

Introduction

Kharak... A desert wasteland has been our home for over four thousand years. The hot sands of the great deserts are all our people ever knew. Or at least remember. The Polar Regions are the only habitable areas of this planet. Even the Kiith Gaalsien, the oldest of our people remember nothing more than this home. Many religions suggest that we did not originate on this world. They say that the great god Sajuuk banished us to this world for our sins. But not until recent scientific discoveries prove the inevitable truth...we are aliens to this world.

One hundred years ago, a satellite's propulsion systems malfunctioned. It turned to face the planet instead of scanning for metallic debris in Kharak orbit; it detected an object buried in the sands of the Banded Desert. An expedition was sent. What they found was an ancient star ship buried beneath the sand. On the metal pieces were symbols. One of them was that of the Gaalsien clan. They claimed to have no knowledge of this. Deep inside the relic was a power plant that was not functional. It sent our scientific studies thousands of years into the future. But farther in, was hidden a single stone that would change the course of our history forever...

On the Guidestone was carved a galactic map, and a single word more ancient than the clans themselves. Hiigara. Our home.

The clans united as one and a massive colony ship was designed. Construction would take six decades. Twenty years for the scaffolding that would aid the forty year construction of the Mothership. It demanded new technologies, new industries, and new sacrifices. The greatest was made by a young neuroscientist, who was an old friend of mine. Her name was Karan Sjet. She had herself permanently integrated into the ship's hyperdrive as its living core. She is now fleet command.

The promise of the Guidestone united the entire population. Everyone's mind became focused on a single question. Where do we come from? Every effort was put into building the ship that would seek it out among the stars...

Chapter One

Departure

-Beep...beep...beep...beep-

I woke up to the sound of my alarm clock. *It's finally the day.* It was the day of the Mothership launch.

My house, like everyone else's in this small town, was made entirely out of sandstone and clay. I got out of bed and put on some clothes. I found my Sobani pendant and put it around my neck for luck. It was the only thing my parents left me when they abandoned me. I later on found my father and he told they did it because it was unheard of for a Sobani to raise a child. My mother died in a battle against the Gaalsien remnants long ago so I never got to meet her. The pendant said that I was from the Soban clan and my family tree for three generations was carved onto the front. I finished getting ready so I went to the kitchen to eat. It was a light breakfast because I had to be in Tiir city soon.

I was about to walk out the door when the phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hi it's just me calling to wish you luck on your trip." It was my girlfriend who was away to visit family in the southern regions.

"Lucky you caught me. I was just leaving. So how's your trip going?" I asked.

"Not bad. I wish I could see you before you leave though."

"I'll see you when I get back. I have to leave now."

"Bye." I hung up and headed out the door. It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the intense light from Khar-Illum, our sun. I put on my shades and looked at the time. I had thirteen minutes to get to the launch pad at Tiir. I quickly got on my motor bike and drove off.

I arrived at Tiir just in time to catch the transport. I parked my bike and walked to the entrance. All the buildings in the capital were made out of metal. At the front desk in the spaceport, I talked to an officer at the front desk and showed him my ID. He gave me two boarding passes. "The red one is for the transport and the blue one is for the Mothership." he told me.

"Okay thanks." I ran to the launch pad and a loudspeaker said:

"Transport seven launching in one minute." I showed the guard my pass and was escorted to the transport. I sat down in the first seat I saw then the speaker said: "Mothership crew transport seven you are clear for launch."

Just then, the doors sealed shut and the lights dimmed. I heard the engines charging up from the back of the ship. "This is T7 command. We will be launching in ten seconds. So buckle up and enjoy the flight." The captain was laughing on that last phrase. I followed his instructions just to be safe. "Five...Four...Three...Two...One..." He was doing the countdown until launch.

"Have a nice flight!" the guy next to me said. I felt a slight shutter in the ship and then the engines burst into ignition. Seconds later, we were off the ground. I stared out the viewport at the

spaceport command tower as it slowly moved away. The engines roared viciously until we were out of the atmosphere. There was no more forward motion feeling at this point.

I felt nauseous so I asked the guy next to me to hand me a bag. I vomited into the bag then threw it in the trash bin down the hall. I sat back down in the same place. “Never been to space?” he asked.

“Well I cleared the stratosphere once for pilot testing. But out here you don’t feel the forward motion and that’s what the problem is.” I looked out the viewport once more and saw Kharak from space. The view was unforgettable. For so long Kushan kind thought of Kharak as a harsh world that was the hell we had to pay for our ancestors sins. From here, I finally get to see its full beauty. The bleach white clouds over top of a cream colour sand with blue oceans at both poles with a bit of green plant life near the water. And Tiir city was a tiny white smudge near the northern pole.

“Don’t worry. We all throw up the first time. You should be used to it by the time we reach the Scaffold. By the way, my name’s John Nabaal.”

“Mine’s Mark. Mark Soban.” It took a while for the transport to arrive at the scaffold so it gave us time to get acquainted. I found out John is captain for a frigate-class ship, his family is in cryogenic suspension in Cryo-Tray 3 and he is going with the Mothership on her maiden voyage.

I told him that I’m only going up to test the fighters and to the Outskirts. Then when the Mothership returns to Kharak, I’m riding the transport back home to see my girlfriend. I also told him I went to school with Karan for a while. Then the two people surrounding me joined in also. Karu was pilot for a repair corvette and Isel, like me, is a fighter pilot. They were also going with the Mothership. For the thirty minutes it took for the transport to reach the Scaffold, we talked and got to know each other.

When the transport docked with the orbital facility, we got off and headed for the Mothership. We got in an elevator and traveled through a long hallway. Then we turned a corner to a large bridge-like structure leading to the Mothership on the other end. It was full of people from all types of clans.

“Hey!” said a voice from behind me. I turned and saw Ja-Siid Nabaal, an old friend of mine. We just called him Jay for short. He was my partner in pilot training. We worked together several times, except he went on to fly larger corvette-class ships. I stayed with fighters.

“I’m fine. What about you?” He joined us and we walked closer to the window that stretched the whole length of the bridge.

“I’m doing fine. I can’t wait until we get to the Khar-Selim. I checked the records and found out I have an uncle onboard.” The Khar-Selim is a support ship that traveled to the outskirts of our solar system on conventional drives. Jay wanted to meet his uncle because he was an orphan child and never knew his family. That’s probably the reason we get along so much. We were both abandoned by our parents. But I found my father later on. He didn’t.

“Well when we return to Kharak after that, I’m done. I’m only up to test the new fighters.” He looked slightly disappointed that I wasn’t going on the long trip with him.

“Oh. Well I guess since you have family and friends on Kharak you don’t want to leave them. Well I have to go. There’s stuff I need to get done onboard the Mothership. I’ll make sure to meet up with you before you go.” Then he started running away. I looked out the window towards the large colony ship.

“Wow!” John was doing the same. “And I thought it looked big from the transport!” When staring at the bottom, you could barely see the bottom. The grey colour of the hull was all you could see. And to the top section of the ship, it was the same concept except the command section was full of colourful lights and windows.

“Amazing!” I said. But then my concentration was broken by the sound of a speaker.

“The Mothership will be launching in twenty minutes.” It was Scaffold control’s way of telling us to hurry up inside. Then Isel walked up to us and said we should get moving.

We walked for a while and then it got silent.

“So Isel, are you testing out the fighters too?” the silence was broken by none other than me.

“Yeah. I want to test if space fighters are harder to use than aerial ones.” There was a theory that it was easier to use space fighters. I guess she wants to test this theory.

“What rank are you?” Our skill levels were in ranks. The higher the rank, the better of a pilot you are considered. But she only looked to be around fourteen or fifteen. She shouldn’t be testing out the fighters. I was only sixteen but I was an exception.

“I’m rank six,” It was almost impossible for her to be rank six at her age. “what about you,” she asked.

“Oh I’m rank seven. But I was almost killed getting this far. Had to fly far in the upper atmosphere and circle the planet three times upside down. But there was a screw loose on the ship and the oxygen tanks were leaking. So I aimed for a lower altitude but was still too high up to breath when I ejected. There was not enough oxygen to breath. I felt my body depressurizing and passed out for a few minutes. I woke up still in freefall and noticed I had to deploy my parachute. I hit the ground pretty fast. But it was soft sand. I noticed that I was on the shoreline of the Maji-irian Sea. In was lucky enough to run into a clan of Paktu farmers.”

“Must have been one hell of a ride...” she said.

I looked in front of us. There must have been thousands of people in front of us. I looked out the window again towards the Mothership. At this point, you couldn’t even see the top or bottom. Just miles and miles of grey hull plating. We kept walking to the Mothership for the next few minutes.

When at the entrance, we showed our blue passes to the guard and he let us in. He also gave us a sheet with some need to know information and a virtual map device so we know where we are in the Mothership. Before I could read any of the information, fleet intelligence came on the loudspeaker.

“All pilots for fighter testing please report to hangar bay E.” He repeated two times more to be sure everyone heard.

“I guess we’ll meet up with you later.” Isel said. We then made our way to an elevator. It wasn’t too crowded. There were only four of us including me and Isel. The door opened but our eyes had to adjust to the intense light. When they did, the room looked huge. It, like all hangars on the Mothership, had a light blue colour painted on the steel floors. It was very bright and open. There were few support beams to allow larger ships to enter the hangar. We headed to the group of people near the fighters.

When we got there, there were ten of us. My guess was three of them were crew for a corvette. Corvettes were large ships capable of more diverse tasks than fighters. They had a crew of three: a pilot, a gunner and a captain.

“You must be here for the testing also. Well then let us get started.” He was an older man about mid fifties with a yellow pilot uniform. “I know all of you are probably anxious to get out there but listen up. We have five rules to follow: Number one, always listen to fleet command. When she gives you orders you obey. She is a highly professional calculator in combat is that will ever be necessary. Number two, only launch when the light on your control panel is green. If you don’t, you could blow yourself up on the energy shield. Number three, don’t wander off too far. We have no salvage corvettes at this time to retrieve you. Number four; don’t damage the fighters by being stupid. No fooling around. We have very little resources to spare for repairs at the moment. And lastly, try not to get killed. You are only facing target drones that cannot back-fire on you. But if we encounter any enemies on the journey you cannot get killed. We are running very low on pilots. We cannot afford to lose you. When you are out there, you own the ship. What happens to it is your responsibility. If you disobey any of these rules, you get to listen to one of my long but highly interesting lectures.” There was a slight laughter at that last part. “Crew for the salvage corvette, follow me. And you can take a look at the Arrows if you want.”

The seven Arrow-class scouts were parked in a straight line in front of us. We chose the ones we wanted and got in. I knew the systems very well. It was the same systems on some of the jet fighters I used for practice. We regrouped and talked to each other. They say it’s better not to know other pilots on a personal level. It makes it easier to accept if they die in combat. Then we got to our fighters. Fleet Command was starting the Mothership’s launch.

“Scaffold decks A, B, C secure. All systems green.” This was Scaffold control telling Karan that the ship can be launched now.

“This is Fleet Command reporting Mothership pre-launch status... command online... re-sourcing online... construction online... cryogenic subsections A through J online... K through S online... Scaffold control standby for alignment...” She was waiting for a reply from the Scaffold.

“Alignment confirmed. Standby release control.” we felt a slight shutter and the ship was moving.

