undertaker, clearly pleased with himself.

Daswani looked up from his **keyboard** .

“Commence funeral preparations,” Undertaker ordered anew.

“Affirmative. Please input the name of the responsible funeral director.” Undertaker slid his wallet into the **console** ’s groove. “Please confirm your identity.” He peered into the **console** ’s small window for the retinal scan.

“Qualification to perform funeral service recognized. Please begin the necessary procedures. First, input the name of the defrayer of expenditures...”

“The funeral director will pay in their stead.”

“Affirmative.”

Undertaker gave Lafier a grin. “Be sure to pay me back, all right?”

“Okay,” nodded Lafier.

“Next, please provide your interment authorization code.” He inserted a string of numbers using a mobile terminal.

“From now on, you guys are one ‘Bigg Tempill.’ No doubt they’re gonna throw a fit at the real Bigg’s funeral, poor old man.”

“Interment authorization code recognized. Next, please input the desired trajectory...”

“Marca, leave this to me, and take these two to the launcher for me. It’s #3. You know where it is, right?”

“Sure do.” Marca half-nodded to the two. “Let’s go, *Fiac Lartnér*, *Lonh-ïarlucec Dreur*.”

Inspector Entryua’s cold eyes watched as Kyte fumbled with the unfamiliar Imperial-make computer terminal in his attempts to extract information. Entryua’s unwillingness to help aside, the man could have asked the nearby firefighter to teach him how to use it, but it appeared Kyte could no longer trust any and all Clasbulians.

When at last Kyte had translated the information he wanted using his own device, he looked stunned. “Why didn’t you tell me about Clasbule-style funeral rites!?”

“You didn’t ask.” Entryua tensed and braced for impact.

Yet Kyte stopped at clenching his fist. Then, he burst into a howling fit of laughter. “As though she could escape that way! The Abh has nowhere to run.”

He slapped the shoulder of a soldier aboard the ship and issued instructions. That soldier proceeded to flash a signal using the blinking light method.

A red light above the entombment door of Launcher #3 was on. “Fueling and servicing in progress. Please wait.”

In front of the door lay an exquisite, brand-new coffin on a dolly tray. The launcher cylinder was below ground.

“It’s to protect the city from the blast impact,” explained Marca.

Bill, who’d come with them, had this to say: “When I was a kid I watched a bunch launch from above ground. But then the city expanded, and they moved them underground. Weird spiel, but hey, Undertaker was the first to share a weird spiel.”

“I just thought of something,” said Jinto, who’d stumbled across yet another seed of worry. “Is there a chance the **Star Forces** will mistake it for a weapon of attack?”

“A ship that moves burning hydrogen as fuel?” Lafier crinkled the gainly curve at the upper base of the bridge of her nose. “You may just make me die of laughter.”

“Guess you’ve got a point...”

“You needn’t guess. Besides, my **compuwatch** will be emitting a friend-or-foe identifier signal. And there can’t be any **EM bugs** above the stratosphere.”

“Sounds good, then.”

“You’re such a worrywort, Jinto.”

“Careful, Lafier. You yourself were looking blue in the face earlier.”

“I have now steeled myself. I trust these individuals.”

“We’re honored,” Marca smiled.

“Hey, it’s not like I don’t trust them...”

“Marca!” Min shouted through the loudspeaker.

“They’re here. But no need to worry. It’s just the fire ship from before. We can prepare to launch within a minute’s time.”

“What’re you guys gonna do after launching us? They might come for you.”

“We’ve some leeway on that end,” grinned Marca.

“So we’ll be just fine. We were born and raised in Guzonh; we’ll never fall into the hands of a bunch of bonehead interlopers. What you should be worrying about is the danger you’ll face after you lift off. The thing isn’t armored, after all. Be careful.”

“Thank you. But how exactly are we supposed to be careful, when it can’t be steered?”

“I’ve heard the Abh are areligious. Are you?” asked Marca.

“No.” The abrupt question took Jinto aback, but he answered honestly. “My family’s been Presbyterian Christians for generations. Not that I’m that devout.”

“Then there is something you can do.” Marca put a hand on Jinto’s shoulder in encouragement. “Pray.”

“Is backup still not here!?” Kyte snarled. By Entryua’s count, this was the fifth time he’d asked.

“They’re here,” reported the soldier, relieved.

Five airships had reached the mortuary, swapping blinking light signals in a bustle of activity. “Only five?” Kyte seemed displeased. “But the area is so vast! And they’re unarmed transport ships, are they not!?”

“They’re asking where they should touch ground, sir,” said the soldier.

“I don’t know, either! We have no other option but to search for one that’s readying for liftoff. Destroy it on sight!”

But since Guzonh Mortuary made use of underground launchers, the spires were essentially nothing more than casket-rockets: the bullets to be fired, as opposed to the shooters. Of course, Entryua knew this, but he chose to remain silent.

Come on, Abh, you’ve got to be quick. Get on out of here.

If he was going to be killed no matter what, he wanted to at least witness the occupiers get outwitted and outmaneuvered before he bit the dust.

The indicator light switched from red to blue. “Interment preparations

complete.”

“Hurry! Liftoff in thirty seconds!” Min announced through the loudspeaker.

“Don’t forget about our **interstellar ships**,” said Marca, pointing to the coffin.

“I won’t. I promise I will ask.” And so Lafier laid herself into it.

“You too, young master,” urged Bill.

“Right. Thanks for everything...”

“You’d better return the favor.”

Jinto lay sprawled beside her.

The coffin got sucked into the door, and each of its three layers of hatches closed one after the other. The interior was pitch dark.

“The indignity,” Lafier muttered. “To be forced to ride a ship with neither outboard *frocragh* nor a **control glove** .”

“It’s not even a *ship*,” said Jinto, as a reality check. “It’s a casket. A caaaskeeet.”

A pause.

“You’ve taken a sudden turn for the repellent. Get back from me!”

“Don’t be like that, it’s so cramped in this thing. Ow! Hey, I’m wounded here!”

“It’s just a scratch,” she intoned ruthlessly.

“I lied. Don’t you know that I do that sometimes? OWW! Stop!”

VHRRRRRR ... The coffin began vibrating.

“THERE!” Kyte’s eyes reeled wide, staring at the spire rising gradually from below ground. “What are you doing? Why aren’t you shooting!? Don’t you see it!?”

The five air-mobile military personnel transport vessels dispersed, alighted on the spire’s threshold, and deployed their troops.

“A flash signal!”

The soldier in the assistant steerer’s seat leaned over the **console** and began

making the landing lights blink. But the casket-rocket's majestic climb continued unabated even as they maneuvered.

Finally, the empennage reached above ground. The blast winds sliced across the surface. Several soldiers could be witnessed hurtling through the air.

The casket-rocket steadily picked up speed as it rose. Eventually, the fire ship briefly came face to face with it.

"Smash into it! RAM IT!!" Kyte demanded madly.

However, it was a firefighter who'd been compulsorily conscripted that was steering. There was no way they'd comply with an order that meant certain suicide. Even a soldier in the occupying army might doubt the validity of the idea. Contrary to orders, the steerer caused the fire ship to withdraw for fear of getting caught up in the rocket's shock waves.

Kyte nearly slipped down and out of the window as he began opening fire himself. "Why isn't anyone calling for backup, dammit? What are the anti-aircraft units doing!? Bombard them! Shoot that flying nuisance down!"

VWOOOM ...

Hot winds blew in through the open window, and the aerial fire ship shook. Entryua promptly braced his head against the back of the seat in front of him. Even Kyte wasn't so crazed that he neglected to block against the shock waves with his arms. When Entryua looked up, he saw the casket-rocket had already reached high into the sky, its propulsor flames like a flower blooming in the night.

"Dammit, DAMMIT!!" Kyte opened fire again.

At last, fire opened from the surface. But it was too late. The casket-rocket had already reached well into the stratosphere. Like a phoenix glaring down at the lowly lower realm, its propulsor flames made nothing of the fruitless gunfire.

"It's no use," said a soldier in a cold tone. "The flying nuisance has become a space-soaring nuisance..."

As soon as Entryua heard those words, the urge to crack up rose from his

insides and broke through to his lips. He threw his head back and roared with laughter. He hadn't felt this invigorated in quite some time. The fear he might get murdered did flit through his mind, but it couldn't suppress the primal need to laugh.

"Damn it to hell," Kyte cried tearfully. "WHY!? Why must everything always go their way? Does God not grant us divine commendation? Is God unwilling to give us a single sacrifice? Give me something to salve my heart!"

That was when it clicked for Entryua. Though the Abh and the Silesia Unaging were both born of genetic modification, the environments of their upbringing could scarcely be more different. He realized that Kyte's hatred stemmed not from anything personal, but from a severe, tribal sort of *envy*.

And while a faint measure of sympathy for the military police lieutenant returned, it wasn't enough to restrain the Lune Beega City Police Inspector's gales of laughter — and Entryua didn't care to stop laughing for some time.

"The destruction of the materials depot at 38 degrees 11 minutes east longitude, 52 degrees 24 minutes south latitude, has been carried out to completion," reported Cfadiss. "Next..."

"Please, **Senior Staff Officer**," said **Associate Commodore** Sporr, **Commander** of the **reconnaissance half-fleet** the *Ftuné*. "Don't annoy me with such overly detailed reports."

"But **Commander** ..."

"I'm leaving the cleanup campaign of all ground targets to you."

"But I must at least report to you after the fact."

"And I'm telling you, you don't need your **commander**," said Sporr, looking away. "This isn't combat. It's closer to an extermination."

Can't argue with that.

Cfadiss, for his part, was beginning to regret having proposed this strategy. There were 15,000 people under the military command of the troops stationed in Clasbule on the transport vessels that they'd captured in **Sfagnoff Marquessate** astrospace, and the ships' memory drives hadn't had their

information deleted.

That was why they had been releasing 300 million **EM bugs** across city centers. EM bugs were nanomachines that, upon receiving radio waves of a certain wavelength, emitted pure noise at the same wavelength. And though the generating power of each individual bug was weak, together they made for an energy output not to be underestimated. Once UH-made EM bugs were released, it was impossible to stamp them all out in a single swoop.

As such, the **Star Forces** couldn't stop the radio jamming with great ease, but nor could the enemy themselves. In other words, not only did the remaining 200,000 enemy troops on Clasbule's surface lack a unified military command, they also couldn't communicate with each other.

With the strike on the alpine radio station at the mountain's peak, the jamming had stopped being planetary in scale. In some remote areas, it was even possible to receive notifications from orbit. However, in the metropolitan areas, highly populous as they were, word from the Abh had not yet reached them.

So here the *Ftuné* , which flashed through space like heavy cavalry, was stuck making the **aerial fleet** 's job as easy as they could, striking units on the move and enemy bases that were removed from urban centers, among other targets.

To tell the truth, it felt empty. It harmed the soul to shoot down defenseless enemy remnants. To complicate matters, most of the enemy was in hiding within the planet's cities, out of the reach of orbital attack.

"Be a dear and ask me for approval only when it might cause harm to befall any **terrestrial citizens** . Apart from that, you can conduct this *work* as you please." When she uttered the word *work* , she visibly balked with a pronounced frown.

"Understood," said Cfadiss, head lowered.

"How many hours until the main unit arrives?" asked Sporr.

"They're scheduled to arrive in four hours and fifteen minutes by ship's time."

"I see." Sporr stood up from her seat. "Now I will take my leave and away to the *Chicrh Raichacer* (Commander's Room)."

“Yes, ma’am.” Cfadiss saluted.

“**Senior Staff Officer** , it’s an urgent transmission,” said the **communications staff officer** .

“Forward it.”

“Yes, sir.” The **compuwatch** beeped, indicating that the information had been transferred.

“Please wait, **Commander** , said Cfadiss, calling her to a halt as soon as he perused the transmission’s contents.

“What is it?” Sporr about-faced.

“It appears the *bodæmiac* (recon ship) of the *Lardbyrch* has rescued some drifters in orbit.”

“So?”

“The drifters in question claim to be **Her Highness the Viscountess of Parhynh** and the **Honorable Noble Prince of the Countdom of Hyde** .”

“*Fiac Bærh Parhynr* ?” Sporr repeated. “What’s an Abliar princess doing in a place like this?” She cocked her head. “Is she running away from home?”

“I doubt it...”

“You can’t be serious!” The **Associate Commodore** ’s **long robe** waved as she strode back to the **Commander’s Chair** . “There’s no elegance in keeping the company of a rebellious teen.”

“That’s not it, though,” said Cfadiss. “If I recall, *Fiac Bærh Parhynr* was on the **patrol ship** *Goslauth* as a **trainee starpilot** , while *Lonh-Ĵarlucec Dreur Haider* was aboard for a ride. As such...”

“I know, **Senior Staff Officer** . I see you’re another serious-minded type.” Cfadiss stood there for a second.

“I apologize.”

“Don’t apologize over something so stupid.”

“I apol— ...Yes, ma’am.”

“In any case, it’s a miracle she managed to survive on a **terrestrial world** .
How are they doing now?”

“They’re still aboard the **recon ship** . The **captain** of the *Lardbyrch* is asking what we should do. I believe we should have them come to this vessel directly.”

“We, the graceful Sporrns, have never gotten along with the unrefined Abliars...” So the Commander monologued, eyes cast down and arms folded.

“Then shall we have the *Lardbyrch* stay in place for the time being? To await handling by **Commodore** Tlife?”

“What are you saying?” Her red eyes stared into the **senior staff officer’s** quizzically. “Have them come here, because it sounds like fun!”

Chapter 10: The *Sairhoth Lothlortagh* (Return to Strange Skies)

The **recon ship** landed on the **take-off deck** of the **flagship** of the **reconnaissance half-fleet** *Ftuné* , the **patrol ship** *Hairbyrch* .

“We’re here.” While stroking his injured shoulder, Jinto peered at Lafier’s profile. She had her head in her hands. “What’s up with you?”

“The **Great Duchess of Laitpanh** ,” she muttered as though delirious. “The **commander** of this **half-fleet** is the Great Duchess of Laitpanh. Why now, of all times...”

“Oh, you mean **Associate Commodore** Sporr? What about her?”