“The Mothership has cleared the Scaffold. We are Away.” Our lights turned green and we started up the engines. The ships lifted off the floor and we headed for the hangar door. We flew out the door followed by a Providence-class resource collector. We set into a Delta or ‘V’ formation. I looked at Kharak again but it was covered in a large sandstorm in the north and the south was not in view from this angle. The collector was given its orders to harvest nearby asteroids. Our orders were to move to the target drones at the coordinates showed on a screen. Fleet Intelligence said we need to set into a formation so we did.

The drones slowly came into view. We turned on our targeting uplink. The windshield now had a grid on it and all the ships we could see had a green symbol representing their classification. Fighters were triangles. When in firing range, the drone symbol turned from yellow to red. Two of the wingmen were slowly drifting out of formation.

“Here’s a reminder to stay in formation.” I said over the intercom. They took their positions and we all opened fire on the drones. One by one the nine targets exploded. It wasn’t long before they were all gone. We went to the next coordinates given to us.

Intelligence then gave us orders to start our tactics run. I took a quick look at the tactics controls. There were four buttons with different colours and a letter on each. The first was a blue one with a ‘P’ for Passive tactics, a green with an ‘E’ for Evasive tactics, a yellow with an ‘N’ for Neutral and last, a red with an ‘A’ for aggressive. I set to aggressive to have more firepower. Shortly after, sixteen drones came into view.

“Now we can freestyle.” One of the pilots said. We broke our formation and opened fire on whatever drone we felt like. I fired on one and it blew up so I pulled down to fire on another. I pulled some sharp turns and did a few spins for the fun of it. I then destroyed another. Then I turned off the targeting uplink so I could fire blind. The drones couldn’t move anyway. I flipped around and got another. Now I had a score of seven. I fired on one more and it was a direct hit. We were done and started heading to the Mothership.

“What’s your score?” Isel asked.

“Eight. You?”

“Six.”

When arriving at the Mothership, a Porter-class salvage corvette launched from the hangar. When it cleared, we started to dock. Only two ships at a time for safety reasons. This time we docked in bay A.

After we got out of our fighters, a refuelling crew was already starting to do their jobs. We paid no mind as everyone headed to the elevators.

When we met up with the others, we headed to Isel’s place so she could unpack. Everyone else already did. And I didn’t need to.

“Have fun out there?” I turned around and saw Jay.

“Hey you caught us!” I said.

“I told you I would. Guess what. I made it onto the permanent crew of the Porter in the hangar.”

“Cool. You probably won’t need it until it’s time to retrieve the Cryo-Trays though.” E sat down in the chairs next to us.

“Standby for hyperdrive test...” We sat uncomfortably. The hyperspace core was never tested. If it failed, we were doomed. But if our ancestors made it here with the same technology, it should work. There was a viewport near me so I waited to see what hyperspace looked like. “Internal pressure doors sealed. Abort systems standing by.” Fleet Intelligence said.

“Hyperspace module fully charged. I am ready to initiate the quantum wave generator on your mark. Good luck everyone.” Karan said.”

“All sections have reported in. Trigger the hyperspace drive at your discretion.” It sounded almost like Fleet Intelligence and Command was arguing on who was going to engage the hyperdrive. But the wave front activated. It looked like a big blue door that the Mothership entered. Hyperspace looked like normal space but everything passed by us faster. Already Kharak was no longer in view.

Chapter Two

Outer Kharak System

It took us an hour and a half to arrive in the outskirts of the Kharak System, so it gave us time to relax a bit. Then we moved out of hyperspace.

“The quantum wave formation has dissipated.” We headed to the hangar bay because we could fly around in the fighters while the Mothership will be docked with the Khar-Selim. “We have miss-jumped. The Khar-Selim is not here. Fleet Command will signal the support vessel while we confirm our current position.” Intelligence was right. We looked out the viewport and the ship was nowhere in sight.

“How could this be?” Jay asked. We headed to the elevator John and Karu stayed behind realizing they were useless.

“This is the Mothership calling support vessel Khar-Selim. Please respond. We have miss-jumped and are requesting your beacon.” We arrived in the hangar and walked up to the guy from earlier standing beside two larger ships.

“Aren’t you the ones who got a lot of the drones a while ago?” he asked.

“I guess so... Why?” I replied.

“You see these two Interceptors? We had them built after the research division sent us the plans. There are seven more on the way. You two get the first pick.” We were both surprised by his statement. “Go ahead choose.” The Blade interceptors looked like advanced, more heavily armoured ships.

“I call this one!” Isel was already climbing into the one with the number 1 on the side. Mine had a number 2. I didn’t mind if mine wasn’t the first one built or not. I just felt like getting into the cockpit and familiarizing myself with the new systems. There was less space than the Arrows but a lot more systems. There was another two screens in it to.

The other pilots arrived and looked disappointed that they were stuck with the Arrows while we get these new Blades. We flew out the hangar door as soon as the light turned green. Fleet Command set us into military parade formation. The Arrows were in a line in front of us and we were in a line also. I looked at one of the screens and it was a rear view camera. In it I saw Jay’s Porter and two new ships. I turned on the targeting uplink and they were called light corvettes. I touched the square corvette icon on the screen and it showed a model of it and it was named ‘Cavalier-class light corvette’. And then I saw the rename button on a control panel to my left. There was: Group and Single rename buttons. So I played around with it for a while.

I successfully renamed Isel’s ‘Blade Mark 4.5 Interceptor’ to Isel, and did the same to Jay’s Porter. I tried the group button and renamed all the ‘Arrow Scouts’ to just simply Arrows. I did all the ships that were out.

“We have picked up the Khar-Selim’s automated beacon here.” It was Fleet Intelligence. The screen to my far left showed the green dot (me) and the green dot with the yellow circle which represented the support ship. “We will send a probe to re-establish communications.”

I looked at the various other buttons on the control panel. One was a transparency knob. I turned it and the grid and the ship icons got more transparent. I left it at a half and half area. I saw a big red button inside a glass case that was labelled 'Self Destruct'. I stayed away from that one. There were also temperature adjustment buttons, a light and a button that was used only recently in newer fighter jet models. It was a 'Guard' button. You select a target and the autopilot helps you in escorting the selected target. I named the two Mercy-class repair corvettes and the Hammer-class heavy corvette that had just launched from the Mothership. But then the Probe was in position with some horrifying information.

"The Khar-Selim has been destroyed." And suddenly, fun time was over. The two Cavaliers and three Arrows moved in to guard the resource collector. Then everyone set their tactics to evasive. The ship was of considerably large size.

"What could have destroyed it?" a pilot asked.

"An asteroid maybe?" I said. But it has weapons to deal with those. But the screen showed it as some form of weapon damage.

"Attention fleet, we have incoming targets." Intelligence was talking about the half a dozen red dots approaching from the upper left. Karan set the rest of the combat capable ships to group one. We moved to protect the Mothership. Seconds later, gunfire whistled past my Blade interceptor. I had three of them following me. I cut the engines and let them pass me. I pressed the aggressive tactics button and opened fire. They were slow moving but heavily armoured. I took advantage of this weakness. They didn't last long against me. I carefully navigated my way through the charred debris and black smoke from the explosion. I moved over to Jay's ship. I noticed there were two larger ships following him.

"Jay, watch your tail!" I yelled over the intercom. The Porter was slow moving and made an easy target for the alien ships. I moved in to attack. Three Arrows helped also. One of the ships blew up but the other was badly damaged and immobile.

"I think we're going to take this one in." The corvette turned to the enemy and turned on its Electro-magnetic field. It grabbed hold of the enemy and started hauling it to the Mothership. We then joined the others in the fight. There were still a dozen ships left. They appeared to just keep coming.

When I arrived, an Arrow was docking with a Mercy repair corvette for fuel and repairs. The ships appeared to pay no attention to our resourcing operation. But the enemies were not coming anymore. They were much uncoordinated. They would bump into each other's ships by accident, then the other would slam into the first even harder. They were everyone for themselves, but working together because they were given orders to. They were like pirates or bandits. It was funny to see them accidentally fire on each other a couple times.

We were given objectives to guard the Porter as it moved to retrieve information from the Khar-Selim wreckage. Group one moved into a sphere formation around the ship for three hundred and sixty degree coverage. One of the Mercy corvettes joined us also. The remains of the support ship, always, getting closer into view.

The Porter moved to retrieve the data. But before the transfer was complete, Fleet Intelligence said there were additional enemy units on an intercept course with the Khar-Selim. But the enemies only moved in one or two at a time for some reason.

"Enemy units are closing in with the Mothership." Karan said.

So that's it. They're just a distraction. I thought. The Mothership's armour can survive until we get there. The ships guarding the resource operation were there. The enemies had stopped moving towards us now that we discovered their plan. The Porter was in safe range of the Mothership so we joined the fight. Only the Hammer stayed to guard the Porter. I headed to the research ship with two Arrows. The two Cavaliers couldn't cause nearly enough damage with their one frontal cannon. Our best scientists are on that ship. We can't afford to lose them.

We received information that the enemy ship Jay's crew captured earlier was some type of missile corvette. The alien race we were fighting was known as the Turanic Raiders. They lived in a liquid oxygen environment and were basically the stereotypical pirate. They said they had been deployed here to stop any ship trying to leave this system.

The enemies attacking the research ship were in firing range. Gunfire drowned the targets. But before the last one was destroyed, the missile corvette successfully launched a single missile. It hit one of my wingmen.

"Scout down! Scout d..." the ship blew up before he could eject. And that is the reason we don't get to know our fellow fighter pilots. The battle has going on for about an hour now.

"Isel, how are you doing out there?" I asked.

"Not bad. Just trying hard not to get killed." I looked at the sensors manager screen, the one that had all the green and red dots. There was about a dozen or so red dots swarming two...make that one green dot. I checked the remaining dot. It was her.

"Hold on I'll be right there." I went to neutral tactics and flew over to where she was. I aimed for the smaller but faster ships. They were the biggest threat in a swarm. I fired on several ships eliminating a large number of them. I entered the vortex to assist her in destroying the rest. I got hit but not bad. It only grazed the bottom hull. We kept at it until we felt we could no longer keep up.

"Let's face it Mark, it's hopeless." There were the same numbers of enemies in the swarm. They just kept coming. It's true what they say about pirates.

"They just won't die!" I yelled.

She's right. It's hopeless. My fuel was running low and my engines were getting overheated. Just when we were about to give up, the Hammer was moving towards us.

"Looks like you guys could use some help." It fired its two cannons. One hit destroyed a Turanic Interceptor and three a large corvette. One by one, the swarm became smaller. The enemies began to retreat. But now they started firing on the Hammer. I wanted to repay them for helping us. It dealt with the large corvettes with ease. But there were several small fighters its turrets couldn't catch being on the bottom of the ship only. We helped the Hammer by destroying the remaining enemy ships.

I thought we were the only ones left. There were only the green dots of us, the Providence, the probe, the Hub research ship and the grey bulge of the Mothership. Enemy ships were headed straight for us. The Hammer was badly damaged and we were out of fuel. None of us had enough fuel to reach the Mothership.

"Now it's really hopeless." I said. But just then, we received a transmission.

"Need help?" It was a Mercy in delta formation with several other ships. The enemies moving closer to us were a scary sight we couldn't move and their weapons had more firing range than ours. The Hammer might have been able to hit them. But these pirates chose their targets

carefully. The weapons, the engines and the communications were severely damaged. The Mercy got to us just in time. I was already being fired at when our allies arrived. But they were the elite and superiorly trained pilots. Rank sevens like me and eights. They also picked the targets carefully. The Mercy was using its modified Phased Disassemble Array, or PDA for short, was repairing the damage on the Hammer.

“Isel you dock first.” She slowly moved with the little fuel she had left to the repair corvette. Our side quickly wiped out all the red blips on the sensors manager. Isel’s Blade refuelled and she took off to join the fight. I then docked my Blade with the Mercy. The green emissions of the PDA stopped and the Hammer was fully repaired. It took a minute to refuel my ship so I watched the battle upside down. Only because the ships design put the service platform on the bottom. The Hammer would need a new paint job somehow. The PDA replenishes the hull or something like that. I’m only a pilot and have very little knowledge in that stuff.

My fighter was just barely refuelled when a lone Arrow sent a transmission.

“I see something. A ship! It’s huge! Bigger than a carrier! Hold on...something’s happening... Danger! Massive weapons! Blue beams of light...” the transmission turned to static. It was clear that we shouldn’t go there. Pilots were confused and scared. We all headed to the Mothership to prepare for a hyperspace jump back to Kharak.

Arriving at the Mothership, all fighters docked in bay A and corvettes in bay H.

When we were docked, I opened the hatch but stayed in the ship.

“Hey are you coming?” Isel jumped on the ship and stuck her head in by the back of the hatch.

“No you go on ahead. I’ll catch up.” I turned the ship off and sat in the chair with my eyes closed.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Why don’t you stop by my place later. Say your goodbyes.”

“Yeah I’ll show up.”

“You better! Or else I’ll kick you off this ship myself!” she yelled as she walked out the hangar.

I got out of my ship and looked around. There were all ten interceptors but only three scouts.

I guess scouts aren’t a good combat ship. I thought to myself. I headed to Isel’s. I couldn’t wait to go home. I miss the safety of my home. Kharak...

Chapter Three

Return to Kharak

We are now returning to dock with the Scaffold for repairs. All pilots have been briefed in case the hostiles penetrated farther into the Kharak System. When docked with the Scaffold, the final stages of construction must be completed in order to defend against possible future attacks. Many main Mothership systems are still incomplete. Fleet Intelligence had notified Kharak's Missile defence systems of this possible threat.

"Standby for hyperspace exit to Kharak." said Intelligence. We were all in the exit area where we came in. We said our goodbyes and all that stuff. We were waiting for the door to open but instead we came back to devastating news.

"No one's left... Everything's gone! Kharak is burning." We all hesitated. I ran to the nearest viewport and saw for myself.

"Kharak is being consumed by a firestorm. The Scaffold has been destroyed. All orbital facilities destroyed. There is a significant debris ring in low Kharak orbit." Intelligence never lies. The atmosphere was reduced to a layer of haze and the entire northern hemisphere had been turned to glass. In the south, a huge fire was visible in the just outside the barrier of the Majiirin Sea. "We are receiving no communications from anywhere in the system. Not even beacons." There was a huge sad feeling in the room. I fell to my knees crying.

"All pilots to battle stations!" Everyone ran to the elevator. Everyone but me.

Everyone I ever knew or cared about is dead. What am I supposed to do now? I thought.

"Mark let's go!" Isel was headed for me.

"I'm not going." The cold steel floor hurt my knees so I sat down.

"What do you mean? It's your job!" she said staring heavily at the viewport.

"No. My job ended the minute we came out of hyperspace. We Sobani only fight until our jobs are done. Then we go...home."

But now I don't have a home to go to. She sat down beside me.

"You can stay here now. There's lots of empty rooms near my place." She took my hand to try and make me feel better.

"You don't understand. Everyone I ever knew. My home, my entire life is now gone. I only know five of the fifty thousand crew members on the Mothership. And three of them I met today." I didn't know what was going to happen to me at this point. I took my Sobani necklace and looked at it.

Be strong. The theme that all the Soban believes in. *Be strong, hold your family close, never give up, know your enemy and hate no one.* My father explained this to me a long time ago.

"What's that?" she asked.

"What it means to be a Soban." I stopped crying and got up. We headed to the hangar together.

"Wait, on the maintenance frequency. I'm getting a signal from the Cryo-Trays in orbit. One of them is suffering a major malfunction." We then headed even faster to the fighters.

“The Cryo-Trays are under attack. All fighters set to passive or evasive tactics. Try and draw their fire away from the trays” The elevator stopped and we headed to the three ships left in the hangar: two Arrows and one Blade. I checked the number of the Blade and it was the number 2 I used earlier. I got in and took off out the hangar.

“Hey!” Isel said as I took off out the hangar. She later joined me piloting an Arrow.

“These ships are different than the ones we encountered at the Khar-Selim. It is likely they were involved in the destruction of Kharak. Capture at least one vessel for interrogation.” Intelligence said.

There was some activity on the far left side of the Mothership so we went to see what was going on. There were seven Porters ready to take action. Four of them were grabbing hold of the enemy ships. There were two on each ship. There were also three Mercy corvettes. Two were repairing the damaged Cryo-Tray. The other was aiding the Porters. I and Isel joined the swarm around the remaining two enemy frigates. They had yellow and red colours on the hull. Our plan was working. The ships stopped firing at the trays. We were too fast for them to catch us. We didn't fire on them too much. We were low on resources and needed to salvage these ships to have a large enough assault force. But then the enemies started aiming for the salvage teams returning to capture the remaining enemies. Two of the Mercy corvettes left the trays to aid the salvage team. Three of the trays were in line to be placed into the cryogenic holds in the lower half of the ship. Each tray contained one hundred thousand civilians. There were six trays. This was the last of the Kushan people.

The enemies soon caught on and started once more in aiming for the Cryo-Trays. But not much later, the enemies were all captured by the Porters. All the fighters returned to dock with the Mothership.

“Those trays contain all that remain of our people. Without them, we will become extinct.” Karan said over the intercom. As we entered the main hangar, I saw the helpless enemies being dragged in by the tractor beam. The rest of the Porters went to salvage the remaining trays.

When we arrived at a service room, the television screen flashed on. It showed Fleet Intelligence's head boss.

“Hostile vessel captured. Interrogations are underway. While searching the ship's computer systems, we came across these flight recordings. Standby for playback...” The screen showed static then a video. At first it showed a probe... then it moved towards the Scaffold. Two modified porters were there. They then exploded in gunfire explosions. Then a strike group of nine yellow and red striped ships flew over to the Scaffold. They were speaking the Kushan language somehow. Then it showed a large carrier ship with several other large ships surrounding it. Then several fighters launched from the carriers hangar. Three of them were hit with the Kharak missile defence systems. Several of their fighters blew up. The missiles hit other large ships but they survived. Then we heard one of them say:

“Prepare for immediate surface bombardment.” Then I no longer wanted to watch. But I did out of curiosity. Then, several of our fighters, mainly Arrows, but some other various models that never made it into mass production launched from the Scaffold's three hangars. They were no match for the enemies. They were swatted like flies. Then I heard one of the pilots say:

“Watch out Marcus!” That was a pilot telling my father, Marcus Soban to watch out. I was sure of it. Then I heard: “Yeah you got them.” I guess he got them. The enemies must have been

hearing our conversations. But then, several enemy ships flew up the infrastructure of the Scaffold shooting at its fuel cells. The enemies flew out of the flaming wreckage. The charred debris was all that remained. It then showed Kharak with the north pole being bombed.” The video ended shortly after that.

“Analysis of the flight recordings shows that the Kharak missile defence systems heavily damaged the attacking fleet. However, we have concluded that at present, they can still easily defeat us. We have therefore plotted a course to a deep space asteroid belt. There we can hide and prepare our fleet for an assault. Our research division has finished analyzing the captured frigate. We have reverse engineered the drive technology and developed two new ships. Plans for a third are underway but will require frigate chassis research.” The screen turned off.

“What now?” I asked.

“Could pilot Mark Soban please report to Strike craft control.” Someone said over the speaker. I headed to the upper levels. I used my map to know where we are. The green dot was us. We had to follow the yellow line. We headed down a hall. The farther towards the centre of the ship, the walls shifted from a new grey paint to an old rusty brown. We walked for at least ten minutes. This must have been one of the first parts built on the Mothership. The lights were dimmed. That meant the hypercore was charging up.

“Ahhh! Are we there yet?” Isel asked impatiently.

“You know you didn’t really need to come. But yeah there should be an elevator around here somewhere.”

“You mean this one?” she opened the door.

“I must have missed that one.” I checked the map. It was elevator 4463. The numbers matched the ones on this elevator. We entered it. It had the same lighting and colour.

“Ouch! Sajuuk-Kar!” Isel hit her head on the low roof of the elevator.

“Watch your language.” I said. “We shouldn’t be cursin’ the lord’s name at times like these.”

“I guess you’re right. But what’s with the lighting in here!”

“Well, no one ever goes down here. And we’re probably charging the hyperdrive. It probably sucks every bit of juice out of the power grid.” In fact, I noticed earlier that the lights would flicker before we entered hyperspace. The door opened to a bright hall with white painted walls. We were greeted by a man in a grey suit.

“Mark Soban?” he asked.

“Yeah, what’s this all about?” I asked. He told me to follow him.

We followed him to a door. He flashed a key card into the slot and it opened. The room was dim and had rust colour paint. It had a big window in front. A middle aged man got up from a chair and walked over to us.

“Mark Soban is it? Well, I would like you to know I’ve been watching you ever since you came on this ship. You have very exceptional skills for a Seven.”

“Um... nice view. So why am I here?” I was staring at the huge window.

“You were one of the best pilots out there. And after what happened, you may be the only Sobani pilot alive.”

“No way, there were a lot better pilots out there than me. I’m only a rank seven.” But he was right about the last Soban pilot. Most are gunners or do weapons control stuff. The rest are officers or are in Cryo-Sleep.

“You also forget who makes those ranks. I see potential in you. You are very brave after what happened in the outskirts. I think you deserve this. He threw me a medal with a number 8 on it.

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

“You do know what happens when you reach rank eight don’t you?”

“You mean... I get my own ship! I don’t understand, for rank seven I had to be almost killed. What did I do?” This action of his puzzled me.

“You were calm in the face of an alien enemy. You put your life on the line for your friend in a swarm that lasted a long time with no hope of coming out alive. No pilot I ever met would put their life on the line in a near suicide attempt like that. Yet you still fought. Everyone else was scared and retreated into the Mothership. That is why you were the only ones out there with a Hammer. Even in the Hersey Wars soldiers would run in fear of being outnumbered.”

The Hersey Wars was an era of global warfare that started with a conflict on religious matters against the Kiith Siidim and Kiith Gaalsien. It lasted three hundred years. It was put to rest when the Kiith Nabaal intervened with chemical explosives.

“Any preferences in mind?” he was talking about the ship.

“Oh. Well actually I was thinking about the ship I was using.” The captain picked up a phone.

“This is strike craft control requesting Interceptor two be permanently assigned to pilot Mark Soban as he is now rank eight.”

“Request accepted.” Karan’s voice was heard through the speakers at the top of the large room.

“She’s all yours,” he said. “And after all, greatness runs in your blood.”

“Thanks.” We walked out of the room and headed for the elevator. Isel did not say a word the entire way back.

We returned to the service area we were before this upgrade of mine. But out of nowhere, Fleet Intelligence said that we have discovered friendly units somewhere in low orbit.

“We are sending our salvage teams.” He said.

They were dragged to the hangar bay. All six ships, five interceptors and one Hammer heavy corvette were all that remained of the Kharak defence force. We had been wiped out. They debated on whether or not to make funerals for the three hundred million inhabitants of our planet. It was decided that we would wait until the burning stopped. It was a form of cremation ceremony on a large scale. I stared out the hangar door from bay H as the flames burning away the atmosphere slowly came to an end. Kharak...lost. All that remains is a big world of glass. The heat had melted the surface and then it quickly faded into a cold black. The surface was shiny, but dead. I stared at the planet with a tear in my eye as the blue door of hyperspace had slowly

engulfed the Mothership. It was then that I realized how easily life was destroyed. And how I must take vengeance on the ones who destroyed my home...