“We, the agreeable Abliars, have never gotten along with the sly and insidious Sporrs.”

“Wow.”

“Not only did I just get saved by a Sporr, I’m forced to meet one in such clothes!” she bemoaned, looking down at her garb. It was a Clasbule-style “one-piece.”

“Boarding preparations complete. Please come this way, *Lonh* .” The **ship commander** with the **rearguard starpilot** insignia proved a tad more tongue-tied when addressing Lafier, though. “**Trainee Starpilot** Abliar.” Lafier stood up and saluted.

“Thank you very much.” Jinto saluted too, and headed for the **air lock room** .

Around ten **starpilots** were already waiting for them at the take-off deck.

The **starpilot** standing in the center was like a carnivorous butterfly: beguiling, yet fierce. Her rank insignia, **associate commodore** : she could be none other than Associate Commodore Sporr.

Upon descending from the recon ship, Lafier saluted, and Jinto bowed his head.

Sporr glared at Lafier’s saluting form as though to find fault, and bowed

gracefully from the waist. The attendant starpilots emulated her gesture.

“Welcome, *Fiac* , welcome, *Lonh* . By the way, Your Highness, please conduct yourself as a member of the **Imperial Household** on this ship.”

“But...”

“I have not received contact from a **trainee starpilot** .”

“But **Associate Commodore** ...” Lafier insisted.

“Besides, I can’t think of you as a **trainee starpilot** even if I wanted to, with that attire,” said Sporr, delivering the final blow.

“Very well then.” She saluted with indignation. “It’s been a while, **Great Duchess** .”

“It truly has. I haven’t seen **Your Highness** since the banquet in celebration of your admission to the **academy** .” Sporr bowed. “And I must say, I as the **Great Duchess of Laitpanh** , must too congratulate the healthy manner with which Your Highness is growing. Or at least, I *would* like to, but it looks as though there has been a gnarl in your eye for beauty. Do tell me, what has led to that choice of clothing?”

“It wasn’t my idea.” Lafier glowered at Jinto askance. “It was Jinto — I mean, the **Noble Prince of the Countdom of Hyde** ’s idea.”

“Oh my...” Sporr’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “You mean to say *İarlucec Dreur* gave you that garb to wear, and had you dye your hair black?”

“These clothes are an improvement. The first set *İarlucec Dreur* bought me was gaudier still.”

“My, my, my...” Speechless, her crimson eyes turned to Jinto.

Jinto was perplexed and embarrassed. If he explained that it was out of pure necessity, would this *Lonh-Nimr* (Honorable Great Duchess) understand and be reasonable about it?

“Please forgive me, *Lonh* .” To his shock, she bowed her head deeply to him, despite his lower rank.

“Uhh, for what?” His confusion only intensified.

“When I heard *Fiac Lart Barcér* (His Highness the King of Barce) approved the founding of the **Countdom of Hyde**, I believed it to be the height of eccentricity. I wondered whether it was prudent to make someone ignorant of the ways of the Abh into a **noble**. I mean no disrespect, but the surface defense weapons of the planet Martinh were not enough to pose any threat.”

“‘Eccentric,’ you say...” Jinto didn’t know what to make of all that.

“But I’ve changed my mind since then. Your achievements more than befit the rank of a *dreuc* (count), *Lonh*.”

“Th-Thank you...” What did he do that befitted the rank of **count**? Did she mean how he protected Lafier? But going by the flow of the conversation, he doubted that was it...

“The quickness with which Abliars fly into rage, and the intensity of their wrath once aroused, has echoed through all corners of the **Empire** as a legendary object of fear. Moreover, I’ve heard that *Fiac Lamhirh* of the **Royal House of Crybh** is an Abliar among Abliars, in that her fiery rage can be compared only to the first instants of the birth of the universe.”

“**Grand Duchess**,” said Lafier. She had something to say.

Sporr ignored her. “And to think that you would dye the hair of that selfsame *Fiac Lamhirh* black, and clothe her with such bizarre apparel. Though I see the evidence before my very eyes, I can still scarcely believe it. That’s a feat for a *laebec* (marquess), no, a *laicerec* (duke), let alone a **count**. You have my heartfelt admiration.”

Jinto cast his eyes down. He was unable to accept her words of praise as such. In fact, it seemed as though she was indirectly chastising him for dressing Lafier in peculiar garb.

“Don’t let it get to you, Jinto,” Lafier said apologetically. “She’s using you to make me fun of me. It is in the nature of a Sporr to be as twisted as a molecule of nucleic acid. If I may borrow the **Grand Duchess**’s phrasing, *Lonh-Painaigr* of the *Nimiéc Laitpanr* (Grand Duchess’s Estate of Laitpanh) is a Sporr among Sporr, in that she is renowned for having brought the technique of veiled disparagement the Sporr family has refined over a thousand years to the level of an artform.”

“Hohhh ho ho ho!” Sporr threw back her pale white throat and laughed. Then she peered square into Jinto’s eyes for the first time. “But it’s true that I like you, **noble prince** . I was told you will be a **quartermaster starpilot** . I invite you to fight under me.”

“Before we discuss the future, there’s a more important matter, **Grand Duchess** ,” Lafier cut in. She seemed flustered for some reason. “Could you lend me a **military uniform** ? I’d also like to shed this hair dye.”

“A **uniform** will be fetched for you on the double. As for your hair, how do we remove the dye? Might a hot bath be to your aid?”

“I tried. It didn’t work.”

“Then what is it we ought to do?”

“I don’t know.”

Lafier looked at Jinto. Sporr looked at Jinto. Jinto looked bewildered.

“Now that you mention it, I feel like there was something about that in the product directions... Unfortunately, I threw it out...”

The two Abh females kept staring.

“Uhhh... There were plenty of those hair dye things on Clasbule, so if we touched down and asked somebody...”

“Just now, I heard somebody somewhere suggest a truly alarming idea.” Sporr shuddered. “The idea goes that the **starpilots** of my glorious *Ftuné* should descend onto a **terrestrial world** still controlled by the enemy. That they should clear away enemy resistance, get their **uniforms** drenched in enemy blood, capture a frightened and quavering **terrestrial citizen** , and ask them: Hey, you know how to get rid of hair dye?’ What a dreadful notion! The *Ftuné* ’s prestige would crash down to the ground.”

Jinto’s shoulders drooped. “You’re right.” With the two of them safe and sound, the fact that enemy soldiers were still holding out on Clasbule’s surface had slipped his mind.

“This is what I suggest we do: let’s borrow a strand of *Fiac* ’s hair. I’ll send it to the *cruriac* (pharmacy). Then we’ll have them analyze it and formulate a drug to

get the dye off. What do you say?”

“Please do so. There’s also this.” Lafier pulled the **memory crystal** up off her chest. “It’s the navigation log of the **patrol ship** *Goslauth* .”

When Lafier held the **memory crystal** in hand, the starpilots saluted it.

After a moment of solemnity, Sporr gave a sign. “**Senior Staff Officer** , go take it off her hands.”

“Yes.” The starpilot with the emerald green hair and a mysteriously fatigued look on his otherwise arresting countenance stepped forward to receive the **memory crystal** with due reverence.

“Now then, *Fiac* , *İarlucec* , please follow me. I’ll take you to your rooms. Actually, on second thought, it looks as though we should take the noble prince to the infirmary first,” she said, eyes on his left shoulder. “I can’t help but marvel at how it could even be possible: to get off with just an injured shoulder after fitting Her Highness with such *amusing* dress!”

“I’m not the one who shot him!” she snapped.

Thirty-seven minutes later...

The *glagac byrec tlaimr* (flagship of the Tlife fleet), the **patrol ship** *Cairhdigh* , reemerged into **normal space** from the **Sfagnoff Gate** . And as soon as it did, they received copious amounts of data in communications from the *Hairbyrch* , which they then began to greedily consume.

“*Lonh* ,” said **Kilo-commander** Cahyoor.

“What?” **Commodore** Tlife looked up.

“Word has come in that *Fiac Bærh Parhynr* and *Lonh-İarlucec Dreur Haïder* have been rescued.”

Tlife grunted disbelievingly, mouth agape. It was just so implausible. He’d known them to have been on the **patrol ship** *Goslauth* . What were they doing out here? “Is the *Goslauth* actually intact?”

“I’m afraid not. It would seem the *Goslauth* did fall in battle.”

“Ah. I’m truly sorry to hear that. But if that’s the case, then why is *Fiac Lartnér*

here?”

“It appears she escaped as per the **captain**’s orders, and fled from danger to this **terrestrial world** . However, the full report has yet to be composed, so I don’t know the details.”

“Hmm... Well, I can’t blame you.”

“*Fiac Lartnér* carried the *Goslauth*’s navigation log back with her, and there is some information of especial interest recorded therein.”

“Go on, then.”

“I have ascertained whence they surfaced.”

“Where was it?”

“**Gate 193 of Céichu** . According to the **captain**’s inference, they carried a **gate** from the area 4.1 light-years away to the Bascotton Star System.”

“The captain being **Hecto-commander** Lexshue... She was a fine **starpilot** ,” he said, pacing.

“Yes. Her reasoning process was fluid and unstrained, and I agree with the conclusion the **hecto-commander** reached. As for the analysis of the rest of the information stored in the captured ships, we have only just begun, but I assume it will corroborate her deductions.”

The **map of flat space** rose back into view on the **Commander’s Bridge** . Cahyoor indicated as he spoke: “Two **domains** exist between this point and **Gate 193 of Céichu**. They are the *Bærschorh Gamtécr* (Gamtek Viscountdom) and the **Febdash Barony** . I strongly suggest we split the **fleet** with all haste in order to allow the **lords** and the *gosuclach* (servant corps) to evacuate, if possible.”

“Are we able to contact the **Vorlash Countdom** ? Perhaps by skirting around **Gate 193 of Céichu** ?” he pondered, back to standing still.

“We ought to try it. Shall we use the *Ftuné* ?”

“I think the *Ftuné* might need to recuperate at the moment,” Tlife feared.

“No other ships can bear to take up this mission,” Cahyoor stated

authoritatively.

“True...” Tlife nodded. “We need to carry on quickly. Let’s drive the *Ftuné* to the edge of exhaustion.”

“Yes, sir. We mustn’t, however, make those two accompany the ships there.”

“Of course not. Why do you always insist on pointing out the obvious? Arrange for a ship to transfer them to at once.”

“Understood.”

“Surgery complete. But you received great first aid.” The **army medic**, a genetic Lander, removed the *creurpaucec* (medical support machine) from Jinto’s shoulder. “So great we probably should’ve just left it as is. In any case, it’ll be awkward for a bit, but by the time you reach Lacmhacarh your tissues will’ve totally regenerated.” The medic bandaged Jinto’s left shoulder and made the dressing stiffen.

“Thanks.” Jinto stared at the shoulder. His new cast had hardened in place, running from his elbow up.

“Your clothes are here, by the way. Hope you like the design.” The medic proffered the **jumpsuit**. Its left sleeve came out at around the hips. The rest of the outfit above the hips was seamless. It was tailored to match Jinto’s present figure.

“I like it a lot,” he said, putting it on.

Then a **linewing starpilot** entered the infirmary with impeccable timing, as though they’d estimated Jinto’s surgery would be done at that moment.

“This **half-fleet** has been tasked with a new mission,” they stated. “We must have you depart the ship, *Lonh*.”

“What, already?” said Jinto, surprised.

“The **Captain** expresses her chagrin. She said she would’ve liked to ask you all about your adventures over a meal.”

“Please give her my regards.”

“Of course. Now, come with me, if you would.”

Jinto bade the **army medic** goodbye and exited the infirmary. The starpilot led him to the **take-off deck** .

“We’ll be having *Lonh* and *Fiac* transfer to the **communications ship** the *Aicrul* . Since it will be taking you to the **imperial capital** without stopping, you should be home in around three days.”

“I’ve never been to Lacmhacarh,” admitted Jinto.

“Is that so?” The **starpilot** looked a tad taken aback.

Upon embarking onto the **boat** , he found Lafier waiting inside.

She was wearing a **military uniform** without any rank insignia, and her hair had turned bluish-black once again. “Hey, look at that, it’s back to normal,” he said jocundly. Though her black hair and “one piece” look had a charm all its own, seeing her now convinced him that her true hair color and a **military uniform** suited her the best.

“Do you really think it’s back to normal?”

“Yeah, of course...” But Lafier’s eyes and tone rang alarm bells in his head, and he lost all conviction.

“Look carefully.” Lafier held some strands in hand. “It’s lost color.”

Now that she mentioned it, the color did look slightly lighter, closer to a primary shade of blue than before. “But this color’s pretty, too,” he said, trying to pacify her. He was about to defend himself, before realizing that there was no need.

The situation had demanded her hair be dyed. Besides, there was no reason she had to be in such a rush to remove the dye anyway. If more time had been spent analyzing it, it may even have proved possible to formulate a chemical capable of doing the job without damaging her hair.

“I’m not attacking you,” said Lafier. “I’m simply disappointed in your faulty memory.”

“C’mon, it’s not *that* different!”

While Lafier hadn’t been angry before, those words sealed his fate. The **royal princess** turned away pouting, and refused to speak until they sat down for

breakfast the next day.

Chapter 11: The Imperial Capital of Lacmhacarh

It was the city without a map. The positions of structures that comprised it, unanchored by ground or land, rolled in a state of constant flux around the curves in space created by gravity. Only the *Spodéc Bilr Arocr* (Imperial Capital Transport Office) had a grasp of their positions at any given moment, yet the next moment they would be somewhere else entirely anyway. That was why the city was called the *Birautech Cnaigena* (Turbulent Capital).

Another of its names was the *Sath Nocher* (Root of the Dragon's Heads), for the *Gaftnochech* on the **crest** of the **Empire** was also a metaphor for the Empire. The eight **monarchies** and the *bill* (routes) ran through them were often likened to the eight heads of the *nochech* (dragon). And no other place could be said to be where those heads were joined.

Yet another of the city's monikers was the decidedly more straightforward *Birautech Gasauder* (Capital of Eight Gates). There were multiple star systems with more than one **gate** , but only one with as many as eight in human-inhabited space. In the distant past, a millennium ago by the city's time, eight **closed gates** once scattered across the vast reaches of space were borne here by colossal starships, and summarily opened.