Chapter Four

Funeral Fit for a King

It has been two days since the ‘Kharak Genocide’ as we called it. The Cryo-Trays have been processed and our colonists are safe for now. From the interrogations, we learned that the frontiers of a fleet patrolling the borders of a vast interstellar empire were dispatched to destroy our planet. The captain of one of the frigates claimed our people violated a four thousand year old treaty forbidding us to develop hyperspace technology. Extermination of our planet seemed to be the consequence. The subjects did not survive interrogations.

I met up with some of the stranded pilots from the Kharak Defence Fleet and asked them what happened. They say that Kharak received our warning and built new ships to defend against the possible threats. But they said they were expecting the clumsy Turanic Raiders that we told them about. But instead, they were met by a huge star fleet that wiped the Kharak Defence Fleet out of existence; however the missile defence did major damage to them. The larger ships were badly damaged when they left. Only four assault frigates remained to finish the job.

I then asked them about my father. “Was he in the fighting?” They replied saying that not only was he in the fight, he was leading most of the fighters into battle.

“He was either the bravest or stupidest man I had ever met.” One of them said. I couldn’t help but smile. *That was him all right.* I’ve heard stories from my pilot teachers. When I would ask my dad if it was true, he would say it was very true. Then, he would tell me the whole story from his point of view. He was a much respected man. Everyone I would meet knew his name. One of the best events was the one that he was being chased by 30 Gaalsien fighter jets with no backup only because this was after mom’s death. But somehow with thirty-to-one chances, he made it out alive and ready for more leaving nothing behind but clouds of smoke and the parachutes of the ejected pilots. But eventually, after the Gaalsien Resistance vanished, he retired to *make peace with the world* he would say.

“So how did he...um...I mean...how did he die?” I asked.

“He died the only way he thought fit for a warrior. He died fighting. He took out a damaged frigate in the process. He was a fool, but a respected and well-trained one. Because of him, we were able to escape. I would give my own life if it would bring him back.” He sighed and then said that the pilots in the Defence Fleet were getting proper funerals. My father’s, by far, was going to be the largest. But Sobani funerals are slightly different from the rest. We would burn the remains, if any, and draw the blood of Soban. Meaning the blood of a family member—in this case me—is used to mix with the ashes of the fallen warrior or any object of his possession. Then, the mixture is painted onto the tombstone in the form of the Soban crest. And on the tombstone is written the most valuable lesson the person has learned in his lifetime. This is something he told me once. He said: *You only get one shot at life. And in that time, you should make it worth value and respect. For only the strongest and most respected will be able to be alongside Sajuuk and the great warriors of history for eternity.*

It was the thing he said most often. That one memorable advice he told me. He said it was the one and most important thing you will ever learn in a lifetime. And now he's gone. He shared the most valuable information with me. I looked up to him. And now he's gone...

The funeral ceremony was about to begin. There were at least three hundred people in the Sobani funeral room. The stands were filled and the front rows were where the people closest to him were placed. The things burnt were photos of him, items he had given to his friends, the salvaged remains of his ship was there as well. But his body must have vaporized on impact with the enemy frigate. The items were all in a pile of wood that had been cut years ago to dry. Probably been doing so even before I was born. It helped it burn longer.

"This man was recognized over many countries in both the northern and southern colonies of Kharak. They are not here to see this, but those who are, please join me in prayer." The priest was starting the ceremony in a prayer to Sajuuk. "He whose hand shapes what is," he started. This is what we called our god. "Although you most likely already have, accept this man's soul as he is known as: a warrior, an idol, a hero, a friend and a father." The priest lit fire to the wood bed. It caught the religiously representing, yet highly flammable oils on the wood. It had three-foot flames from orange to yellow. There was again that sad feeling in my gut. I looked around and saw everyone dressed in black. All the Sobani were made to wear red. There were about fifty Sobani including me. I was a part of the ritual. The priest then recited something from an ancient scroll passed down the Soban bloodline for centuries. It was written in an old southern language that is un-writable with our current language. Therefore, you just have to imagine. But in rough translation, *He who becomes one with the universe becomes one with Sajuuk. From the ancient homeworld of our ancestors to the heavens above, allow his body to become one with all, and to the land forbidden to the living, the land of Balcora, shall you send his undying soul. One day, may we all meet again.* Well there's a rough translation. The language was in books I used to take after my dad, my foster parent I mean, finished reading them. He thought it was funny that I was trying to read *grown up's books* when I really understood most of it. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him in years. He must have been in this room somewhere. He did get onto the crew of the Mothership. He was a farmer so he worked somewhere on the produce level.

The pictures and objects burnt to ashes at this point. And the unrecognizable ship remains were molten liquid in the bottom of the pile. But the priest thought it to be enough time to get on with the ceremony.

"And now with the blood of the Soban line and the ashes of his remains are met to his grave." This was the cue I was given. I stepped forward fully prepared for what is about to happen. I opened my left hand, grabbed the knife from the priest, and cut out the Soban Blood crest to full detail. The palm of my hand filled with blood as it dripped away into a jar filled with ashes of the fire. The embers made a sizzling noise as the blood poured on them. The pain was so hard to take. But I was willing to do what I can for my father. The jar filled to the top and my hand was bandaged in white.

A part added to the ancient ritual was, when the blood is visible on the other side of the bandage showing the crest carved into my hand, I could leave if I wanted to see a doctor or put

some medicine on it for it to heal. But I never left. I wanted to wait until the end. The tears were gone now. I was too sad to cry. I felt like dying right there. The blood was showing on the other side of the bandage. But I wasn't leaving. If I would faint here from blood loss, I would.

Soban funerals usually take place outside but that would be kind of hard to do in outer space. So the lights dimmed to make a more night time feeling. The jar was being heated on the fire and mixed so the blood, my blood, would bond with the ashes perfectly. When it was, the priest took the very large tombstone fit for a king and took a paint brush. No ordinary one. A special one designed to withstand the hot blood mix. He dipped it in the jar and started painting the crest of our family on the cement slab. Slowly, the image was completed. When it dried, it was the crimson colour of dried blood.

Most of the people left at this point. The ones left on the stands were all in the front with me now. The priest left with the tombstone to place it in the Mothership's cemetery. The flames had died out long ago. The only lighting was that of the big red embers of the burnt wood. I must have been standing out here for hours. I almost fainted several times from blood loss. But it would take more than that to get the best of the son of Markus Soban. I waited a little longer until there were maybe a dozen of us left. My father had made many friends in his life. But his true best friends were the ones waiting until the end. I saw the strike craft commander and some of the rescued pilots. There were some others that were familiar in distant memories. They were the ones who knew him best. I took a look at the bandages on my hand. The symbol was perfectly visible. I took a look at my Sobani necklace and thought of something to say about him.

"Hold your family close huh, I wish I had." I felt an arm around my shoulder. It was the man from strike craft command.

"Don't beat yourself up kid. It was an honourable way to die. He died both fighting and saving his friends. And he wouldn't want you to feel bad about this. And it was honourable on your part to take place in the ceremony. We could have just awakened one of the sleepers closely related to him."

"Maybe... But what blood closer to his than that of his son. And besides, losing him feels a lot more painful than a scar. What did you think of my father?" I asked.

"He was the best pilot I ever knew. He was very much respected. People say he was the best of the best. He was a damned good pilot but an even better friend. He always knew what to say in bad situations to get your hope back up."

"Sounds about right to me."

"I also see this in you. I see you becoming even greater than your father. I see you being a great hero like your father, Mark. You have talent. I haven't yet seen a lot of it, but I know you do. I will be watching you. You have the potential. All you need is the opportunity." I didn't really know what to say to him. This was the guy who made me a rank eight in less than ten minutes. He said I was just really good. I knew a part of it was that I am the son of Markus, this man's friend, but I didn't quite understand how he knew I would be a hero like my father. My surpassing my father has been nothing but a dream and an impossible goal until now. But this guy believed I could do it. And he's seen thousands of pilots; probably hundreds in higher ranks than me. He said I have the potential, so maybe he was just giving me the opportunity.

"I-I'll try." I said to him.

“No, you won’t. You will. There is no trying. One of the few lessons Markus couldn’t teach you because he always tried, and succeeded. If you learn this, you will become even greater than him before you know it. Learn to control your fear and make it work for you. Everything is possible if you believe it.” He spoke like my father just then; giving me great advice that would be useful later on.

The funeral was over after another two hours. It must have been after midnight now and we had to leave. So I headed to the Mothership’s cemetery to see my father’s tombstone they had just put in the ground.

It wasn’t too far away. Maybe two hundred meters down the hall. They grew artificial grass in here to make it look like the cemeteries on Kharak. I don’t see why. We knew where we were. We were no longer on our home planet. We were in space somewhere a couple light years away from the system with nowhere else to go but forward. Hiigara was a long ways off, but it was our only reason for existence now. We had to get there, or the Kushan people would die out forever. Like in the funeral room, this one had its lights dimmed to either recreate night, or save energy.

I hardly had time to say anything. I felt like I was going to collapse into unconsciousness. I sat down leaning on the big gravestone. “I miss you. More than you know.” Hoping he would hear my words. And before I knew it, I fell fast asleep...alone in the cemetery...

Chapter Five

Just Making Friends

It is now two weeks since the Genocide. I was in the hangar bay my ship was parked. I had been thinking of the words of the strike commander last week at the funeral. But not at the moment as the support crew was giving it a paint job to my specifications. There are many things I wish not to think of but the memories haunt me: the Genocide, the funeral, my family, my friends and my home, all gone by the hands of the Taiidan as they call themselves. But why? What was so important that we were forbidden to develop hyperspace technology? And the contract we apparently agreed to was over four thousand years old. Do they honestly expect us to remember that far back? I had no answer to these questions haunting me.

But I got a home right next to Isel's and money from my father's will. So everything was going good in my living situation but my mental situation is another thing.

"We're done painting. It'll take about an hour to dry so don't touch it. If you want you can give the ship a name," they said.

"I'll name it...Ferin Sha." It sounded like a good name for a ship. It was the name of the city I was born in. It was also called the *Dancing Grounds*. It was a place that the Kiith Manaan nomads would group together once annually and throw a huge festival. I've been to it a couple times. It was really big with tourists and it was the hideout of gypsies and thieves. So you had to keep an eye on your money. I was born shortly after one of these events sixteen Kharak years ago.

The painters finished painting the name and took their stuff. They moved to a room in the back of the hangar. And from the left I could see John walking towards me.

"Like the paint job?" I asked. He looked around at it.

"Yeah but I don't think the red and grey go good together. I think some black would look nice." The paint was the grey of the standard ship except the white stripes were now a crimson red. And on the two sides was the Soban Blood crest, because I was officially a part of this line of Sobani. I had the mark in my left palm. It healed over the two weeks into its normal feel. But where the cut was, the skin had turned dark red over the tan colour of my skin. But I noticed my skin had gotten lighter than when living on Kharak. It was something that happened when being away from the sunlight and heat. This was common for the people living in the dome habitats of Tiir and other major cities. I guess it's because of the same thing.

"Yeah black would look nice in there."

"So did you name it?" he asked.

"It's now known as the Ferin Sha Blade-class interceptor, named after the city of my birth." He seemed to like the name.

"Did you see my ship? I mean... it's not finished or anything but it's almost done." I nodded negatively and he told me to follow him. We walked to a nearby elevator and entered.

"So what kind of ship is it?" I asked. I already knew he was a frigate captain but did not know what kind he captained.

“It’s a Matriarch-class support frigate. So that means I’ll be helping fighters like you in the battlefield.” The elevator doors opened to the large construction hangar with an oversized chunk of metal plating and wiring. “I know it’s not much now but it’s getting there. The builders are too lazy to build when in hyperspace. They can, but they don’t need to so they don’t. They might get around to it eventually. But we’re still three weeks ‘till our destination.” We walked closer to it. The ship must be a hundred meters long! It had five fighter docking pads on each side and four corvette docking arms on the bottom. Its main use was to repair and refuel all classes of ships. It repaired frigates and larger the same way the Mercy does. It has a larger and more powerful modified PDA on the front.

“Does your ship have a name?” I decided to ask him for his ship’s name because he did the same to mine.

“I called it the Ifriit Nabaal after the man who put an end to the Hersey Wars. So I guess this means when it launches we won’t see each other for a while.” He’s right. Frigates have to get system checkups, maintenance and re-supply every three months. This will be the only time we’ll be able to see each other. And it doesn’t take very long to do all that either, maybe an hour or two. It’s too bad; I was really getting to know John well. But I guess it’s his job and work comes first.

“I guess not. And hey, when we get in a battle with the Taiidan, we’ll all be counting on you. No pressure.” We started laughing while the whole time staring out into hyperspace from the hangar door.

“So what do you think about Isel? A little young don’t you think?” he said.

“I know! She looks like she’s fourteen or something! But she is a good pilot.”

Almost as good as me. I thought.

“Hello boys. You know I can hear you from over here.” We turned to see Isel leaning on the hull of the ship.

Oh!-Hi!-Sorry, was all we could say to her.

“No, it’s okay. I get that a lot. And I’m fourteen and a half by the way. Nice um... whatever this is. And Mark, red and grey does *not* look good together.”

“I guess you saw the Ferin Sha. Well I’ll fix it eventually.” We talked for a while longer but John had some stuff he needed to get done so I was stuck with Isel for the rest of the day.

We went to my room because the hangar was getting cold.

“It’s empty in here.” She noticed that my room was pretty empty as I did not have a lot of stuff.

“Well, I didn’t exactly bring anything with me did I. I’ll have to go to the shopping level sometime to buy furniture.”

“Well, at least the food here is free.” She said.

“Oh yeah. Protein pills, multivitamins with the occasional yellow mush. Yummy.” I said sarcastically.

“Well, it’s all we can make until the produce level is finished.” This was an entire level of the Mothership reserved for growing vegetation and other food. We were forced to have a strictly vegan diet because there were no animals for meat and no cows for milk and cheese.

“I just can’t wait until we meet up with the fleet that bombed Kharak so I can *destroy* them.” And why not? They deserve it.

“Yeah me neither. So what’s with the messed up Soban symbol?” she asked.

“It’s called the Soban Blood. And I used it because I became a part of this line when I participated in my father’s funeral. See?” I showed her the palm of my left hand. The scar has the same shape.

“Ouch! What did you do?” she asked.

“It was a part of the ceremony. The blood of the closest living relatives must be mixed with the ashes of the fallen soldier.”

“Oh. Well, it’s *your* religion. Where does this come from?”

“It was the funeral that was given to the most powerful and blood related Sobani. Meaning the ones related by blood to Soban Tarestin, also known as Soban the Red. Yeah I looked it up. I found the name of my grandfather four times removed, and Soban had a son with the same name. So there are some chances that I am related to Soban the Red.”

“Cool. You are related to a famous person. I don’t know my entire family tree. Most of the data was lost during the Hersey Wars.

“Yeah. What a time that was.”

“But it’s good that you respect your family ties unlike most Sobani. No offence.”

“It’s alright. I know most of us don’t like our families. And that is one reason we run away from them to join the Soban clan.”

“So why did you name your ship Ferin Sha?” she asked.

“Because the city Ferin Sha was a safe spot for the Soban after they defeated an enemy clan that threatened their destruction. And also because I was born there.”

“Oh. Well I would name my ship Balkar-Ren” Translated from old Kushan meant: Hell raiser, “just because it has meaning of destruction.”

A few minutes later, all pilots were called to hangar B for a meeting. On the way, we met up with Jay and his crew.

“So what are your names?” I asked. But they did not answer and pretended as if I wasn’t even there.

“Come on guys, he’s my friend!” Jay told them.

“It is against our code to know fighter pilots,” said the one with three gold stars, which made him known as a corvette captain.

“But he’s the son of Markus Soban. Which makes him unbeatable.” He always thought of me as an unbeatable pilot because of my lineage. Well, it could be true. I mean, I never lost a race or never had to eject out of a ship because of a battle. But they then paid attention to my existence.

I didn’t like the fact that some people only acknowledged me because of my dad. It was like being forced to live up to him, which I knew I couldn’t, because he was known by almost everyone. He was my idol; as he was too many others. But having people show you respect without really doing anything was somewhat of an upside. It still made me uncomfortable. I was known only as: *The son of Markus* or *descendent of a hero* and never by my own name. It was my main goal. To be known not as the son of a hero, but as Mark Soban, to equal my father in greatness. I was a long way from it. Being a rank eight gave me some respect, but was only out-

greatened by my father's. It was like nothing I could do was good enough. But at least my *friends* knew me for who I am. Jay knew me like that. But still believed being born from greatness makes you great.

"Yeah. And now Markus is dead." I said. They stayed silent from that point, probably thinking of my father's death. News goes through these steel walls fast. Everyone on the Mother-ship was aware of his loss. But even in death he was one of the most respected men ever to live. Even in death was I less important than him.

A man walked up to a stand with a microphone. He spoke and his voice was heard through the whole hangar.

"We are sorry for interrupting your spare time, but seeing the events that took place in the Kharak system, we thought a new battle plan is needed. We now have a plan to place all fighters and corvettes willing into squadrons. Fighter squadrons consist of five and corvettes and Scouts of three. There is also the option to have a corvette in a squadron of fighters making six ships; although repair corvettes are the primary choice for this job." The man sat down and another came up to the microphone stand.

"We ask that those who do not want to be a part of this project to leave immediately so we can continue with the meeting Karu's teams leave the area. In fact, not very many corvette teams stayed. There was about fifty of us left. After everyone else left, the man at the stand continued. "Now may I have all rank eight and nine fighter pilots to step over to the stand please?"

"I guess that means me." I headed over to the stand. When I got there we stood in a row and there were seven of us, but only room for five squadrons. I overheard two of the people behind the stand talking about eliminating the eights.

-What about that one? He just became an eight.

-You're kidding right? Do you know who he is?

-No. I'm afraid I don't.

-He's the son of Markus!

-Oh! My apologies! How about him?

-Yeah.

One of them walked up to someone two people down from me. He looked at me with an angry glare and walked off the stand. When he got back to his spot in the crowd, he kept looking at me with an angry look. He must have heard their conversation as well. I lowered my head in shame. It *was* my fault, but indirectly. Because of my so-called fame, that guy was not able to become a squadron leader.

"Here are the squadron leaders." One of the two men said into the microphone. He then told us we could pick our partners to be on our squadrons. "You will take orders from these people. They have more experience and know more strategies than you."

"Jeez he makes it sound like we don't know anything!" Isel was leaning on the stage.

"Yeah. I feel sort of embarrassed to be up here."

"Oh yeah! You, a better pilot than me! I'd be a rank eight too if I was a year older." We both started laughing at the joke. But some people didn't like it much.

“I’m sorry miss, could I ask you to step back until your name is called.” A guard said standing between us. I poked him on the shoulder.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary sir.” He left us alone after that. One by one the pilots named their partners. And then it was my turn. “Well Isel of course, and well I don’t really know any other *fighter* pilots I can trust. Jay knew what I meant by that as I could see him smiling.

“Alright.” He said then moved down the line. Three other random pilots that I did not know were assigned to me. I asked the other one in the conversation I overheard earlier who the pilot he sent back into the crowd was. He said his name was Eric Gaalsien.

Then we were sent back to the crowd and the corvette captains were called up. The Porter captains decided to make salvage teams into salvage squadrons. This meant that one repair corvette and two salvagers became a squadron and then the others did the same. The meeting was over and people started leaving.

“I guess this means you listen to me now.” I said to Isel as a joke.

“Yeah you wish!” we headed out the hangar with Jay’s group.

“So Jay, What do you say about going to see my ship?” I asked. He said he was done and agreed on my request. I didn’t like Jay’s captain. There was just something about him that I didn’t like. I got the feeling he hated me or something. But I said nothing just to keep the peace.

When we got to my ship, I saw someone with a can of yellow paint and a brush in his hand. We ran up to him. It was Eric Somtaaw.

“It’ll do you no good. You won’t gain anything from this. But I noticed he had already painted over the Soban Blood symbol. “Why are you angry at me? Destroying my family’s symbolism will never do you any good. I know who I am, I know who my father is, I know who you are Eric; and I know you are angry at me for being famous. But the truth is that it’s not my fault. I am me. Not the son of a hero. Some may call me that, you might not like me, but I am not a bad person.”

“But you get everything easily without working for it and earning it like the rest of us pilots. We’ve had it with people like you who get everything without loss.” And with those words I lost my cool.

“What did you say? You think I got rank eight *easy*? I risked my life saving Isel in a swarm of evil space pirates while all of *you* people flew into the Mothership for safety as soon as you could! You say I *didn’t* lose enough? I lost *everything*! My friends are all dead thank you! And so is the only man that I looked up to! My father was the best person I ever knew. To me he was more than a great pilot and a hero. To me, he was a father and a damn good one too. He taught me all the lessons he learned in his life and helped me when I was sad and felt like I wanted to die. His soul now rests in Balcora not because he is important and well respected. He is there because he has been there for whoever it is that needed help. I am his son. But I am also me. And you need to grow up or get a life! You don’t know me.”

He did not speak. He just picked up the bucket of paint and walked out the hangar.

When we knew he was gone, I climbed the stairs onto the top of the ship. The yellow paint was dry now so there was no point on trying to remove it.

“Hey what was that all about?” Jay asked.

“I don’t know. He just doesn’t like me or something. Just like your captain buddy.”

“Oh you mean Rob? It’s not that he doesn’t like you, it’s that he doesn’t like bein’ around fighter pilots. He thinks all pilots will one day be blown up or killed in battle and he just doesn’t wana get to close to any,” he explained.

“Well, I think it was a productive day, what about you two?” I asked. I had painted the Ferin Sha, I got to see John’s ship, I became a squadron captain, and oh yeah! I made an enemy today! What a day this has been.

Just making friends Mark, just making friends...

Chapter Six

A Journey Through Time and Space

A week later, I find myself getting out of bed and saw my door was open.

“Isel?” I asked finding out I was alone. “I must have left it open again.” I got up and went out the door. I think everyone lost track of the time at this point, or at least most of us. In fact, I didn’t have any way of telling if it was the middle of the night, or seven in the morning. People would walk through these halls all twenty-six hours of the day. I headed for a room in the Mothership that was open to the public but never used. I saw an observatory room right above where the hyperspace core, along with Karan, was. I headed for there using my mobile map.

It took a while to get there. I had to walk about two kilometres. As I walked to the centre of the ship, the walls became the rusty brown colour of old metal. I walked up to an elevator that took me all the way up to the level I wanted. I got out the elevator and entered the observation area down the hall.