Further, it was dubbed the *Gyrsauge Frybarer* (Cradle of the Empire), for the greatest empire humankind had ever seen — an empire whose history would be tinged with blood and fire — traced its beginnings here.

It was through that ghastly history that they earned the name *Daüatsariac* (Those that Succumb Not). Many a time, the capital opened war with haughty arrogance, even in the face of likely defeat, and many a time, they watched the **propelling flames** of enemy ships as they sailed away. But in the end, those enemies didn't undergo any infamous fall. Even the nations that made it all the way to invading the capital simply became the blood and bones of the empire, long-lived and triumphant.

Birautech Négr , another such sobriquet, meant "Capital of Love." Opportunities for brushes with romance were few and far between for a race that spent their days aboard **interstellar ships** and in **orbital estates** , and who

were thinly scattered across a whopping range. As such, it was customary to spend half of one's life in this metropolis. In Lacmhacarth, open invitation banquets were always being held somewhere, and the Abh searched for a lover with whom the sparks reached supernova intensity.

Of course, more than a few simply referred to the city as *Murrautec* (Homespace). A majority of Abhs were the products of an explosive love triggered in the city. They were born here, scattered across the galaxy wide, and then one day returned.

The Turbulent Capital , and too, the **Root of the Dragon's Heads** . The **Capital of Eight Gates** , and too, the **Cradle of the Empire** , and too, the **Homespace of Those that Succumb Not** . These all were Lacmhacarth, and Lacmhacarth was all these.

The name of the **imperial capital** 's sun was Abliar. So too the city-ship their founding ancestors lived on, the surname of the **emperor** , and the star that illuminated their home were all called. When the group of people that birthed the Abh, (who could be called their indirect ancestors), lived off the land on their bow-shaped island chain, not yet having unraveled the secrets of the gene or the mysteries of the heavens above, the name of the sun goddess they worshiped, "Amaterasu," shifted drastically over the ages, ending up as "Abliar." This star system was therefore also known as the *Dreuhynh Abliarser* (Abliar Countdom). Incidentally, the **title** of *Dreuc Abliarser* (Count Abliar) was always held by the current emperor.

As for Abliar the sun, those who drew closer could view the globular "basket" encompassing it. The spaces punctuating its trihexagonal tiling mesh were large, but the mesh itself was made of thin fibers. "Thin," that is, in comparison to the star itself; more precisely, the band-like structures spanned 500 *üésdagh* in width. The sides of the bands facing the sun were solar batteries, and the opposite sides contained countless linear accelerators which produced **antimatter fuel** without pause. It constituted the largest **antimatter fuel factory** in not just the **Empire** , but the known universe.

The **imperial capital** measured 300 *saidagh* in diameter, was shaped much like a sickle, and orbited at a distance of six *saidagh* from Abliar. The *Rüé-Béïc* (Imperial Palace), the **Royal Palaces** , the *garich arocr* (orbital estates in the

capital) of **grandees** , the *bach* (joined residences) of **gentry** and **imperial citizens** , the *débh* (space gardens), the *ilébh* (shopping halls), the **Star Forces** facilities, the *locrh* (warship construction sites)... It was a gathering of these kinds of artificial planetoids, and more. Innumerable **transport ships** , as well as **interstellar ships** coming from **flat space** , soared through the city. Each facility possessed a measure of maneuverability, and avoided collision automatically.

The eight gates were evenly spaced in orbit 100 *saidagh* out from Lacmhacarh, each accompanying a *lonidec hoca* (orbital fort), and revolving in the opposite direction relative to the **capital** . Emerging now from one of those eight, the *Saudec Ilicr* (Ilich Gate), the **communications ship** the *Aicrul* carried Lafier and Jinto into the **Abliar Countdom** .

Communications ships were different from **connecting vessels** in that they were constructed more like small-scale **cargo passenger ships** . Since they were meant to carry guests and messengers in addition to information, the ship contained twelve rooms furnished with sanitary facilities, as well as a common room of modest size.

Jinto, who was busy doing absolutely nothing in the living room, took a peek into the common room, to find Lafier there, much to his surprise. She was rarely there. “Hey-ya, report finished yet?”

“Yep.” Lafier looked over her shoulder, pointing at the big screen in front. “What’s your impression of Lacmhacarh?”

The **Homespace** was there to see. It was the first time Jinto had laid eyes on such a cluster of lights. Splendorous and manifold of color, the array almost literally dazzled. With the ship and Lacmhacarh’s orbits coplanar with each other, it struck him as though he were viewing a galaxy from the side.

“It’s even more amazing than I was expecting.”

“I see!” said the **royal princess** , with a smile of unvarnished delight.

Jinto grabbed himself some **coffee** and took the seat beside her. Regarding his first impressions of Lacmhacarh, Jinto certainly hadn’t lied. Yet a different emotion entirely was currently taking up his heart. Loneliness.

He’d taken quite the detour, but here at last he’d reached the **imperial capital**

from the **Vorlash Countdom** . And now his journey was drawing to a close. This meant goodbye. He and Lafier would part, and there was no guarantee they'd ever see each other again.

On top of that, Lafier had holed herself up saying she needed to write the report, spending time with him almost only during meals. The feeling wasn't pleasant.

"Did the *Manoüass* (Commander) inform you?" asked Lafier.

"Of what?"

"We are proceeding toward the **Imperial Palace** ."

"What, directly?" Jinto was surprised.

"Yep. It appears **Her Majesty the Empress** wishes to speak of many things."

"Speak to you, you mean."

"Not just me. She wishes also to speak to you, it would seem."

"Whoa nelly," Jinto tensed. "You're laying that on me like it's no big deal. Though I guess to you, she's your grandma."

"A year has passed since last I met Her Majesty."

"Yeah? Must be tons you wanna talk to her about, then."

"There is much to discuss, yes, but **Her Majesty** must be busy with all of her duties. In case you've forgotten, the **Empire** is currently at war."

"I know, I know. Heard anything about how the war's shaping up?"

"No, I'm out of the loop as well." She leaned her head in. "Worried?"

"Course I am. Have *you* forgotten where my home planet is?"

Not far from the field of battle lay the **Countdom of Hyde** , whose residents continued to call Jinto "heir to the traitor." The **Ilich Monarchy** was shaped like a ring, so contact wouldn't be severed immediately, but if it ever got annexed like the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** did, well, even just thinking about it chilled the nerves. The people of his homeland would probably be far more amenable to an occupying army than the **terrestrial citizens** of Sfagnoff were. He kept picturing, despite himself, what sort of treatment his father, the **Count of Hyde**

, might receive at their hands. Though they hadn't met in years, and they'd never been very close, he was still his one and only blood relative.

"Ah. Right." Lafier's expression turned uncomfortable, embarrassed. "Forgive me my foolish question."

"It's all right. I myself forgot all about it while we were on Clasbule."

"We were fairly occupied."

"To say the least. You know, sometimes you really put things super mildly," said Jinto, in admiration.

The lights of the **capital** approached, closer and closer, and the nearest structure came into focus. A set of spheres were stacked together, and they made a giant tube wriggle like a tentacle. It lent the appearance of a strange life form that had reached an evolutionary dead end.

"It's the *Locrh Baiturr* (Baitur Warship Construction Site). The **patrol ship** *Goslauth* was born there," said Lafier.

"Interesting."

"See that?" Lafier pointed at the spheroid beyond the site. "That's a *sodmronh* (baby nursery). There are a few of them around Homespace. Inside, it's near weightless due to microgravity, the lining is soft, and foam stars are floating in the air. A while after birth, babies are given **circlets** and dropped there. That's how they learn the law of action and reaction, and how to use their circlets. If an Abh doesn't experience this during the developmental period, their brain's *rilbidoc* navigational area will never form..."

As Jinto nodded and interjected to indicate to Lafier that he was listening as she began to describe the sites to see in the **capital**, he inwardly wondered whether she felt any sorrow over their imminent parting, and if she would express reluctance to leave him.

When they arrived at the **imperial palace**, **chamberlains** who were stern of feature pulled Jinto away from her. Due to his experience in the **Febdash Barony**, he grew apprehensive, but his fears proved groundless. He was led to a grand and extensive **lavatory**, in whose warming waters he stretched out. After a thorough cleanse, he exited the **lavatory** to find a change of clothes already

prepared for him.

Just as the **army medic** had predicted, his shoulder had completely healed. The hole had closed up with new skin, and the bones were devoid of pain.

He donned a **jumpsuit** with the hems of its sleeves at the shoulders, as well as a **long robe** , as usual. A **circlet** identical to the one that had been stolen from him at the **barony** and a **compuwatch** to replace the one he'd borrowed from Seelnay also lay for the taking. After putting on the full attire of an **Abh noble** , Jinto gave the sign just as he'd been instructed.

"Please come with me," said a **chamberlain** who'd arrived at his summons, standing at attention to guide his way.

A **movable podium** awaited him in the hallway. "You may get on."

"Okay." Jinto stepped up onto it, and the chamberlain got on after him to input orders into its **console** . "Uhh, where are we going?" asked Jinto timidly as the podium took off.

"To the waiting room of the **audience chamber** ."

"The **audience chamber** !? But I thought it's only used for important events..."

"That is correct."

"So, uhh, what's on today?"

The chamberlain looked back, dark blue eyebrows raised. "Are you honestly unaware?"

"Know what, forget I said anything." He was happy so long as his astuteness level was deemed higher than a cyanobacterium's.

"Quit your fidgeting, Jinto," Lafier frowned. She'd arrived at the waiting room before him, and was sipping out of a glass.

"Sometimes you demand stuff that's easier said than done," said Jinto, whose nerves were not so readily dispelled. "I've got no idea what the proper protocol is. Are there, like, special manners to this, or...?"

"It's not such a big deal. Just be at your most polite, as common sense dictates."

“C’mon, I can’t have you forgetting that I’m not exactly an expert on Abh ‘common sense.’”

“Then do as I do. We shall walk up to the **throne** , make a deep bow, and wait until we’re greeted. It could hardly be simpler.”

“Does sound pretty simple,” Jinto admitted.

“Because it is.”

A **chamberlain** entered the room. “Thank you for waiting, *Fïac* , *Lonh* . All preparations have been made.”

“Yes.” Jinto made to walk over to the chamberlain.

“Not there. Over here.” Lafier pointed to the giant doors.

“Look at me, messing up before it’s even begun,” Jinto muttered.

“Walk alongside me, and match my pace.”

“Ah, right. Got it.”

“You ought to hold your head up high. You’re a hero, after all.”

“Well that’s the first I’ve heard of that.”

“You’re such an **idiot** .”

The big doors opened. The soft light of morning bathed the **audience chamber** . Basking directly in the rays of Abliar, it played across the room resplendent. A number of beams spanned the ceiling, but without a roof to support. Instead one could view the bright blue sky — for a *chnobézsia* (scattering surface) splayed above them. From the beams hung **crest banners** , the flags of the **grande**es that made up the **Empire** . Jinto noticed the brand-new crest banner of the **Countdom of Hyde** all the way in front.

Rows of *Sach Idarr* (NCC Guards of Honor), one to the left and one to the right, were standing straight with a dignified air. They trod across the black marble floor, approaching the **throne** as they did so.

Sach Arobhotr (Army Music NCCs) played the *Rüé-Oll* (Imperial Anthem). The lyrics of the anthem weren’t being sung, but Jinto knew them. They heralded eternal prosperity for the **Empire** , and expressed its determination to live to be

at the bedside of a dying cosmos. In its arrogance and temerity, it was a very Abh anthem indeed.

Since Jinto hated the idea of bungling this like he had when he first met Lafier, he'd tried his best while still in the communications ship to memorize the faces of the distinguished people he might encounter. Thanks to those efforts, he could distinguish the faces of the three people standing before them.

The one who stood up from the **Jade Throne** (its back to the **crest banners** of the **eight royal families** , which surrounded the still-larger **imperial flag**), was of course none other than **Her Majesty the Empress** Lamagh. The man with blue-grey hair, standing on the right and a step below the **throne** , was Lafier's father, *Larth Crybr Fiac Debeutr* (His Highness *Debeusec* , King of Crybh). Below him smiled a handsome indigo-haired boy. He could only be Lafier's younger brother, *Bærh Üemdaiser Fiac Duhir* (His Highness Duhir, Viscount of Üemdaise).

Jinto felt disoriented. Though they were the **Empress** and the **King of Crybh** , he couldn't see them as anything but Lafier's siblings, so young they looked. At the same time, his brain categorized the Crybh King as being older than the Empress. On an intellectual level, he understood the Abh didn't physically age past a certain point, but seeing it in person threw him for a loop. How did the Abh themselves deal with this headache?

Lafier knelt upon the white carpet below the tiers leading to the **throne** . Jinto hastened to follow her example.

"Stand, *ïarlucec Dreur* ," intoned a nearby voice.

When he looked up in surprise, he found Lamagh had descended from the **throne** to stand right in front of him. "On your feet," she prompted.

"Yes." Jinto got back up.

"You will accept the thanks of the Abliars, *ïarlucec* . This girl," she said, pointing to Lafier, "is nobody quite yet, but she holds much potential. And you are the one who safeguarded that potential, and brought it home safely. If it hadn't been for you, we would have never gotten another chance to see this hatchling alive."

Jinto turned red. “But I... I didn’t do anything. I was the one who got rescued, time after time...”

“Not so, *İarlucec* ,” said Lamagh, taking his hand. “Seeing as you may very well not have realized it, We do not think you are deliberately lying. Yet had you not rightfully told her to retreat when you did, she would have pressed on without ever ceasing, and fallen as a result. Though it may be in the nature of this clan of ours to misread when to withdraw, that disposition is particularly pronounced in this young one. Furthermore, you are an **Abh** that knows the ways of **terrestrial worlds** . Without that special and rare quality, it’s not clear what fate she would have met.”

She stared back at him at close quarters, her comely countenance so like Lafier’s, her red-brown eyes radiating gratitude. While the **Empress** ’s hands felt pleasantly cool, there was also, somehow, a warmth to them. Jinto was disconcerted, abashed.