It was almost pitch black inside.

I guess no one’s here.

Or so I thought. After my eyes got used to the faint glow of the lights on the level that the hyperspace core was attached (We simply called it the Core Level), I saw a shadow of someone leaning on the railing separating the platform from the large pit below. I had no idea who it was.

It’s probably someone like me with nothing better to do. I thought. But as I got closer, I noticed something familiar; like I’d seen him before. And when I was about several feet behind him, I knew who he was. It was Rob. Jay’s captain. I thought of quietly walking backwards and leaving to another place. But before I could do anything, he turned looking me straight in the eye. I said nothing. I just stood there. I didn’t know the guy, but for some unexplained reason, I got the feeling he didn’t like me. I don’t know why, I mean... it’s not like I did anything to antagonize him or anything.

“So you and Jay are friends huh? You look nothing like the stories.” What? Stories about *me!* And here I was thinking there were only stories of my father. “You don’t look like someone who deserves to be the lone warrior of Soban. I mean. I didn’t expect you to be *nearly* as good as your father, but I didn’t know you were this bad.” I thought I knew exactly what he was thinking. But suddenly the playing field had completely reversed. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” I asked. His gaze then turned to the large window showing space outside of it.

“It doesn’t surprise me. I mean... no one can be as good as Markus. But you are way out of line *farm boy!*”

How could he know? How did he know my childhood nickname? No one, and I mean *no* one but me, the Dane-Paktu’s and my father knew that I was adopted by a clan of Paktu farmers. My real mom and Markus would *never* tell anyone about my existence before I ran away to the north to find him it was frowned upon for a Sobani to have a child. But it was forbidden to raise one. So they knew that it would be best for me if I lived far away from them. And everyone in

the south knew me as Elmer Paktu not Mark Soban. News didn't travel very fast from pole-to-pole. If they figured out Markus had a long lost son, they would've never expected it to be me. So this guy was new. I had no idea what to say to him.

"What do you mean by *that!*" was my only reply. The only other was "how did you know?" but I wanted him to confirm what I thought he knew. He turned back to me.

"News travels fast in the house of Soban. You didn't think I wouldn't notice. But who woulda thought it would be *dear older brother Markus* having a child with someone he met in Ferin Sha one day and said he fell in love. To me, it was all the alcohol and drugs being sold for cheap prices. To *me*, you are a mistake he made. The biggest one he ever made! Except maybe for falling for that stupid whore! And then running away like that to join the army! Not all Sobani need to fight. Some of us want to live normal lives. But no not him; he ran away with that *mother* of yours and went straight to the Soban Military Academy. Not even saying goodbye to his only brother. That's right Mark! I am your uncle. And now, your only family." I saw tears in his eyes. My mother has always been a cloud in my mind. An empty image that I wanted to fill. But she died before I even met her.

"Hey! I never met my mother, but I could guess by the way my father talked about her that she is nothing like what you describe! And even if you are some long-lost uncle, don't think you can treat me like shit! I am who I am, and I am Mark Soban. Your blood is the same as mine! I saw you at that funeral, you didn't offer your blood for the ceremony, and you just stood on the sidelines with an angry look in your eyes. I have too much going on in my head to start thinking about the past. Be angry at my father if you will. But not me." He looked shocked by my answer, like he was no longer talking to a little kid. But then he gave me an answer that I *really* didn't like.

"You think you're better than me. Well, all you are is someone desperately trying to be exactly the way his father was. Hey? Are you daddy's little boy or what. No. Stop chasing your father, kid. You will *never* be him." he walked passed me and towards the exit of the platform. But before he could leave, I gave him the answer that he would never forget.

"For your information," I clenched my fists in anger but kept my face pointing in the opposite direction not to let him see the tears coming from my eyes. "I do not want to become Markus. All I want is not to be referred to as his son. I hate it when people call me the son of a Hero. Or son of Markus as if he is some kind of golden idol that everyone worships to on their knees and that I'll always be in its shadow. I am Mark not Markus. What I do is so I won't be known only to be his son. All I can hope to do is gain some respect and make a name for myself. Sure Markus taught me the values of life, but I choose to use them to *my* advantage. I focus on the *why* and not the *how*. I look at how the future will unfold and how can I reach my ultimate goal. Not like you. You tend to focus on why my father did what he did and why he never came back to apologize. But all you are asking yourself really is why can't I do the things he did. Everyone gets their own answer; only when you know the how will you understand the why. All it takes is time and wisdom." And with that said, he left not saying a word. I felt like my advice, sorry Markus's advice, had worked.

After I had calmed down, I stared out into the distant space. It looked like the entire galaxy was in my hand. I held out my hand and closed one eye. The galaxy was in my hand alright. It fit perfectly. A dark blue disk that slowly faded into a bright and vivid orange-red with a bright yel-

low bulb in the centre hovered in the palm of my hand. We were obviously moving fast. I could see all the stars flying past us at high speeds. It was then that I knew. We would make it. We would reach Hiigara and defeat the Taiidan. It is our fate. It is the path that Sajuuk has drawn for us. We must reach our goal. But as soon as the thought came, it was then gone replaced by another. What if it's not? What if Sajuuk is just punishing us for leaving the place he had banished us to?

But then I felt an eerie feeling like someone was watching me. The light from outer space was the only light in the room. Before I thought it was the hyperspace core. But now I was sure that it wasn't. But I was still getting that feeling.

"If it's you Rob than yes I accept your apology."

"Rob was here?" I turned and saw Isel. She had a calm but frightened look on her face. It was hard to see but the light from the galaxy reflected dimly on her face.

"Mark...I...I don't know. Um..." it sounded like she was debating on telling me something. But I didn't know what about.

"Whatever it is you can tell me." I said.

See now looked more nervous than anything. This wasn't like her. She was usually hyper and a little aggressive. But she was like a completely different person than I knew before. It was only almost a week of ten days that I knew her, but she wasn't like this. Ever! Something must be up.

"What is it?" I asked not expecting for a second the answer I was about to receive.

The answer she gave me was no answer at all. She just leaned against me and gave me a kiss right on the lips. I wasn't sure what to think. Sure I liked her, but I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable and stupid about what she did, so I just did nothing. A part of me liked it, but several parts of me didn't. I mean technically I never broke up with my old girlfriend on Kharak, but she was now dead. So I guess that didn't matter. But still, she never gave any hints about this ever happening between us. I guess I didn't know as much as I thought about her. It lasted about ten seconds. When it was over, she just stepped back as if expecting me to say something bad.

"I-I'm sorry. I-I don't really know what to say." And that was a bad thing, because neither did I. But then I thought of something.

"Confusing isn't it? It happened to me once." Referring to what she was obviously feeling. "I once loved a girl named Karan. But well...we all know what happened to her." She couldn't help but smile. I guess she thought the hard part was over. But I now had the hardest part of all: Deciding weather or no to turn her down. I liked her and all, but it was weird because I never had the slightest hint that this could ever happen. I never saw her like this except maybe that time at Kharak just before we headed out to swarm the Taiidan frigates. But if I said no, she would probably never forgive me and I was just not in the mood for any more emotional distress so I said yes.

"Really!" she looked happy for some reason. I mean...we only met 10 days ago. But I guess she was feeling confused because all her emotions were all messed up because of Kharak. I told myself not to put too much thought into it though. It was just agreeing to be her boyfriend; I mean... how bad can it possibly be?

I mean...sure...she was cute, how bad could this *really* be? But I thought too early...

Chapter Seven

A Journey Through... Shopping?

“Hey...Hey Mark...Wake up!” I woke up to the sound of Isel’s voice. It was now two weeks into the voyage. Most days were boring and empty. Usually there was nothing going on inside the steel walls of the Mothership. But today I felt like doing something.

“How did you get in here?” I asked looking at my door. I was sure I locked it this time.

“An old trick I learned. And I’m not tellin’ you!” She stuck her tongue out at me but I was still too asleep to do anything.

“So what do you want this early anyway?” I asked.

“What do you mean *this early*? It’s past twelve! Anyway, I was thinking on taking you shopping since you apparently can’t get around to it on your own. Hey maybe you can get yourself an alarm clock! Maybe then you won’t need me to break in here every morning. Oh wait; you never lock your door! Most of the time it’s open! So anyone curious enough can walk right in here while you’re asleep and they could...” I stuffed my head into my pillow because I couldn’t bear hearing her ramble on anymore. I’m telling you she’s worse than my *old* girlfriend. Now I have to deal with *her* every morning. At least the old one let me sleep until I wanted to wake up.

“Wake up sleepy!” she pulled the pillow from me and wacked me over the head with it.

“Well, I’m awake *now*! Anyway, what were you saying before you started rambling?” I asked.

“I’m taking you to buy stuff, like clothes, because you’ve been wearing the same thing for three days now. And shave before we go. You look like that old drunk guy over by Karu’s.”

‘Yep, definitely worse than the last one.’

After I got out of bed and shaved, we headed to the commerce level. When we got there she *obviously* had to check out the women’s clothing department first. Well, I guess the worst part was her constant asking me if it looked good on her. I mean honestly. Do women actually think we care? No seriously! I don’t and most guys don’t. The only answer I could honestly give her was a *sure* or *whatever works for you*. Never and I mean *never* say no or anything that would sound negative, because well...you’ll find out.

“What about this?” she asked walking up to me.

“If you like it I’ll like it” bad answer. Not in the actual words, but women tend to over analyze everything. Not being sexist or anything. It’s just the way I figure it.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked in an angry tone. Yep, that’s the worst answer possible. Like I said, she analyzed a hundred possibilities and found one tiny shred of negativity. “You don’t like it! Well I do.”

“I didn’t say that.” I said trying to keep peace. But you know when people say its better just to agree with them, well they’re right. You might not like it, but I didn’t know this.

“So you agree with me about agreeing that the dress is good but agreed that it wasn’t the best and disagreed that it looks good on me?” well I can honestly say that I was lost about half-way through. She said something else after but I didn’t catch it.

“Um...yes?” I would ask her how many negatives she had in that sentence but it wouldn’t have mattered. Before I knew it, her fist was in my face. It hurt like having a wrestling champion hammer you in the face with one of those chairs that are always in the ring for some reason. I fell backwards hitting another customer. This poor guy must have been dragged here too. But my mind was more focused on the big fist imprint on my face. It singed when I touched it so I left it alone. “Hey what the hell was that for?” I yelled.

“For insulting me.” She answered.

“Like I knew I was insulting you. I barely understood what you were saying!” but she didn’t care.

It stayed silent between us for the rest of the time in this store. She bought a bunch of stuff and of course, made me hold everything. Well, at least I was in shape. Every store we passed led to more bags for me to carry. And after about the third, I couldn’t carry any more. So we went to my place and dropped it off only to come back. Her shopping was now done, thankfully.

“I really can’t keep doing this.” I said.

“Yes, you can. Now come on! We’re about a quarter ways done.” I didn’t like that response. I thought we would be halfway by now! Well, I wasn’t going to argue. What else was I supposed to do? Mope around the observatory all day? I did that too much lately. So I followed her out the door and to a nearby elevator that took us straight up to the shopping level. It was pretty convenient besides that it was constantly crowded.

But that was life on the Mothership. It was constantly crowded in the more convenient areas and the rest was basically empty, which is why I go to the central areas of the ship to be alone. It was quiet that way. Everyone needs some place to get away from their world and their jobs. It helps just to relax and do completely nothing sometimes. Just think about what direction your life was headed. I did that a lot. But I wasn’t going to be able to do that today, because I had to go shopping.