“Allow me to express my gratitude as well, *İarlucec* ,” said Dubeus. “To us who have first drawn breath in Lacmhacarth, **terrestrial worlds** are strange lands with strange skies. The majority of us were born in the Abh world, and die in the Abh world, without ever having so much as set foot on a planet’s surface. I don’t mean to offend you, but to state the unvarnished truth, we’re afraid of surface worlds, Count Heir. I can’t begin to express how thankful I am for bringing her back from one.”

“Um...” Daringly, Jinto rebutted. “There are people on **terrestrial worlds** with their hearts in the right place, and without their help, we would have gotten captured by the enemy.”

“You misunderstand, *İarlucec* ,” Debeus smiled. “I’m not saying we think people on **terrestrial worlds** are typically wicked, or any such thing. In fact, when it comes to wickedness, we don’t plan to be outdone by anybody. The fact is that Lander and Abh lifestyles are extremely different. And the clash of cultures can easily result in people slain. Moreover, that land was ruled over by people who detested us as vermin. If you weren’t there to serve as a mediator, then my daughter wouldn’t be standing here today.”

“He speaks the truth, *İarlucec* ,” said Lamagh. “I have already read the **royal**

princess 's report. As such, I know of the people who ended up saving you two on the **terrestrial world** . They, too, have earned my everlasting thanks. However, now is the time for *you* to be acknowledged."

"But she saved me just as much. Especially when we were in **space** ."

"That was the mission that Lexshue had entrusted to her." At her name, a brief flash of sorrow flitted across his flawless features. "*İarlucec* , you're unaccustomed to the **spacefaring world** . My daughter was ordered to help you cross that unfamiliar world. By that same token, no one ordered you to help her cross the **terrestrial world** . You must credit yourself the venerableness of your deeds, *İarlucec* ," said Lamagh firmly. "At least as of now, to us, there can be no nobler act."

"Please allow me to give you my thanks, too, Lonh-*İarlucec Dreur* ," cut in Duhir, his manner humble. "I'm so happy you've reunited me with my sister."

When Duhir offered his frank, unaffected vote of thanks, Jinto's heart was finally soothed. The gratitude of the **Empress** and **King** was so lofty that try as he might, it didn't feel real or deserved. While their sentiments had come through, he felt so out of place that the back of his mind insisted they must be alluding to some other Jinto.

"I am honored, *Fiac* ," he said, bowing his head. "*Érumittonn* , *Fiac Lartr* , your praises are very generous, and I am most flattered and obliged."

"That's just how honorable you were, Jinto," whispered Lafier. "Carry yourself bolder, more confidently."

"Am I coming across *that* nervous?" He thought he was already doing everything he could to uphold his dignity, so he was reluctant to go over the top.

"Yes. You're so blue in the face one would think you're being denounced."

"*Far frymec* (my daughter), my love, your report has a glaring omission," said Debeus, with an amused look. "You failed to mention how close you've become with *İarlucec Dreur Haider* ."

"Can you blame me, after all the perils we faced, Father?" Lafier replied.

“No, I cannot,” he said, though his devilish grin persisted. “What say you and I go on a walk, Lafier? It’s been a while.”

“Leave Us for the moment, Lafier,” said Lamagh, her tone pensive. “It appears We have an unpleasant duty to attend to. You are to follow Us, *ĭarlucec Dreur* .”

“Yes... Uhh, what’s this about an unpleasant duty?”

“We must be the bearer of bad news.”

Lafier followed her father, treading across white sand. Pure, clear water formed a streamlet over the sand bed. Suffused with soft reflected light, the walls and ceiling also gleamed white, bereft of even a single blemish.

All over the handful of white columns, glyphs were written in miniscule text; since they weren’t inlaid, they couldn’t be read except up close. They were the names of those who had died for the sake of the **Empire** , engraved in order of passing without regard to social status (and, in the case of simultaneous death, in alphabetical order). Sufficiently close inspection would turn up people with the surname Abliar amongst the names of the various **gentry** and **imperial citizens** . In addition, one phrase was engraved at the top of each of the stone pillars: *Frybarec a dal fronédé* : The Empire shall not forget thee.

This was the *Graich Fronétara* (Hall of Remembrance), the most sacred room to the race that ridiculed all religions. Dubeus halted in front of one of the pillars.

“I forget, did I welcome you back yet?”

“No. You have not graced me with your words of welcome yet,” she answered.

“Then welcome back, *dorfrymec* (prodigal daughter). I’m glad you made it home.” Dubeus looked back. “Your flesh may remain young, but your mind and spirit will age with time. Even as an Abh, whose body will stay youthful to your dying day, your *true* youth will be over in the blink of an eye. And I’m wrestling with that reality as we speak. You’ve been through quite the valuable experience, and all during your true youth, at that.”

Debeus looked back at the pillar, and stared at one name in particular. Lafier got closer to see it for herself.

“There’s something else I’ve neglected to tell you, *far négh* (my love). I didn’t alter your genes. You’re all natural. That is why your **Abliar ears** are so small.”

Lafier looked up. “But why do such a thing?”

“Because there was no need to alter them, of course. *Placiäc* just so happened to give me a wonderful gift, and with my level of talent, if I had adjusted your genes, there was no way I could make you even more beautiful than you already were.”

“Father, I’m not sure I understand why,” she said, confused by her own feelings, “but hearing that makes me happy.”

Debeus laughed lightly. “Is that right? Then I’m glad. I’d been under the impression that you resented me about your ears.”

“In truth, I did, somewhat,” Lafier confessed.

“Well, I suppose that was inevitable, *noüonn* (beauteous one).” On that note, Dubeus fell silent, fixing his eyes on the name engraved on the pillar. Lafier too stood there, quietly gazing with her father.

“It was a glorious time,” spoke Dubeus at last. “Right by a dying giant star... and also at the edge of an event horizon... and even in a nebula in the midst of becoming a star... *Placiäc* and I loved each other, and we would use each other’s privileges, and we’d annoy each other in grandiose fashion.”

“‘Privileges’? You mean to annoy the other?”

“No. To be annoyed.” A faint little smile floated to his lips. “I’m relieved, *asaugec* (little baby). You’re still too young to fall in love.”

“Am I really...” Lafier reacted sharply, but she couldn’t issue a retort.

“When that marvelous time began to pull away from me, I couldn’t believe it. But despite my disbelief, I could feel it in my bones. I could practically hear the sound of the footsteps as those days slipped away. That’s why I, at the very least...”

“Father, don’t tell me...” Doubt welled within her heart. “You aren’t saying that you birthed me as a memento of *Cya Placér* (Lady Plakia), surely.”

“Was that wrong of me?” Dubeus traced Lexshue’s name with a finger. “Back then, *Placiāc* was my everything. Tell me, *sériac* (shining one), is it not a matter of course to always want a keepsake on hand of such a splendid moment?”

“I am not a memento, Father. Nor am I a copy of *Cya Placér* !” Her doubt had turned to wrath.

“Of course, my little *loreucec isarhotr* (slave to fury). You are different from her. *Placiāc* was bright. *She* would never raise her voice for no reason.”

“FOR NO REASON!?” Lafier’s anger only increased. “I am who I am! To think I thought you loved me for who I am...”

“I do love you. If I didn’t, then why would I call you **my love** ?” said Dubeus, unperturbed.

“You love me solely as an echo of *Cya Placér* .”

“Wrong again. I love you for you, *gnac abriāarser* (Abliar flower).”

“I don’t believe you, Father.”

“I didn’t think you would, *clasononn noüa* (headstrong beauty). But know this: you were born as a *üabædec Placér* (memento of Plakia), but grew into **my love** . As you are now, you look just like her, but inwardly you’re totally different. I’ll refrain from telling you how exactly you’re different from her. It’s true that in the past, my love passed through you and flew to Plakia, but I no longer see her behind you.”

Lafier was far from convinced. She had respected **Hecto-commander** Lexshue as a person and as a **starpilot** . She had looked up to her. Yet she wanted her father to acknowledge her as a person in her own right. And though he was telling her he did think of her as her own person, she couldn’t think of that as anything other than a smokescreen.

“Please tell me: was it your idea that I be placed in **Lady Plakia** ’s ship, Father?”

“I suppose calling it a coincidence would be too much. I wanted her to polish the treasure I raised, my *lamh* (ruby). I may be a reserve soldier, but I am technically an **associate commodore** in **rank** , so I do have some lobbying

clout.” Dubeus briefly became lost in thought. “Hmm... I suppose I won’t be a reserve for much longer. War is upon us now... And I shudder to think that I might be placed under a certain laddie of the **royal family of Barce** .”

“‘Laddie’? But I thought you and *Fïac Lartr Barcær* (His Highness the King of Barce) were the same age...” said Lafier, half without thinking.

“I was born from the **artificial womb** three months ahead of him. It makes a world of difference. When we were young, I would always win whenever we fought.”

“Never mind that, Father.” A fresh new seed of doubt had sprouted. “Were you behind Jinto getting on the *Goslauth* , too?”

“Yep. It was mostly coincidental, though. There were as many as 15 ships fit for *ïarlucec Dreur* to ride, I pushed her ship to be the one from behind the scenes. I’d thought you ought to have at least one friend from a **terrestrial world** — though I could never have imagined you’d grow that close.”

“I’m beginning to think you were the force behind everything... even maybe the United Humankind’s invasion.”

“Then you overestimate me, **daughter of mine** . If I guided the enemy or somesuch, then your grandmother would rip me limb from limb.”

“Perhaps so, but you’re taking measures where I can’t see in order to mold me...” Lafier didn’t much care for that fact.

“Because I am your parent. I received half of Plakia and sired you, then raised you by myself. But that too is now over. You are already a *frymec frybarer* (daughter of the Empire).”

“Is that so?” Lafier stared at Dubeus’s profile with eyes of incertitude.

“She was a fantastic woman,” said Dubeus, ignoring his beloved child’s misgivings as he steeped himself back into reminiscence. “When I first met her, I was a **deca-commander** with a poor record, and she was a **linewing starpilot** with a bright future ahead of her. I can think of a hundred reasons she had me spellbound, but I still can’t think of a single reason she fell for me.”

“It must have been the royal *Fïac* in your **title** .” Lafier surprised herself. She

herself had little idea why she'd blurted something so mean. It was most likely her anger toward her father.

Dubeus looked back at her. The way his eyes were narrowed spoke volumes of his ire. Lafier's father stood out among his clan as a relatively calm and gentle sort, but even so, he was still an Abliar. "You've known Plakia since you were a baby. You've even been on her ship. Yet I see you would appraise the woman who is half of you as one blinded by social status, *Abliarsec Néic-Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh* . Answer carefully."

"No." Lafier hung her head. "She was not that kind of person."

For a short while, Dubeus observed his daughter. He sensed her true remorse. "Very well, *onh* (blockhead). See to it you don't spout such nonsense again."

"Yes..." Lafier couldn't bring herself to lift her face. "Please, just tell me one more thing. Do you know what **Lady Plakia** thought of me?"

"I do. She once wrote to me that she was proud of you."

"Proud of me..." The old days she spent with Plakia came flooding to mind. Vivid memories of the woman that held a position in her life that on most **terrestrial worlds** would be called "mother." Fun, happy memories... Suddenly, her vision turned blurry, and some warm liquid streaked down her cheeks.

"Are you weeping, Lafier?" noticed Dubeus.

"I'm not crying because you scolded me," she said through her convulsive sobbing. It was as though she'd regressed to her days as an infant.

"Then are you weeping over Plakia's death?"

Lafier couldn't speak, so frantic was she to curtail her sobbing fit. She simply nodded wordlessly.

"I'm disappointed in you. It seems I've raised you wrong." But his tone was full of affection "Come to think of it, this may be the first time you've cried since you were in nappies, *socrh ghainena* (steel heart)."

Dubeus pulled Lafier into his arms. "Listen, Lafier. Our clan has a reputation to protect. We Abliars are ruthless. We Abliars are callous. We Abliars wouldn't raise an eyebrow if death were to snatch away our closest friends and most

intimate lovers. If it ever came out that an Abliar shed a tear or two, what would become of the infamy our ancestors carefully built? I don't care if you rage. You may even laugh and smile from time to time. However, no one born an Abliar has the right to weep. Even amongst fellow relatives, you cannot let your guard down. If you really must cry, do so in secret."

"It's not fair, Father!" Her tear-stained face looked at him from his breast.

"What isn't?"

"You never taught me how to cry without shedding tears!"

In the room to which the **Empress** accompanied Jinto, a man in **military uniform** waited at attention.

She introduced him: "This is **Vice Hecto-commander Birskuth** of the **Military Command HQ Information Department** . Vice Hecto-commander, explain the current situation to *Ĵarlucec Dreur Haider* ."

"Understood."

A **map of flat space** projected in the center of the room. It included all sectors as yet known to humanity. The vicinity of the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** suddenly turned red.

"This is where the engagement took place. I believe you're already aware, but the **Star Forces** prevailed, and recovered the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** ."

Then, a red blip appeared between the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** and the **Vorlash Countdom** .

"This is **Gate 193** of Céichu. It was the entry point of the invasion. The **reconnaissance half-fleet Ftuné** carried out reconnaissance in force..."

A red dotted line extended from **Gate 193** , dividing the **Ilich Monarchy** as it stretched. The **gates** that the dotted line intersected turned into red glints.

"The enemy has made the **gates** in the area into temporary military operation bases, totally blockading any and all passage. Of course, if that was all, the **Star Forces** would be able to break through with ease. The problem lies here..."

Now another area within the **Ilich Monarchy** (on the far side of the **Sfagnoff Gate** as viewed from Lacmhacarh) shifted red. Its borders were indistinct, but it

included several **gates** . Then a red arrow emerged, advancing fiercely toward the *Saudec Ilicr* (Ilich Gate), the entrance to Lacmhacarth.

“The enemy aimed for the **capital** with 120 **half-fleets** . Their actions on **Sfagnoff** must have been a diversion. While we surmised as much, we never dreamed they would make another place in the very same **monarchy** their invasion’s point of entrance.”

Now a blue arrow arose from the **Ilich Gate** to collide with its blue counterpart.