Now that Isel’s stuff was done, it was my turn. But the first stop was the men’s clothing department. I didn’t like shopping for clothes; okay I didn’t like shopping in general; unless it involved cool stuff like engine parts or other fun *toys*. But in this case it didn’t so I was bored. I just grabbed the first things I could see that were on the list of stuff I needed, and threw it all in a bag. I only needed two weeks’ worth because the twenty-five cent wash was right down the hall. The next stop was the furniture store. I found a great couch that would fit three people. I would want a couch for visitors if I ever get any. And I got a television to keep up to date with the news. But these objects were too heavy for me to carry. Well the couch anyway. The television was flat and light weight. But we placed an order on it that would make it be delivered in about one day.

It wasn’t really an interesting day for me. I was done all my shopping, dropped everything off at my house, went to a couple other stores and then went home again. I finally managed to ditch Isel and run off someplace else. I didn’t really know where to go until I ran past Jay walking towards the hangar bays.

“Hey what’s up?” I asked.

“Where’d you come from? Well, I’m glad to see you. I have stuff I want to show you on my corvette.” I hadn’t seen Jay since that day about a week ago when I ran into that Eric guy. In fact, I haven’t seen him for a while either. But as usual, Jay was his old self. He long forgot of his uncle on the Khar-Selim and all the people of Kharak. He learned long ago to store away his deepest emotions to never be seen again. He wasn’t repressing them; he was just forgetting they were there. And when he was reminded, they would only return in a fraction of the strength they were. This was a useful tool that he probably learned being an orphan. I was lucky enough to have been left at the doorstep of a family of farmers who were really good people. Actually, I just remembered that my foster family lives on the Mothership. They probably work on the vegetation level. I should visit them one of these days. But for now I was going to help Jay with whatever he needed done on his Porter. But it would be nice to see them again. The last time I saw them was after my famous accident in high orbit that won me the title of rank seven. I was given shelter once more by those people. They really were nice. They never expected any repayment when they did something for free. They always accepted whoever it was into their homes if they needed it. I can honestly say I missed them.

It didn’t take long to reach the corvette hangars. They were at the far bottom of the hangar sleeves. It seemed to me that this journey was becoming a habit. I walked to the hangars at least once a day.

“So is Rob here? If he is I’m leaving.” I said.

“What do you have against Rob anyway? He’s just doing his job.” He replied. I guess he didn’t know.

“Rob is my um...well he’s my uncle in a way. He’s Markus’s brother. But he hates him; and me to for some reason. He said I’m just one of my father’s mistakes.”

“Oh. Well that’s a load of information I’ll have to think over. But no he’s gone to the command levels for something. He wouldn’t tell me what for. But then again, he tells me nothing except orders.” We climbed up the ramp that leads onto the ship. There was a large storage area in the back end. And behind that was the engine room. It’s a pretty simple design, but an effective one. The ship had no weapons as it was designed to magnetically drag ships into the hangar not for full front combat. He guided me to the main control room. There were two seats down a few steps on a lower floor. Not much lower; maybe about a foot and a half. And on the floor we were on was one chair. My guess is it belonged to the captain. I then sat in it and said:

“You there! Insignificant fool! Work harder and faster. And you! Fly better we’re being hit by bullets the way you fly. My grandmother could do a better job than you!”

“Ooh I love this game...um...let me guess...Rob!” we both started laughing. “Man. This reminds me when we made a funny impersonation of the western general not noticing he was behind us.”

“Yeah. Those were the days. Hey didn’t he make us sweep off the runways after that? Now that ticked me off; there were strong winds that month and the sand would just cover where we finished sweeping!” it was around three years ago. But it was pretty funny. Everyone was laughing; even when he was behind us. Actually I think that’s when they were laughing harder.

“Yeah. We must have swept every runway along the west coast three times over. But we can do it again; this time there’s no sand to sweep.”

“He might just make us wash the hangar bays until he can see his reflection in it. Hell he might even eat off it.” That was his two terms he used to make people clean things as good as they possibly could. “Hey didn’t we use that in our impersonation? I think we did!”

Jay cleared his throat and started impersonating the general in the lowest voice he could do. “You there! I want these toilets scrubbed, washed, flushed and polished. I plan on eating off it later.” We started laughing again. Yep, that was in it alright. But just then I heard someone walking up the ramp in heavy boots. Our minds were both worried it was him, as unlikely as it seemed. We were relieved to see when it was just the other crew mate of the ship.

“I remember that speech! That was you two! I swear I saw you on the news. You don’t even look the same.” Yeah. Puberty hit us pretty hard. I used to be the shortest one in the group. Now I was a little taller than Jay. “Like the boots? You shoulda’ seen the looks on your faces.” I was glad to see this guy had a sense of humour. He looked to be about nineteen. So when we pulled our famous prank, he would have been our age now. “Oh by the way, my name’s Brad.” He said to me. I mean it was obvious Jay knew who he was. So it was obviously me he was talking to.

“I’m Mark Soban. I mean you probably knew that from the meeting last week, but I thought I’d just tell you anyway.” How lame could I be? Well, it didn’t matter now. “So what’s your story?” I asked.

“Well, I’m a member of the Kiith LiirHra and I’m an aerospace engineer. And I’m here because I know how to fix the salvage field manually. So basically, it’s my job to activate the salvage field and fix anything on the ship. I heard you’re a fighter pilot. And Jay here says you’re a really good one.” He said smiling.

“Well, I’m good all right! And I’m goin’ to the top, all the way to rank ten!” I said confidently. It was my goal after all.

“I bet you will.” He said. “Hey what happened to your hand?” he asked. I looked at it. The scar was showing. I usually kept my left fist closed because of it. But it was too late. He already saw it.

“It’s my mark.” Wow what a funny play with words. “It’s my blood given as a sacrifice to allow my father a safe passage to Balcora.” Well, that is most of it. The other part was kind of unexplainable to a *non-believer*. They were those who did not believe in Sajuuk. They only believed in science and that witch can be explained. The clan LiirHra was a part of those people. But I didn’t mind them. They just haven’t yet realized the truth.

“Mark is gonna take down the Taiidan by himself if he needs to. I would help, but, well, Rob.” Jay decided to join the conversation. I had told him that I would take revenge on the Taiidan that destroyed Kharak if it was the last thing I did. At least then I would die like a warrior. It as die fighting, or don’t die until we reached Hiigara and all the Taiidan were wiped out.

“Well, I hope he won’t need to do it alone. I wouldn’t want to.” Brad sat in his chair.

“Yeah. Well, if I do, I will. It’s how I work. And besides, I’m not scared of them.” The problem was, I hadn’t met any of them yet. We had captured a couple hundred from the frigates back at Kharak, but I didn’t exactly know how their mentality worked. All I knew is that they were almost identical to us; with much paler skin, lighter coloured hair, and blue eyes and were shorter. I had not learned a thing about what they were thinking. But that didn’t matter. I would do it anyway. But that time was another month away. I had plenty of time.

“I respect that. I had friends and family to who lived on Kharak; I left to join the Mothership crew knowing that they would be safe. But after the Genocide, I was lost. I didn’t want to continue. But then I had remembered my primary goal, the one most important reason for joining the Mothership. To reach Hiigara and see who was right. If the Siidim were right, it won’t be there. If the Gaalsien were right, then it will; and the Hersey Wars would have been a lost cause. I need to see it to believe it. It’s the way we think. The LiirHra I mean.”

“Well, you can believe what you want. I’m not gonna stop you.”

“Well, now I guess we can get started on what I was gonna show you.” Jay said. That’s right! It totally slipped my mind. We were only headed here because he wanted to show me something.

“Sure” I said not to look stupid. We walked to the back of the ship near the storage area. It was on the other side of the ship than the entrance room I thought was a storage area. No, this one was filled with plastic bins of metal parts and wires. They were labelled with numbers and letters in orders I was not familiar with. I wanted to know what was going on so I asked him.

“What are we doing?” he turned to look at me and then back at the hall of bins. We walked almost to the end when he pulled out a bin from the racks. He opened and pulled out a huge um...*thing* made of metal. He gave it to me. But I had no idea what it was supposed to be. “What is it?” I asked.

“Remember when the general was talking about a new engine technology? Well, here it is. I don’t know exactly how it got here, but my guess is that none of this stuff was unloaded after it transferred from the Scaffold. This ship was built years ago to support the Mothership’s final construction stages by magnetically pulling nearby asteroids nearer to the PDA’s on the scaffold. The one built for the salvage testing was the second. That’s why it didn’t make any sense. This ship has no identification number. I thought because it was the first one, they didn’t need to put one on. But then I went to the other one and noticed it had a number 1 on it. It’s not really a big deal but...”

“This could be worth a fortune! Well to the research teams I mean. But this could be very useful.” It was kind of like a fast booster engine. It released an incredibly high amount of energy but at the same time used more fuel than the fusion torch engines we use now. If the researchers used this technology, they could eventually discover fighter technologies that would not require to be refuelled. Doesn’t seem like a big deal to the average person, but if we never needed refuelling for our fighters, it would allow us to send our ships in from far distances without giving off the position of the larger carrier ship. It would give us the ability to sneak up in small numbers and destroy the enemy fighters before the frigates and corvettes moved in for the kill. But this was still a couple years away. At the moment, the technology still only gives off a fast powerful boost using up less fuel than if you were going the same distance but moving slower. It only saves fuel but gives more speed. It needs more work. But that’s not for me to do. I had to give it in. “We should give this to the research teams. They could use it.” I said.

“Sure but it’s perfectly functional as it is. And there are four of them. We could give them one or two and use the others.” He was thinking the same thing I was. I needed to go faster on my ship if I wanted to do the things I was talking about to the Taiidan, I would need an advantage. I guess speed was the key. But even now, we were a week away from entering the asteroid field were we would resupply our resources and create a larger fleet. All we could do is hide it

here and hope no one comes along and takes it all away. We ended our meeting in the storage area and headed out the ship.

“Well, I’m gonna head out. I need to *apologize* to Isel for ditching her.” He started laughing.

“She makes you angry already? I thought it took at least a month for that.” He was referring to my past girlfriends. I was popular back home because of, well, again, my father. But now most of the people who *worshiped* my father are gone or in cryo-sleep on the trays. So I could start over as slightly less popular. Witch I liked because it gave me more alone time. I wasn’t crowded by people who wanted to be my friend to get known.

I was out of the hangar and headed home, again.

Chapter Eight

Old Family and Old Memories

Isel had kicked me in the head yesterday. She was worried about where I was. Honestly I don't get that woman most of the time. She's either the toughest and strongest one I've ever met, or the most girlish one. And she switches between both without warning. Honestly it gets annoying. All I can think of doing is avoiding her early in the morning so she finds out I'm already gone. In fact the alarm on my watch gave me an advantage because it woke me up at six instead of noon. I could just evade her all day, but where? I didn't know where else to go? She knew where to find me at the observatory, she knew my other *do nothing* spots, and she knew I liked being with my ship. So I had to think outside the box. And then it hit me. I *did* want to meet up with the family. So I headed to the farming level.

The walls stayed freshly painted a light grey this time. They did not turn the rusty red colour on this floor. I don't know why though. The humidity was higher on this level. That should rust it more not less. But it must be a special paint, because it looked as good as new. Or maybe it was new. I didn't know, and who cares. It works for me. I was looking for the one farm that the sign read: Dane & Lisa Paktu. It was owned by my foster parents from when I was a kid. I haven't seen them in years and just thought I should stop by and say hi. After all, they're the only family I have left now.