“We responded in kind, and under the command of *Fiac Glaharérr Rüé-byrer* (Their Highness the Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Fleet), counterattacked with 140 **half-fleets** . And though we succeeded in repelling the invasion, it was not without a great number of casualties. We have lost many talented men and women, and many ships.”

The **map** disappeared.

“That is all we have established as of this point in time. Earlier, it was reported that the **Imperial Fleet** is in pursuit, conducting reconnaissance around the entrance point. It must be said that the enemy cannot be failing to fortify their defenses in the area, however. Meanwhile, we don’t have enough resources to initiate large-scale military action. That is because we must send troops to defend the remote regions and search with great care for other entrance points that may exist, all while planning the reconstruction of the **Star Forces** . It will take a minimum of three years to break down the two walls that now divide the **Ilich Monarchy** . Beyond those walls, there is only a single **half-fleet** to contend with. Even then, it’s only really a **half-fleet** if they mobilize, as they are troops without a unified chain of command. They would be helpless before a full-fledged offensive.”

Jinto reflected on what it all meant. The **Countdom of Hyde** , too, lay beyond the walls...

“It is extremely unfortunate, *ĭarlucec Dreur* ,” said the Empress dolefully. “It’s a shame that in exchange for the good news you brought us, We must give you such deplorable news. It was a failure on the part of the **Empire** , and now there are no words We can offer to rationalize it. Yet the facts are the facts, and We

cannot expose the entire Empire to danger in order to save a part of it. All contact with your **territory-nation** has been severed, and We do not see it being recovered in the near future.”

Jinto was stunned. Not only had all links to his birth planet of the **Countdom of Hyde** been taken from him, but also those to his second homeland, the **Countdom of Vorlash** . His entire past was now sectioned off. And yet, shockingly, he felt not an ounce of sorrow. Jinto reacted to his lack of an emotional reaction with trepidation and confusion.

Chapter 12: Daughter of the Empire

On the day that Jinto and Lafier arrived in Lacmhacarh, a meeting of the **Council of Abdicant Emperors** convened in the **Imperial Palace** .

The **council** was made up of one **abdicant emperor** chosen from each of the **eight royal families** . Its only functions were to oversee the promotion of, and reward or punish, **starpilots** that were **imperial family** members.

Under the principle, or perhaps pretense, that the most outstanding starpilot among a generation in the **imperial family** was to occupy the **Jade Throne** , it was the role of the **Council of Abdicant Emperors** to take their time in choosing the **Emperor** to be.

Needless to say, the topic of the session was to deliberate whether the **First Royal Princess** of the **Royal House of Crybh** was a worthy starpilot, and by that token, a worthy candidate for the emperorship.

The meeting lasted for five days. In addition to Lafier's own report, they scrutinized the testimonies of the **former baron** and **servants** that had been pulled out of the **Febdash Barony** .

Finally, on the last day, Lafier was called to the *Üabaiss Fanigalacr* (Chamber of Abdicant Emperors), which was a spacious, circular room with the eight-headed *gaftnoche* dragon depicted on the floor's center, and a raised platform in front.

When Lafier identified herself, the holograms of the various **abdicants** appeared. They were the elders of the Abliar, old souls trapped in young flesh. Lafier bowed down.

"We are gathered to determine whether you, *Fiac Lamhirr* of the **Royal House of Crybh** , are suitable to be appointed a **starpilot** . We have some questions for you, and so we shall be conducting a hearing," declared *speunaigh raica* (former emperor) *Nisoeth Dugasr* (Their Eminence Dugass).

"Raise your face and look up, *Fiac Lamhirr* ," spoke *Nisoeth Dusumr* of the *Lartiéc-Balgzédér* (Royal House of Balgzédé), eldest of the **imperials** .

"Yes," said Lafier.

All eight **abdificant emperors** were gazing down at her, including Dugass and Dusum, who stood at the center. It appeared the two of them would be the driving force behind Lafier's hearing.

Dugass was among the youngest of the **abdlicants** , but he too had already reached centenarian age — of course, his hundred plus years did not mar his youthful form. Physically, his aging had stopped halfway through adolescence, and so one could still see the sprightly boy in his especially juvenile visage.

On the other hand, Dusum was well past two centuries in age. He had a poise all his own, his long flowing ringlets the light purple that came with occasional bleaching. For one reason or another, he relied on his *frocragh* , and was not wont to open his eyes. Even now, his eyes were screwed firmly shut.

Lafier was nervous. Though this was the first time she'd been the subject of the **Council** 's discussion, she had heard various things about it. Rumor had it that since the **abdlicants** , who had retired from both war and commerce, had nothing else to do, they had honed their skills in ferreting out the faults of young Abliars.

"Usually, *radéüragh bucragr* (starpilot aptitude examinations) are boring affairs," said Dugass. "Most children may believe otherwise, but picking apart every little thing about a **trainee starpilot** 's conduct is not a very amusing pastime. One among us has commanded a **fleet** of 100,000 ships, and another among us has laid waste to a notorious interstellar power. Why, then, would we take delight in such trifling concerns?"

This was a nod to the achievements of *Nisothe Dulardr* (Their Eminence Dulardh), who led the Shashyne Campaign one hundred years prior.

"However, your case was a fun one, *Fiac* ," said Ramlonh of the *Lartiéc-Üescor* (Royal House of Üesco). Giving the **title** of *Fiac* a disdainful tang was a special skill of the elderly **imperials** .

"Your actions were found to be unmindful in numerous ways. The atmospheric leakage incident in the **Febdash Barony** was particularly difficult to overlook," said Dugass.

"A petition was filed by the **former baron of Febdash** ," spoke Ramynh of the *Lartiéc-Scirr* (Royal House of Scirh). "He asked that we refrain from censuring

you for your behavior at the **barony** . However, he is operating under a false impression. It is not the task of the **Council of Abdicant Emperors** to call you to account. We are here solely to judge your aptitude to be a **starpilot** . As such, the **Empire** shall take responsibility for your impressive wake of destruction, deeming it collateral war damage.”

Lafier had had no doubt otherwise, so she simply stood there.

“Regardless, the air leak is a serious matter. You can never know for certain what may happen in the midst of battle. And though we may have proclaimed ourselves the **Kin of the Stars** , I do believe you’re aware that we cannot survive without air to breathe,” quipped Dugass sarcastically.

“Yes.” Naturally, this only heightened her unease. Nothing would be more humiliating than to be seen as incompetent despite her clear desire to fulfill her duties. If she was to be judged not worthy to be appointed starpilot, she would have rather not survived her ordeal.

“That being said, *Fiac* , the **Council** was unanimous in agreeing that that was a mistake any very young **trainee starpilot** could be guilty of,” said Dusum. “Every one of the people gathered here spent their trainee period uneventfully, but went on to make astonishing blunders after becoming **starpilots** . Do you remember, *Nisothe Ramlonr* , the day you stood here, and were demoted from **commodore** to **hecto-commander** ?”

“**Your Eminence** ,” objected a blushing Ramlonh, “I question the necessity to bring up things long since past.”

Dusum continued addressing Lafier: “Notwithstanding, *Fiac* , there are two issues even we cannot gloss over. We would like to hear your thoughts on those points.”

“What might they be?” Resolutely, Lafier stared at the eldest of the Abliars. One could only wonder whether Dusum, who had dispensed with his vision, was able to pick up on the ardent pride of younger Abliar. A faint smile played about his lips.

“*Fiac* ,” said Dusum, “while in the **Febdash Barony** , did you or did you not make use of your status as an **imperial** to incite a rebellion against the **baron** ?”

Before she could answer, Dugass piped up: “*Fïac Lamhïrr* , it is said we Abliars’s souls blaze with imperial wrath. Reluctantly, I must agree. From time to time, I too lose myself to anger. Be that as it may, our **subjects** not only accept our rule, but harbor love and affection for us. Do you know why that is? It’s because they can distinguish between fury as an individual, and fury as the **Empire** . Even when one is driven by wrath, if that wrath has nothing to do with the Empire, they do not use the bludgeon that is imperial authority, which no one ought to oppose, to strike one’s personal enemy. And even if there were only one Abliar left, if a fool who would wield the Rüe-greuc (Imperial Command Staff) as a cudgel impelled by personal passions were ever to accede to the **Jade Throne** , our subjects would lose faith in us. Ever since the **Founding Emperor** , the ultimate role of the **Council of Abdicant Emperors** has been to expel those who misunderstand the true meaning of pride from the path to the **emperorship** ...”

“Please wait, *Nïsoth* ,” Lafier interrupted.

“Speak, *Fïac* ,” Dusum permitted.

“I did not abuse my social status, nor did I incite a rebellion. I merely asked for the aid of the *imperial citizens* as a **soldier** of the **Star Forces** to end the **Baron** ’s meddling in my mission.”

Dusum crossed his arms. “I see. That does make some sense. However, *Fïac* , if you did not bear the Abliar **family name** , would it have played out as smoothly?”

“That is not something that has to do with me.”

“What exactly do you mean by that?” said Dugass, brows knitted.

“It was battle, and in battle, luck is a factor. In that I happen to be an Abliar, fortune favored me. If ever I forget to acknowledge luck, and boast of my achievements to no effect, then you may call me haughty, but I did not forget.”

“If you had been **gentry** by birth, what would you have done?”

“I would have acted no differently whatsoever,” Lafier replied without delay. “Even now, I cannot think of a superior plan I could have adopted to ensure the mission succeeded.”

Dusum smiled. “You may yet be a baby bird, but I must admit, you did well to come through it all.” Lafier couldn’t tell whether by “come through it all” he meant the events at the **Febdash Barony** , or this hearing.

“Very well. Should you earn the sympathies of the **abdicants** , that will be the end of that matter. Have any of you any objections?” Dugass paused.

No objection was made.

“Then there’s but a single issue left to discuss, *Fiac* ,” Dugass continued. “And it is this question that is the most significant by far. In fact, it involves the very foundation of the **Empire** . We hear you have promised to furnish **interstellar ships** to **terrestrial citizens** of the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** .”

“That isn’t true!” Lafier rebutted. “All I promised them was that I would beseech **Her Majesty the Empress** to lend them one or more **interstellar ships** .”

“It’s understandable, given how wet behind the ears you are, but you do not fully grasp the weight behind the words of the **imperial family** . Whenever an Abliar suggests something may be possible, people will assume it will definitely occur. And if it never materializes, they will consider it breaking a promise.”

“Not only that,” said Ramynh, “but they will then misconstrue it as having been a lie to save your own skin. It will manifest as a mark of shame.”

Lafier found herself raising her voice: “**Your Eminences** , that statement is incredibly one-sided!”

“There is no way you will get your wish to begin with,” said Dugass calmly. “According to the *darfass* (customs) of the **Empire** , a person below **gentry** in status cannot borrow an **interstellar ship** . Did you not know that?”

“I was not aware of that...” Lafier bit her lip. The customs of the **Empire** were wide-ranging, complicated, and arcane. And though she knew the basics, she’d never paid the trivial little details any attention.

“Now, how ought we to settle this?” Dugass shook his head. “That you didn’t know the custom was an unavoidable development, but a moment’s thought would have clued you in. The **Empire** and **terrestrial citizens** owe each other nothing, as the **Empire** hold **terrestrial governments** under their aegis, and

those governments hold their citizens under their protection. Terrestrial citizens are, in a way, immaterial in the eyes of the Empire. Why, then, did you think **interstellar ships** could be lent to such people?”

“How heedless of you, *Fiac*,” said Ramlonh.

Lafier didn’t know what to say. She had not made any surefire guarantee. Anger against the Abliar elders flared within her. They were being unreasonable, irrational. Yet now that they had explained the weight behind the words of the **imperial family**, she realized there was truth in that idea. After all, she remembered when the **servants** had misconstrued her promise at the **Febdash Barony**.

Suddenly, a ringing laugh. It was *Nisothe Dusemh* (Their Eminence Dusemh) of the **Royal Family of Barce**.

“**Your Eminences**,” said Dusemh, who spoke for the first time, “it is just as **His Eminence Dugass** stated earlier. It would be cruel to pillory a fledgling whose wings have not yet grown feathers. Besides, it is not as though the **royal princess** endeavored to tell some hideous lie. All she did was speak the truth.”

Lafier was taken aback. She had not been expecting a helping hand.

“That is not good enough, *Nisothe*. Those **terrestrial citizens** will believe they were deliberately deceived by an Abliar. That is the problem,” Dugass insisted.

“Then would it not be for the best to lend them the **interstellar ship**?” said Dusemh breezily.

“Not you, too!? Must I repeat the words of *Nisothe Duradr* ...”

“In the end, those **terrestrial citizens** saved a **daughter of the Empire**,” Dusemh cut in. “That is a deed worthy of appointment to **gentry** status. If they are appointed to gentry, and lent an **interstellar ship**, then the problem disappears.”

“You would have **terrestrial citizens** be made **gentry** so abruptly? That would be unprecedented,” protested Duradh.

“The **Count of Hyde** wasn’t even a **terrestrial citizen** to start with. Compared to that, then...”

“It was your son that so readily set that precedent, *Larth Raica Barcoer* (Former King of Barce),” said Duradh bitterly.

Dusemh’s face turned cool.

“Please hold on, *Nisothe*,” said *Nisothe Lamaudor* (Their Eminence Lamaudh) of the *Lartiéc-Ilich* (Royal House of Ilich). “According to the report, they desire secession from the **Empire**. Would they take any joy in the prospect of being **gentry** of that empire?”

“It matters not whether or not they take joy in it. It is their right to turn down the offer. If they refuse to be **gentry**, then they cannot be lent **interstellar ships**, even by us. That is all.”

“They may have gone underground,” said Dugass.

“That is fine.” The **abdicate** of the **Royal House of Barce** grinned mysteriously. “As luck would have it, the **airship fleet** is operating in the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**. If we were to send the rank and file to search for them, we can accompany them anywhere, by gunpoint if necessary. Let us inform the populace that they are to be appointed as **gentry**. They can then accept or refuse the offer, with the understanding that if they refuse, they will not be lent **interstellar ships**, but will be given some other reward as consolation.”

“But the **Star Forces** aren’t geared toward that sort of work,” said Lamaudh.

“If it proves beyond the **Star Forces**’ powers, then that just means we should employ the **Institute of Crests**.”

This is insane, thought Lafier, who had gone pale.

Much as the name suggested, **Institute of Crests** was a government office that dealt in the safekeeping of the **crests** of **nobles** and **gentry**, and managed genealogical trees and family ranks. However, their operations expanded from there, and now they also administered covert investigations throughout the **domains** and **territory nations**, taking on the role of a kind of secret police.

“I thought we were talking about ‘gratitude,’” said Duradh uncomfortably.

“Yes, this is of course an act of thanks. We don’t wish to be called ungrateful.” The fan-shaped sleeves of Dusemh’s *fécséic* (vestment) fluttered. “That is why

we will hold a pomp-filled appointment ceremony on Clasbule's surface. Oh, and it would be wise as well to invite people known for being Secessionist Party members and extremists as the guests of honor."

"Why in tarnation would we do that...?" said Dugass, flashing Dusemh an extremely confused look.

"Those that yearn for independence disdain the **Empire** . I believe they are laughing at us and look down on the Empire as being unable to crack down on them."

"Are you saying we should clamp down on them, *Nisoeth* ?" Repulsed, Dugass hid his mouth with a sleeve. "That would be inelegant."

"Of course not. If we did that, the **Star Forces** and the **Institute of Crests** alike would swell to enormous size. It would indeed be far from the realm of the elegant." Dusemh's smile turned yet ghastlier. "That said, we cannot tolerate their open contempt. To be hated is of no concern to us, but to be slighted is another matter. It is not that the **Empire** isn't capable of clamping down, it's that it elects not to. In other words, teaching the **terrestrial citizens** that the Empire can hunt down those who do not submit at any time if it so chooses might just prove an entertaining diversion. Their initial scheme is likely to threaten the Empire. Is it not necessary to give them a dose of reality?"

"You Sporr!" said Ramynh gleefully. "I've always thought the **family name** of the **Royal House of Barce** isn't Abliar, but Sporr. The way such devious ideas come to you."

Lafier couldn't stand it any longer. "**Your Eminences** , allow me to inform you that I am grateful to those people. I may even be rather fond of them. Their ways are different from our own, but they are proud folk in their own way. So, I implore you not to rebuke them..."

"This is a great example of how misunderstood we often are," said Dusemh, spreading his besleeved arms wide. "Even our own relatives can misunderstand us. Such is the fruit of our lack of discretion. *Fiac* , I am saying that we very much ought to thank them."

"Why do I get the feeling that tendency to be 'misunderstood,'" grumbled Lamaudh, "is not so much the fruit of our indiscretions, but rather springs from

what a certain **royal family** has assiduously built up?” But her derision fell on deaf ears.

“But *Nisothe* , we lack the authority to decide on such a plan,” Duradh pointed out.

“Then we should ask **Her Majesty** Lamagh to decide. It wouldn’t take much time at all, either. Kindly wait a moment, **Your Eminences** .”

Dusemh’s hologram disappeared. The projections of the other **abdicants** froze. Lafier could tell something was being discussed someplace she couldn’t overhear, but she had no choice but to stand in place and wait to be addressed.

At last, Dusemh returned. The holograms of the rest of the **abdicants** resumed moving, as though returning to life.

“**Your Eminences** ,” Lamagh intoned. There was no hologram of her, only her audio. “We heard tell of the issue from *Nisothe Dusemh* . We had been racking Our mind over a suitable token of gratitude toward the **terrestrial citizens** . As such, We thank Your Eminences for your wise counsel. We shall adopt the measure at once; in My name, it shall be arranged.”

“And so, with this, the matter is settled,” said Dusemh.

“So it is,” nodded Dugass, though his expression was fastidious. “Now the risk that the honor of the Abliars would be tarnished has cleared up.”

“I wasn’t aware patching up the mistakes of a **trainee starpilot** was a role of the **Council of Abdicants** ,” frowned Duradh.

“Is it not the duty of old birds to smooth over the little ones’ blunders?” Dusemh retorted.

“In any case, we must make our final decision. We have been discussing for five days, and we have no more questions for *Fiac Lamhirr* ,” said Dusum.

“Let us hear **Your Eminences** ’ opinions.”

“I hereby acknowledge that *Fiac Lamhirr* has the aptitude to be a **starpilot** .” With that, Ramynh’s hologram put his hands to his shoulders, and disappeared.

“I have no objections, either,” said Lamaudh, herself vanishing.

“Though I feel as though we’ve struck a tremendous blow to custom this day,” said Duradh, shaking his head and putting his hands to his shoulders, “I suppose there’s naught to be done about it.”

“I’m looking forward to your future. I know you’ll be able to overshadow my ignoble past,” said Ramlynh. Then she, too, disappeared.

“It’s as though I’m looking at my own daughter when she was small,” spoke *Nisothe Lamaimer* (Her Eminence Lamaiméc), Lafier’s great-grandmother, for the first time in the meeting; perhaps she was not taking her position very seriously. “Be sure to pay me a visit before you receive another mission.”

“You truly look just like **Her Majesty** Lamagh. You may just be the one to take the throne after my son.” With that, Dusemh vanished.

“Let us meet again, little one. Though I hope that the next hearing will be easier on all of us,” said Dusum.

“Congratulations, **linewing starpilot** Abliar.” To round out the meeting, Dugass saluted her (albeit his salute was a little off) and vanished.

To the Abh, the concept of seasons was not linked to the time of year, but to the mood in the air. The *Lartbéic Crybr* (Royal Palace of Crybh) had a garden for spring, summer, autumn, and winter, each with their ecosystem and temperature adjusted accordingly. Seated on a wooden bench in the autumn garden, Jinto counted the colored leaves dancing down.

“So that’s where you were.”

Jinto looked toward the voice. There stood Lafier. She was not in her **military uniform**. Rather, she was wearing a bright golden **long robe** over a green **jumpsuit**, with the graceful and florid **circlet** of a **royal princess**. In her arms, she held a kitten.

“Yeah. It’s the most calming place for me. *Fiac Lartr Crybr* told me to think of this place as my own home, but it’s really a bit too big to square with the concept I have in my head of ‘my own home.’”

Sure, it was small compared to the **Imperial Palace**, whose population once numbered over a million, but the **Royal Palace** of Crybh was an artificial planet in its own right. It was voluminous enough to house 50,000 people, and

currently there were 10,000 who dwelt there in order to manage the *Saudec Crybr* (Crybh Gate) and the **Royal Palace** .

Lafier sat herself next to him. “Were you thinking about your **territory-nations** ?”

“Nah...” He was surprised himself: “I didn’t even look back at my home planets.”

“Not even a little?” Lafier looked shocked.

“Not really. For some reason, hearing that I’ve lost contact with my home, I just don’t feel sad at all. I’m actually relieved. Like a heavy burden’s been lifted... I’m an awful person, aren’t I?”

“I don’t know,” she said, confused. “Are you not worried about your father?”

“I thought I was worried about him, tried to convince myself I was, but I’ve come to realize that in my heart, I’m not... I mean, he’s bound to be fine. He was born and raised in Martinh, and he’s got experience and personal connections. If we survived Clasbule, he’s sure to...”

But he realized at that moment that that was a lie. Martinh’s ecosystem had arisen independently of Earth’s and was hostile to humans. Respect for the indigenous environment was drilled into Martinians from an early age. That meant that the only way his father could survive was by hiding in one of the planet’s hybrid structure buildings, but any serious manhunt would turn him up given how limited the space was. And worst of all, the greater part of the Martinian populace despised him.

In all likelihood, the **Count of Hyde** was no longer of this world.

Jinto changed the subject: “What’s with the cat?”

“He’s named ‘*Diāhoc*’ (DIAHO). He’s the son of Zaneria, the daughter of Horia. Here you are, Diaho.” Lafier let go of the kitten on the chaise. “He was born while I was out doing navigation drills.”

Jinto recalled what “Horia” referred to: it was the name of the cat that Lafier had believed, when she was a wee lass, to be her mother.

“So that’d make you this cat’s aunt.”

“You *onh* !” That epithet again.

Jinto held his hand out, and Diaho seized upon it, rubbing his head against it. Lafier looked vexed, and, for whatever reason, saw fit to apologize for Diaho. “Despite being a cat, he hasn’t a stoic bone in his body. Zaneria was much the same.”

“It’s adorable, if you ask me.” Jinto tickled his throat.

“Tomorrow, you’ll be headed to the **quartermasters’ academy** , if I recall.”

“Yeah. Somebody’s coming to pick me up after breakfast. Since there’s a war on now, a lot of kids got their date of entrance moved up, and it looks like I’ll just be another in the crowd. Thanks to that, I don’t have to worry about how I’ll be starting late in the year. That said, I’ll be living the life academic for three whole years. Please don’t feel down over it.” He transferred Diaho to his lap and faced Lafier. “How about you?”

“It’s still undecided which ship I’ll be on.” Lafier shook her head.

“Gotcha. Well, enjoy your moment of peace, I’d say. You’ll be spending your every day on the battlefield for a good clip.”

“Yeah.” Lafier nodded. “Three years... In three years, you’ll be a *faictodaïc sazoïr* (quartermaster linewing starpilot).”

“If everything goes smoothly, yeah.”

“By three years’ time, I will most likely have become a **deca-commander** , with the right to receive a small vessel, either an **escort ship** or an **assault ship** . Personally, I’d prefer an assault ship.”

“Right, right.” Jinto caressed Diaho’s scruff, wondering what she was trying to say.

“Each **assault ship** requires a **quartermaster linewing starpilot** to serve as a **clerk** . And... as per **Star Forces** tradition, a ship’s captain has some say in its personnel affairs. It’s far from set in stone, but if the captain and the officer agree on it, then it should come to pass,” she said, staring at him interrogatively.

Of course, Jinto understood what she expected from him. “O future **Deca-**

commander Abliar,” said Jinto, putting on airs, “if at that time there should be a man named *Faictodaïc Sazoïr* Lin, you have but to call him by your side, and he will serve as your loyal clerk.”

“Okay.” Lafier’s face shone bright. “If you put it that way, I suppose I have no other choice. I do have my misgivings, mind you. It’s virtually set in stone that I will be a **deca-commander** in three years’ time; that means it’s up to you to be diligent and work your way up to being a **quartermaster linewing pilot** .”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry. I’ll expend every effort, Lafier.”

“All right, then, Jinto, we’ll see each other again at the supper table.” Lafier stood up forcefully. “I’m rather busy at the moment.”

“Hey! What about Diaho?” Jinto embraced the kitten in his arms.

“You’ve clearly taken a liking for him, so you ought to take him as your conversation partner. It’s not as though you haven’t the time.”

“Can’t say I’m as busy, no,” he said resignedly, putting him back on his lap. “You’re kind of a boring conversationalist, though.” Diaho responded by sniffing his fingers.

As he let the kitten entertain itself on his lap, Jinto ruminated. *You’re as terrible a liar as ever, Lafier. But I’m happy I can spend more time by your side. I’ll age with time, and my lifespan is half yours at best. But I want to spend as much of my short life with you as possible. Whether you ascend to the **Jade Throne** or crumble to smithereens in a pocket of **flat space** , know that I’ll be there with you. I’ll see your destiny play out to the end, even if it displeases you. That is my will, the future I chose of my own volition. The value of one’s life is bought and determined by offering the freedom they were born with for sale. Ku Durin would probably wince and tell me it’s too early to sell, but something tells me an opportunity this sweet won’t come twice. After all, the buyer isn’t the **Empire** . It’s you, Lafier. You’ll never taste the thrill, understand the joy of selling your freedom. Members of the **imperial family** aren’t born with any.*

Memories of the planet Martine’s Exotic Jungle floated to mind. It was the great new motherland of all Martinians. But now, he could only think of it as a foreign landscape, compared to the sea of *gereulach* (stars).

“Hey, Diaho. Tell me: who am I? *What* am I?”

The kitty meowed.

Epilogue

At **Ralbrybh Naval Station** , on the **Commander's Bridge** of the **flagship** of the **reconnaissance half-fleet** the *Ftuné* , the **patrol ship** *Hairbyrch* ...

"You're taking the *Ftuné* away from me!?" Sporr cried.

"Somebody with the **rank** of **commodore** serving as a **half-fleet commander** is an exception to the norm to begin with," said the hologram of *Glaharérh Chtymer* (Naval Base Commander-in-Chief), *Spénec Laburer* (Star Forces Admiral) *Uneuch* (OONYOOSH), with an air of patience. "As you're aware, our ships were greatly depleted in number after the engagement three years ago. Now, the array of battle is finally in order. We will be having you head up a full **fleet** , under the wing of Fofraudéc (Grand Commodore) Tlife."

"And that **fleet** would be?" Sporr was not coy about her disaffection.

"It hasn't yet been organized. We will make you *Roïglaharérh Chtymer* (Naval Base Vice Commander-in-chief) for the time being, but it won't be for long. That's because the time the enemy will be forced to recall the existence of the **Imperial Star Forces** fast approaches."

"Has the ship I'll be on been decided? I'm quite fond of the *Hairbyrch* , myself..."

"It won't be the *Hairbyrch* . That's the **flagship** of the *Ftuné* . Assign it to a successor."

Her eyebrows of flowing scarlet-blue bristled.

"And that's that," said Uneuch, hastily. "Your appointment will come into effect in three days. I'd like you to set your personal affairs straight by then. I'm willing to discuss personnel matters at the new **Headquarters** as well. Now allow me to take my leave. And congratulations, **Commodore** Sporr."

Hurriedly, the **Commander-in-chief** 's hologram vanished. Sporr continued to glare at a hologram that was no longer there.

"“Congratulations’!? Does he think I WANT a promotion? I’m already a **Grand Duchess** !”

Having overheard their exchange, Cfadiss was relieved. Sporr had been difficult to work for. He thought it'd take at most three years to grow used to it, but that had been wishful thinking. She was incorrigibly self-indulgent, capricious, and worst of all, an incredibly capable commander despite that!

Cfadiss could see it now. A slightly more manageable **commander** to take her place. That would be nice.

"And what do you look so happy about, **Senior Staff Officer**?" Cfadiss snapped to, to find Sporr staring daggers at him.

"Ah! I... I'm not," said Cfadiss, stiffening his face.

"Oh? But I'm *happy* that you're happy... so you'd better hurry and set your affairs in order, too."

"Huh? How come?" he said, dumbfounded.

"You heard what the man said. He'll hear me out with regard to the personnel affairs of the new **Headquarters**. And you're the new **Chief of Staff**!"

"Please, hold on," he said, dismayed. "I'm a **hecto-commander**. My **rank** isn't high enough."

"I think it's high time you get your promotion. In fact, I'll back your promotion. Why, I myself have just been promoted, so I simply must share this pleasure with my subordinates. Congratulations, **Kilo-commander** Cfadiss."

"I'm beside myself with gratitude, but..."

"Does something about this *inconvenience* you?" she prodded, folding her arms.

"No, ma'am. It's a stupendous honor. Thank you very much," he said, his hand forced.

"You're welcome." She had an announcement for the other personnel on the bridge as well. "Everybody will rise up the ranks. I'm taking you all with me!"

Amidst the whole of the commander's bridge cheering with jubilation, Cfadiss alone heaved a deep sigh.

In **flat space**, in a room in an *isadh saura* (lightweight transport freighter)

named *Clasepyr* (CLASBULE) in transit near *Saudec Matmatsocna Cloharr* (Gate 229 of Cloha).

“This isn’t the kind of aboard-ship lifestyle I had in mind,” lamented Marca.

“No two ways about it,” said Undertaker.

“Here I am, having left my beloved husband and child to see deep space, only to have to do the **Empire** ‘s bidding and help haul their cargo. Why, I ask you?”

“Can’t be helped,” said Undertaker.

“And it’s not like we’re actually the ones doing the hauling, either,” said Bill, gulping down some booze. “It’s an Abh who’s piloting. Besides loading whatever cargo the **Empire** wants us to, all we can be said to be doing is drinking thusly, and watching our savings pile up.”

“No other option,” said Undertaker.

“Well, it helps to think of it as accumulating funds for the Clasbule Secession War to come.” Min took another sip of drink. “And the **Empire** ‘s helping us do it. It amuses me.”

“Oh, it amuses you, does it?” snapped Bill. “We can’t even return to Clasbule. We’re too famous there. I can hear the sarcasm now: ‘*Ceucec reucer* (sir gentry), I’m so terribly sorry to have to ask this of you, but could ya take 10 *üésboc* of pork shoulder into the next town over?’”

“Can’t do a thing about it,” said Undertaker.

“Well, I’m fairly satisfied with this arrangement. We can see different worlds. We can use these travels as reference for the independence effort. In any case, I say we should bide our time until the war’s over. When it ends, this ship’s destination will be freed up.”

“You want us to wait until the war’s over!?” Marca held her hands up in shock. “When’s it going to end? It hasn’t even really started yet!”

“It is what it is,” said Undertaker.

“I swear...” Bill looked Daswani’s way. “Hey, can you use your skills to take over this ship’s **computing crystals** ? Let’s get this thing in human hands.”

The hulking man shook his head silently.

“What the hell do we even do with ourselves!?”

“Oh well, nothing for it.”

“Undertaker,” said Marca, glaring at her comrade, “do you have *anything* else to add?”

Undertaker looked at her with eyes drowsy from drink. “Did I ever tell you about the guy who jumped into a bunch of thorns?”

“Oh yes, Undertaker. Hundreds of times.”

In the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**, at the Lune Beega Municipal Police Agency building on the planet of Clasbule...

“The election results are in!” said a subordinate who came barging in.

Entryua looked up from the screen on his work desk. The officer didn’t have to say a word; Entryua could tell from that look. Yet Entryua was forced to ask anyway.

“And?”

“Aizan’s done!” Fists pumping, he was thoroughly delighted. “We’re finally free from Commissioner Aizan’s two-year reign!”

Entryua grinned. “Looks like cooperating with the occupiers blew up in his face.”

“Aizan’s backers are up in arms. They’re saying that police officers passing damning information about the commissioner violated election law.”

“All I told the press was the truth. They can hold my feet to the fire if I ever lied, but I didn’t. What’re they going to attack me for?”

“Too right, sir,” replied the officer, smiling sweet revenge. “Though they’re saying that you shouldn’t have answered the press to begin with.”

“They must be joking,” said Entryua, cocking an eyebrow. “The people love us. We’re cops the citizens respect! So how could we keep mum when the cameras and mics are on us?”

“Exactly, sir,” said the subordinate, nodding gravely. “Now then, Inspector,

allow me to make the rounds telling everybody the good news.”

“I think everybody probably already knows.”

“Probably. But I want to spread the message anyway — because there’s no doubt in mind they’d all like to hear this particular bit of news over and over again.”

Entryua watched as he flew right back out of the office like a whirlwind, and then looked back at the screen, which displayed a letter. A letter from Military Police Lieutenant Kyte, sent from *Loneucebhic Siturr* (Situr Prison Camp) in the faraway *Faicec Üescor* (Üesco Monarchy).

At the **Countdom of Abliar** , in the **airlock room** of the *radéüiac baicæcer* (antimatter fuel tank ship) *Sélñaïc* , sailing via inertial navigation in an astrospace sector located between the sun of Abliar and a point three light-seconds from the **imperial capital** Lacmhacarh...

“That was quite the close call,” said Seelnay as she shed her **pressure suit** . “The magnetic flux density had dropped so low. But the **computing crystals** in the remote surveillance bot have degraded, so instead of the current situation, I was seeing the *memory drive* ’s—”

“You don’t need to lie to me, too,” frowned Arsa, who helped her take off the **pressure suit** . “You’ve gone and done it again, haven’t you, Seelnay.”

“Guess you found me out!” Seelnay stuck out her tongue.

“Why on heaven are you pretending to have ‘repaired’ a **fuel tank** that’s not broken?”

“C’mon, the money from just an inspection’s nothing compared to inspection plus repair.”

“Sure, but we have so much work coming in, there’s no need. We just got word from Greda. The authorities think it’s strange.”

“Huh?” She frowned, a sense of foreboding in the air.

“They’re asking why the **fuel tank** inspected by Seelnay Ltd. was the only one with an unexpected anomaly spotted, and whether it’s breaking new ground in the field of statistics or stems from some other cause entirely.” Arsa took a

breath. “Are you willing to gamble? Because I’d put all of my money on a new discipline of statistics NOT coming to be.”

“Don’t worry. We’ve the **Royal House of Crybh** backing us,” she said, putting on a daring front.

“You can’t be over-reliant on the good graces of the **royal family** . They’ve already funded this enterprise. Besides, how can you honestly ask them to be complicit in fraud? You’re not unlikely to incur the wrath of the Abliars that way.”

“But Seelnay Ltd. still has so much room to grow!” she replied, pouting her lips.

“And if you keep at it, that potential will get nipped in the bud.”

“Okay, okay...” Seelnay hung her head. “I won’t do it again.”

“Seelnay, do you have any idea how strange the authorities think this case is?” Arsa sighed.

“They’re that suspicious?”

“It’s worse than that,” said Arsa, thrusting her face toward her. “They’re not suspicious at all! They know what you did. But they’re willing to let past offenses slide, as long as you understand they won’t overlook anymore.”

“So, they’re saying I can pretend this incident never happened, either!?” Seelnay opened her arms.

“That’s right. They’ll forget it ever happened. Only, they’ll be paying you solely for the inspection.”

“But I repaired it, too!” said Seelnay, displeased. “I DID replace the magnetic flux density meter with a new one, and I even refreshed the data on the **computing crystals** . I didn’t NEED to, but I did.”

“I’m going to tell Greda to dock your cut of the pay,” resolved Arsa.

“But I’m the CEO!” said Seelnay. That said, she had no true intention of wielding her position of authority. If Arsa or Greda abandoned her, it was obvious that the newly formed Seelnay Ltd. would immediately tank, and to confound things further, it seemed the two of them knew that, too.

At the **imperial capital** Lacmhacarh, in the drawing room of the *Garich Arocr Lym Faibdacr* (Imperial Capital Manor House of the Baron of Febdash)...

“It’s only been three years since then, eh? You’ve grown into a real man.” The old man extended a hand.

“Thanks. You haven’t changed, **Honorable Former Baron** .” Jinto gripped his hand. “How are you?”

“I’m holding up all right.” The **former baron of Febdash** urged Jinto to take a seat before setting himself down. “Seems you’ve inherited the *dreuragh* (rank of count).”

“Yep.” Jinto nodded and sat down.

According to a UH broadcast, the execution of the former **Count of Hyde** , Jinto’s father, had been carried out. Jinto was thereupon made **count** . Though he hadn’t yet gone through the military service that was a prerequisite of peerage, the **King of Barce** took him under his wardship, so it was no issue.

If the info was accurate, then a new head of government had been elected to lead the Hyde Star System, a man who was a solid member of the UH, and who had declared plans to fight against the **Empire** .

That new chancellor’s name? Teal Clint...

“I should probably be giving you my condolences, but instead I’ll leave it at: congratulations, Lonh-*Dreuc* ,” said Sruf.

“Thank you very much,” smiled Jinto, embracing the sentiment. He’d learned of his father’s demise nearly a year prior. He’d seen it coming beforehand, and he’d long since worked out his feelings on the matter. “But don’t call me ‘**Honorable Count** .’ I’m a count in name only, without a star-fief.”

“You got it, **boy** .”

“I mean, I’m not really a ‘boy’ anymore, either,” said Jinto, with a wry smile.

“‘S’pose not. You’re 20 years old, eh. A full-grown adult. But what should I call ya, then? ‘*Üanch* (youth) don’t sound right.”

“‘Jinto’ is fine. But to be honest, it feels pretty ace to be called ‘**quartermaster linewing starpilot** .’”

“Ah, makes sense. I oughta congratulate ya for your appointment. Congratulations.”

“Thank you very much,” Jinto repeated.

“What would ya like to drink?” The **former baron** activated his **compuwatch** .
“Or would you rather an early meal?”

“Oh, uh, I’m sorry...” said Jinto, scratching his head. “I actually don’t have a lot of time.”

“I see... Well, thanks for coming out of your way to visit me despite being busy.”

“It’s true, I swear,” insisted Jinto, noticing the melancholy look on Sruf’s face. “I’ve been on holiday since finishing my training voyage, but one way or another...”

Sruf laughed. “I didn’t think you were lying, **boy** ... wouldn’t ya know it, that’s the name that fits you the most. And I think I’ll be grateful if ya remember this doddering old fool, even if it’s just one last time.”

“One last time? I’d like to think I have to visit this place again, without fail.”

“Thank you. I’ve got a lot of friends from way back in Lacmhacarth, but every time I see their still-young faces, I get on edge.”

“I can’t just let you lie like that.”

Amusement crept on the **former baron** ‘s wrinkly visage. “Do ya remember when I told ya the same thing three years ago?”

“You did?” To tell the truth, he didn’t recall.

“Good grief. Don’t tell me your memory’s lagging behind the memory of an old man like me. Do ya remember when I told ya I’d impart my wisdom on the Abh frame of mind?”

“Of course. And I’m looking forward to it; I just can’t right now...”

“It’s okay, I understand. I ain’t gonna take any more time off the hands of a young adult with a future ahead of him. Youngsters finding the ramblings of the elderly boring’s a law of nature.”

“Boring? I’d never...”

“Do ya remember when I told ya? Blatant ego-salving’s only gonna hurt people. You should’ve learned that fact by then, let alone three years later.”

“Yeah, I remember,” said Jinto, red in the face. “But I really mean it. You’re never boring.”

“I find that doubtful, but I’m not gonna keep ya. Best be on your way, if you haven’t got time.”

“I’ve got a little time left.”

Sruf waved a hand. “Don’t strain yourself, **boy** . I’m looking forward to hearing about your exploits as a **quartermaster linewing starpilot** . Oh, hold on, there’s something I need to know first. Where’s your new post?”

“I’ve been appointed as a **clerk** on the **assault ship** *Basrogrh* (BAHSROYRR).”

“Haven’t heard of that ship before. Guess it is an **assault ship** , though.”

“And it’s a new one, too. It’ll become famous soon enough, of course.”

“Cuz you’ll be on it?”

“That won’t hurt,” nodded Jinto, “but also because the **commander** happens to be named ‘Abliar.’”

“Ho ho!” Sruf was thrilled. “You really did come pay me a visit at a busy time, **boy** . You have my gratitude. Now get your butt over to *Fiac Bærh Parhynr*’s side.”

“Got it.” Jinto stood up, albeit reluctantly. “I’m really sorry about the hurry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just feel free to come here when you have got the time. I’ll bore ya to tears.”

“Of course. I’ll be coming back. Please remain in good health, *Lonh-Lym Raica* .” Jinto saluted.

“Oh, I will, **boy** ,” smiled Sruf mischievously.

In Lacmhacarh, on a **bridge** of the **assault ship** *Basrogrh* (presently in harbor)..

Everything was brand new. That wasn’t surprising, considering it had just

come fresh from its construction at the *Locrh Lespor* (Lespo Warship Construction site). It hadn't even yet been taken for a whirl for some on-the-job training.

Lafier touched the brand-new equipment, and filled her lungs with the new-ship odor. Looking up at the **crest banner** of the *Basrogrh*, patterned after a *rogrh* (red-banded sand wasp), her heart welled with pride and joy.

This was the very first ship she'd ever received. Over the past three years, the **Star Forces** had not been waging full-blown war. They couldn't afford to. Nor, it seemed, could the enemy. There had been no engagements apart from a handful of small skirmishes.

What was surprising were the developments in the Hania Federation. When Lafier brought back the navigation log of the **patrol ship** *Goslauth* and the **Empire** went public with the evidence that the UH had attacked first, the Hania Federation condemned the UH for falsifying the reason they declared war, and opted for neutrality. Hania was a single nation among the **Four Nations Alliance**, and they hadn't joined in the assault on the **imperial capital**, so they lacked any incentive to aggravate the situation with regard to the Empire.

Of course, as the general public viewed it, the Hania Federation wouldn't place a premium on rendering justice. There was no doubt in their minds that if Lacmhacarth lay fallen, they'd instantly be there, pecking at its remains as a loyal member of the **FNA**. In short, they were waiting, observing from the sidelines. The other three nations of the **FNA** rebuked the federation for its perfidy, but many Abhs also expressed consternation. They'd thought they could finally participate in the true war to end all wars.

Lafier felt likewise. That said, she knew they had to take care of the enemies before them. The front of battle was at a stalemate. Two thirds of the **Ilich Monarchy** (which was partitioned by two walls) had been annexed by the enemy and had yet to be retaken.

But this dreary, irritating reality would soon fall by the wayside. The empire was showing its warlike face, and an unprecedentedly large fleet, several times the size of that before the war, was emerging. The **Lespo Warship Construction Site** was pumping out one *Logrh* Wasp class assault ship every ten minutes.

Meanwhile, other **construction sites** were producing warships of all classes and varieties. The **Baitur Warship Construction Site** was phasing out *Lauth* (Dragon) class patrol ships, now in the process of completing the leading-edge *Cau* patrol ships. The *Locrh Bhobinauter* (Bhobinautec Warship Construction Site) was producing *Saumh* class **battleline warships**, the *Locrh Syrer* (Syrec Warship Construction Site) was building *Gammh* class assault ships and *Paigh* class **escort ships**, not to mention the *Locrh Gocrocr* (Gocroch Warship Construction Site)...

The vast majority of *lodairh cisaïna* (reserve starpilots) had been reconvened, with each **academy** swamped with the work of putting them through training once again. The numbers of new applicants had reached record highs. Across large numbers of **terrestrial worlds**, employment quotas for **NCCs** had greatly increased. Every warship needed to come with passengers to ride them, and so the fleet had to gather lives as the contents to their tins. The war proper would commence in the blink of an eye. Lafier and the ship she commanded would face the heat of battle.

She took a deep breath, attempting to quell the excitement bubbling inside.

There was nobody else aboard. The **NCCs** were busy getting ready for departure, while the **starpilots** were busy supervising them. Excluding Lafier, the capacity of starpilots was four. They were a pair of **flight staff starpilots**, a *lodairh scaëmr* (engineer starpilot) who served as **Supervisor**, and a certain **quartermaster starpilot** who served as **Clerk**.

“**Commander**,” reported the clerk who had entered, “we have finished loading the food and supplies.”

Seeing his stuffy, ceremonious salute, she stifled a laugh. Was he holding a grudge for being called “**quartermaster linewing starpilot**”?

“You and I are the only ones here, Jinto.”

Jinto beamed. “Ah, yeah, you’re right. I missed you, you know.”

“Listen, for I have a secret of great import to share: I missed you, too.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.” Jinto narrowed his eyes. “Man, though, you really haven’t aged a day. You look exactly the same as three years ago.”

“I’d hate to have visibly aged in just three years. You, on the other hand, you do look a little older.”

“Aren’t you gonna say I look more mature?”

“Feh.”

“Did you just *scoff* at that, **Commander** .”

“I told you, we’re alone here,” said Lafier pointedly.

“It’s just, I can hardly seem too chummy when there are others around, right?”

“Right. It’d affect morale.”

“What if I make an honest mistake? It might be smarter to start calling you **Commander** or **Deca-commander Abliar** , you know, to make a habit of it.”

“Is that what you WANT to do?” A mix of anxiety and rage welled up within her.

“Do you THINK that’s what I want to do?” Jinto smiled with his eyes.

“In that case...” Lafier threw out her chest. Her bluish-black hair swayed, as did the **functionality crystals** at the ends of her **access cables** , not unlike a set of eccentric earrings.

“You will call me Lafier!”

Appendix: Summary of the Formation of Baronh

Proto-Baronh had every mark of being a constructed language, as it was an “ancient language” reconstituted by dogmatic nationalists. For its vocabulary, they made a point of excising all historically “recent” loanwords originating from the various tongues of Europe, as well as those of Chinese origin that entered the language alongside the writing system.

Of course, such radical restructuring was bound to come with its fair share of problems. They may have pruned the language, but they had no intention of abandoning civilization. As such, they faced the need to rely on the vocabulary of ancestors who lived during the dawn of the age of metals to express the fruits of the science and technology that had made space travel a reality (though that technology was still in its infancy in the eyes of their descendants).

Similarly, when the nation of Israel was founded, ancient Hebrew was revived by Jews; an arduous labor, but the nationalists were forced to expend even more effort. Many of the twists and concessions they made were more than a stretch. They expanded the meanings of archaic, long-forgotten words, coined neologisms based on mimetic words, and employed many other means besides to resurrect an ancient language as a tongue capable of expressing concepts in a scientific world.

Due to the strained, arbitrary nature of this venture, Proto-Baronh yielded a handful of weak points. At the outset, this language was riddled with large numbers of syllables. The raft of Chinese-origin loanwords had tipped the actual historical language toward fewer syllables, but since those words were also abolished, syllable counts became more and more unwieldy.

That was the ungainly language that the first generation of Abhs lived using. It was only natural for Baronh vocabulary undergo a rapid and drastic phenomenon of abbreviation. Another reason for this is the fact that the original Abhs didn't have writing. The Abhs' creators never wanted them to develop a civilization of their own. They were to simply carry out the repetitive tasks they were taught, and make easy, uncomplicated decisions if ever an emergency arose. That was all that was desired of the Abh.

In accordance with the idea that the written word was not just unnecessary but an active hindrance, the first generation of Abhs were instructed without text or letters of any kind. The only forms of information storage bestowed to them were video and audio. They were not permitted the method of information transmission with a deeper pedigree. Letters, glyphs, text: all were banned.

It is well known that languages without orthographies shift at a quick pace, and Baronh is no exception. Yet another reason behind its rapid change must be that the Abhs numbered so few and coexisted in an enclosed environment. After all, whenever any one person affected a change, that change would immediately make it to the entire group and take root.

It follows, then, that the upheaval that laid waste to all of the phonological rules would progress at an extremely accelerated rate. Going by the precious little extant data left, it seems vowels were the first to shrink in number. That straightforward vowel reduction led, however, to the proliferation of homophones. They must have noted that was occurring, and in order to prevent it, the remaining vowels got tugged to different places by the vowels that had dropped out. Consequently, the variety of vowels had sprung back from its brief low point.

In addition, (though it's far from certain how exactly this relates to the vowel shifts), the transition of consonant pronunciation (such as the denasalization of certain formerly nasal sounds) also transpired, and it's reasonable to assume that that played a part in the fusion of word-ending inflections and case-marking particles.

Given the intensity of these changes, they must have taken place over an exceedingly short span of time — that is, within two or three generations. Afterward, the Abh declared independence, discarded the restrictions placed on them by the birth city, and designed letters for their own use.

Shifts in Baronh became much slower once a writing system was established. Moreover, the founding of the Empire accompanied the codification of the standard language. Not much of note changed after that, owing to their heightened awareness that, in order to keep communication between their brethren on separate ships or orbital cities smooth, they had to work to

preserve a singular, “correct” Baronh.

As such, though the grammar of Baronh is more complex than its bygone parent language, it is kept the way it is. The most striking example of increased complexity would have to be the introduction of noun declension.

(Kindly refer to the declension tables included in the author’s notes in Vol. I.)

Afterword

And with that, CREST OF THE STARS — the work that took three volumes despite being its no-name author's first longform — has come to an end. I wonder whether you enjoyed the read.

When I was concepting these books, I'd planned to write something pertaining to an interstellar war from the beginning. I soon realized, however, that simply taking nations that could exist or have existed on Earth and expanding them to a galactic scale wouldn't be engaging.

Instead, I thought I'd set up an interstellar empire that couldn't have arisen without the advancement of humanity to many different planets, and pit it against the countries that spread the political principles of Earth across the galaxy.

I created the *Humankind Empire of Abh* as a sovereign entity that could never exist on Earth, and the Abh race as a unifying element of that empire. I've fashioned a rather unique galactic superpower, if I say so myself.

Meanwhile, I tasked young Jinto with guiding the reader through the Empire. He knows just enough to need some but not all things explained to him from time to time, making him an ideal guide indeed. He is the indisputable protagonist of CREST OF THE STARS.

...As for why I felt the need to tell you that, I fear that the impression the guide's own guide, Lafier, left was so strong that it rather overshadowed his own. I can't help but laugh at that, but I assure you I do feel a little sorry for him.

Oh well. Nothing for it, really. With Lafier, I've never had that "I *crafted* her" feeling. I suppose that's also true of the other characters. There were even those who entered the fray in spite of the fact I never had any such plans, running roughshod over my plot.

In any case, CREST OF THE STARS is hardly sufficient, on its own, to guide you through the Empire. It's particularly lacking in any depiction of the economic side of Abh life.

I don't feel too many misgivings over wrapping up CREST OF THE STARS here, because the plot naturally progressed to the "the war's going to start in earnest" point. (To you who already read Volumes I and II, there's no way you thought the war would be over in the space of three volumes, right?)

I actually found myself thinking *oh, I guess this phase of the story's complete*. Not even I know where exactly the Kin of the Stars are headed now. All I know is that if the Abh fall in battle, they can but suffer complete annihilation. An Abh bound to a surface world is an Abh no longer. Worse yet, if genetic modification is forbidden to them, they'd die out within a few generations anyway, due to their unstable genome.

I'd love to learn alongside all of you whether the Abh crumble to oblivion, or whether they bring the slumber that is "peace" to the galaxy. Yet at the same time, as embarrassing as it is to admit, I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a part of me that wants to leave them with an infinite future.

...But that makes it seem as though CREST OF THE STARS was penned with some grand and important idea behind it. In reality, as I confessed in the afterword to Volume I, I ended up creating the setting as I went along.

The actual impetus behind this series was all the murmuring that we were in "the Winter of SF." That made me want to write some light-reading SF that people might pick up precisely because it was the so-called "Winter of SF" (which doesn't seem to have abated, mind you), and so I started working on it, just like that.

Initially I was aiming for a piece of around 400 pages, thinking that'd make it easy to publish, but it dawned on me that was going to be impossible after the third day of writing. *All right, then, I'll get it done in 600 pages...* But it wasn't long before I was thinking, *800 pages and I'll have it published as one thick paperback*. I found myself constantly rethinking my initial conception.

I finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel at around page 550. I reckoned that turn of events would make for the best midpoint in terms of story balance. (Though I ended up writing 700 more pages before reaching the conclusion.)

I also altered the setting and terminology a great deal, retroactively. For instance, Lafier wasn't a Star Forces Trainee Starpilot, but rather a Space Army

Cadet, and Captain Lexshue was a colonel. After I'd written the series and waited a while before rereading it, there were bits and bobs that felt "loose," strangely. The unique terms I came up with, such as "Star Forces" and "starpilot," were born then.

What had been created with relative care were the mechanics of flat space navigation and Baronh. I'm no august SF writer, of course; at the end of the day, the idea of "flat space navigation" is just a slight twist on the well-worn, hackneyed "warping" trope (evoking faster-than-light travel with one quick and easy word) that I wanted to avoid. With regard to the liberal sprinkling of Baronh all over the place, I had several reasons. To give you just one, I wanted to foster an alien atmosphere.

In terms of the feel of the setting, Jinto hails from a society just 300 years from our present, so you can think of him as your stereotypical future human, but Lafier comes from more than 2,000 years in the future. For those of you who can't square that discrepancy, try looking up Lorentz contraction. Whatever you do, don't ask me to clarify, because then I'd have to give myself away! In truth, I just didn't want to go ham with too many foreign-origin words.

That said, "plasma" and "energy" were the words that had me stumped. Japanese just uses the English words for them for the most part. I was under the impression that a purely Japanese word whose characters combine to mean "ionized substance" was coined as a translation for the English word "plasma," but I couldn't find that word in the *Koujien* dictionary, so if I tried using that made-up word as the meaning of the Baronh for "plasma," readers wouldn't be able to understand what it was referring to. Obscuring the commonly used word with non-standard characters on top of piling on fictional vocabulary felt too unfriendly to the reader, so I gulped down the urge to overindulge in my little hobby.

Speaking of Baroh, its true origins became clear in Volume II — or at least, I hope I made them clear enough. In case you didn't buy that origin story ("How in sam heck did that become the language in the books!?"), I included an appendix in this volume that should help persuade you. If you've bought all three volumes at once and haven't read any of the story yet, I recommend not reading that appendix beforehand. It's a spoiler. (I see spoiler warnings from

time to time, but I've never personally abided by that whole rule.)

Now then, seeing as this is the last volume, allow me to express my gratitude.

A hearty thank you to NODA Masahiro, who wasted a blurb on the likes of me. I only met him in person and greeted him once, but he introduced me to the sheer entertainment value of a good space opera through works published in SF magazines — works like “Heroic Figures of SF” (*SF Eiyuu Gunzou*). I'll never forget how, when I was in elementary school, I'd hole up in the tin-roof shed in the sizzling heat, browsing through back issues of SF magazines to read installments of “Heroic Figures.”

I'd also like to thank one AKAI Takami, for decorating the covers with gorgeous illustrations despite how busy he always is. I'm sure the majority of people who picked these books up did so because they were captivated by the cover art (and I bet you did, too, dear reader).

In addition, I can't forget to thank all the people who put in the hours to slot in the Baronh. At first, I only added Baronh based on specific criteria, but then it ran away from me. I ended up laying down Baronh even where it wasn't really necessary; so much so, that to say I went mad with it would be an understatement. Making all of that Baronh play neatly with the rest of the text was largely on the shoulders of a certain someone in Editorial. Of course, that certain someone helped me with everything, not just with the Baronh text.

Moreover, all the work these books required must have been a nightmare to the proofreader(s) and overall production. Thank you so much! I do think less is more when it comes to auxiliary text, so I'll still be relying on their help from here on out.

Finally, I naturally need to thank you, the readers who followed along all this time, from the bottom of my heart. If you could send me your thoughts and feelings, I'd be even more grateful.

Writing CREST OF THE STARS was loads of fun, and if you experienced a tenth of the fun reading it as I did writing it, then I think you've thoroughly enjoyed it.

I sure hope we meet again, somewhere, some day. Until then!

10-May-96



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Crest of the Stars: Volume 3

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THE RETURN TO STRANGE SKIES

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