All the farms had small and young vegetables growing. They must have just been planted. But the odd thing was that the place was lit up by a huge incandescent bulb that would move and then turn off for twelve hours to simulate the day and night cycles.

I arrived at the sign and saw that the farm looked the same as the others. But this one was special. I knew people who lived on it. I walked up to the front door of the farm house. Yeah this was a huge level. The farmers had houses made of sandstone and wood that looked exactly like the one I grew up in. I guess it was for the farmers to live in a peaceful environment rather than the metal walls and floors that the rest of the Mothership crew did. It had a nice feel to it. It felt like I was back on Kharak. The only metal there was besides the open walls of the huge room was the tractors and other various machines that the farmers shared.

I knocked on the front door and waited for an answer. I go one. I was then hit with a sudden realization. What if they didn't want me around? But that was then replaced with the calming words of the person who answered.

"Hello? Oh! Elm...I mean Mark! This is unexpected. Come on in!" I was greeted by my mother Lisa. She looked happy to see me. This was a good sign. We walked by three rooms. In the third, I noticed my younger sister Ellen. She was only three the last time I saw her. She of course didn't know who I was. I ran away before she was born. Now that I realize it, it was only two years ago that I had seen them. Yet it felt like ten. We went into the kitchen and she sat at the table. I did the same.

"So where are the other two?" I asked her.

“Dane went to the shopping level to get some stuff and your sister is outside in the garden. She really misses you. You two were always so close. But you had to do what you thought was right. I guess you just never had farming in your blood. But I’m okay with it.” She sighed and then got up to make something that required vegetables.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“Yes, actually you can go in the back and get some Agriisak roots.” They were my sister’s favourite. They had an extremely sweet taste to them; almost unnatural. I knew Lisa didn’t actually want me to go get any because she had a pile of them right next to her. I understood her riddle and went to find my older sister in the back by the Agriisak’s.

“Hey, It’s been a while.” As I said that, she quickly stood up to face me. She was still shorter than I was. It was kinda funny for me because she was two years older than me. But I was always taller than her.

“Elmer? Why didn’t you come back? We were worried about you! We missed you.” She then gave me a hug. Not a soft hug either. She nearly squeezed my guts out. She had a lot of muscle. This was probably because she worked on the farm all the time.

I waited until she stopped. “Jen, I know you missed me. But it was my choice. I had to do what I had to do. I needed to find my real parents, my bloodline. I had lots of training to do. I didn’t have the time to travel to the southern regions.”

“But Elmer?”

“It’s Mark now.” I said. She looked surprised. But not the happy surprised like Lisa. She was more *I can’t even look at you* surprised. Well, I did sort of deserve it. She ran inside and I thought I heard her crying. I picked one of the red rooted vegetables and cleaned it off with one of the water hoses. I crunched the root and tasted the unbelievable sweetness of the Agriisak. And then I had an instant flashback; like I had suddenly fallen unconscious. But I then remembered that the Agriisak can do that to you when you need to think hard about something. I guess now was one of those times.

I could only hear the sound of a roaring fighter jet engine. To the top, I could see Kharak. But to the bottom, I could only see blackness. It was then that it hit me. It was the time two years ago that I was being tested for my annual pilot training. It was the time I got my rank seven. I was only fourteen at the time. The engines were roaring then suddenly, I heard something. Like an explosion. It came from behind.

“I have a problem up here!” I said over the speaker. It was as if I was there, I could think, but I could not do anything. I was in my body, but I couldn’t act at my own free will. I was stuck until it was over.

“We hear you Mark. There has been a malfunction in the fuel cells. You’re leaking. You won’t have enough to get back so you’ll have ton head for the habitable southern pole regions. We will send a team to wait for your return. They will be there in about three weeks.” I recognized that voice. It was the western general. The one me and Jay made fun of the year before this happened. “We’re sorry. We can’t do anything. It’s not your fault that this has happened. We’ll do our best to get to you as soon as possible.”

After he said this, the fighter moved closer and closer to the surface. But the fuel was empty and the light was flashing red to signal the ejection procedure. Without a choice, I pressed the button and the hatch opened sending the seat with me in it; towards a suicidal ejection into the upper stratosphere where the oxygen level and air pressure were both extremely low. I unbuckled myself from the seat with nothing but a parachute bag already attached to my ejection suit. I separated from the seat and sent away from it. All this time I felt every part of my body depressurizing. It felt like your entire body was swelling up and bulging with red. The skin turned red because of the blood trying to pop out of your skin. It felt like a

dream, but the pain was as real as it was the first time. After about five minutes, I felt the pain slowly decreasing. And then, I passed out.

I was now asleep, when I was asleep.

I woke up in my dream still in free fall like I did two years ago. I needed to pull my Shute. I was not too far from the ground. But no matter how much I yelled for myself to pull it, I didn't. I then remembered that I was too terrified to pull it. But eventually I did. No one knows how it feels to be falling that fast and has no idea of how it is terrifying. It feels like you were shot out of a gun towards the planet. And activating the parachute was like feeling all the weight in my body suddenly rush to my feet. It hurt. But then I felt like I was floating slowly down to the ground. But it wasn't the actual ground that I was falling to. It was the Majiirian Sea; the ocean surrounding the southern regions from the Great Desert. But as I remembered, I fell to a tropical island and not to the deadly sharks of the Sea. And sure enough, it was there. The tropical island was there. I was falling to it. But when I hit the ground, I realized I wasn't actually going as slow as I thought. I hit a rock and sprained my ankle. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time, but when I remembered far back, I needed to wait a week for it to heal before I could swim to the green shoreline that I could just barely see in the distance.

The days and nights passed by; I was dreaming the entire event. But it happened before. And I used the Agriisak before. I knew when I woke, that it would be the same time as when I fell asleep. But the effects of time were real. I felt each day pass as it was a real day. And I scavenged for food and all the things you had to do when stranded on a deserted island. But I still could not physically control my body. It was frustrating. And I never knew when it was going to end. I could replay the entire two years up to now or I could wake up in a second. I honestly didn't mind the first option. I would see my friends and family before they were going to die by the Taiidan. But it eventually came to an end. It was after I swam across the Sea. I knocked on my foster parent's door and my sister answered.

"Elmer?" and then I woke up.

It was then all gone. I was sitting in the field with the Agriisak root in my hand. But I threw it to the ground just in case I had to go through it again. It felt like a whole week I had been gone, when in reality it was only just less than a second. That was the meaning of 'Agriisak' in old Kushan. The literal transition I am not familiar with but it means just what I went through. This vegetable is illegal in most markets and is even sometimes illegal to grow. But we are taking it with us to Hiigara so its important effect is not lost for eternity. But the thing is; the effect does not happen to everyone. For some reason, it only does this when someone is thinking about the past or wondering what happened that they didn't want but couldn't stop. It had nothing to do with me visiting my family for the first time in two years.

It was different. It lured people into eating it for the sweetness but then it might find you dwelling on the past and makes you repeat the events you are thinking of trapped inside your body from that time. So you would not want to think about it again. It was a mysterious thing. I never understood it very well. But then I decided to walk to the house again. I wanted to see everyone so what the hell am I doing out here?

I went inside to find Ellen playing with her dolls so I walked up to her and kneeled down to her height.

"What are you doing?" I asked to try and make her speak.

"Playing. Rosie is going to school and she has friends there. She's riding the school bus right now." I realized she was five now and should be attending school. But this is a time of war now. She couldn't go to school.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked like adults do when they're talking to a little kid.

“You are that Elmer guy that Jenny’s always talking about aren’t you?” I was surprised. Not by her answer, well yeah I was surprised she knew my name, but her grammar is excellent for a five year old.

“Actually I’m your older brother. You wouldn’t remember me though. I left to live somewhere else before you were born. And the last time I was here you were probably too little to remember.” All she did was smile. I smiled back and got up to go to the kitchen.

When I turned the corner, I saw Jen sitting at the table and Lisa was finishing that salad she had started. There were Agriisaks chopped up with lettuce and a dozen other things. The Agriisak’s effect only work when they are fresh from the soil. If they are cut, peeled and boiled, they lose their hypnotic effect. That is until you go to sleep at night. It gives you dreams. Dreams you remember in crystal clear detail the next morning.

“Looks yummy.” I said reaching my hand in to grab some. But Lisa quickly smacked my hand to tell me not to touch. I stood there with a grin on my face. She would usually throw in some Diiraan Crab meat to add a seafood flavour. But no foreign meat was allowed on the Mothership. They were worried about contaminating the cycle of life on Hiigara. However, all the vegetation was allowed to be grown.

“Why did you choose now to return here?” Jen asked in an angry tone.

“I thought you said she missed me.” I whispered to Lisa. But all she did; was give her *you’ll see* smile. “Well, I don’t know, because I felt like it. My blood father just died recently you know? So before you think you’re in emotional pain, think about other’s first.” I think I was getting through to her. Her tears had stopped so that was a good sign.

“What? Markus died! How tragic...how tragic...” Lisa said trailing off in thought. “You must be feeling absolutely horrible.” She said to comfort me. But the honest truth was that I had almost gotten over the pain of losing him. The only thing troubling me now is that if I need help, or if I need advice only the wise Markus can give, I was on my own. No one was here to help me when I needed it the most. Sure the Dane-Paktu family was here, but these farmers didn’t have the answers to my great problems. Marcus always did.

“I guess that means you’ll be visiting more often?” Jen said. But I didn’t bother to answer her selfish question. She had changed so much since when we were growing up together. She was always selfless and looked at things from the perspective of others. Now she just wants her life to be good ignoring everyone else’s. But I wasn’t completely sure yet. I had not yet gotten through to her. All it would take is time. It was only six thirty after all. I still love the idea of having a watch to know the time. It really helps.

“No. This only means I have no one else to go to. I just want you to know that I’m not back. I’m far from it. I’ll only be back after all the Taiidan are dead. Every last one of them.” After thinking about it, I had an uncontrollable anger against them now.

I looked back at the two of them and they were stunned. They didn’t know how to reply to this. And this is why I cannot rely on them. They were simple farmers and did not know how to deal with uncontrollable anger of revenge. They knew not the meaning of war. I could not look to them for advice if they knew less about the subject than I myself did.

It was now past noon, and I helped out on the farm all afternoon. My dad, my step-dad sorry for the confusion, came home and he came out to give me a hand. He hadn’t said a word. He acted like I have been doing this every day with him for the past two years. I wondered what was

on his mind. Maybe the others told him about what I had said earlier. Or maybe he was just glad to see me. Either way, I helped him do all the watering and uproot all the vegetables that were done growing. Like the Gyenn Potato, the Cereib Grass and even the Agriisak. The Gyenn was a tiny root that tastes very bland. It needs seasoning to taste like anything; which is probably the reason for the Cereib; a very spicy red grass that tastes like the spicy Tuuang Peppers of the South Pole where it grows in fields that stretch out far beyond the horizon. I had mistaken some peppers similar in size, shape and colour, but it was extremely sour and bitter. I was hoping for a yummy spicy quabbit stew cooked on a fire, instead it was sour and tasted like mould.

I went home near seven because I decided to stay for super. It was the Agriisak salad with some tofu roast. I usually don't like vegan-style meals, but there was no meat on the Mothership but the Kushan crew, and I'm not a cannibal. But it tasted good with all the spices. That's what they grow. That's what these nice farmers always grew; spices, seasonings and a few small vegetables that could be sun dried and made into other stuff that tastes good when it is all mixed together. Spices sell even more than the vegetables do. Everyone likes spices and that's the reason. They will buy some food, but they will also buy half a dozen spices to put with it. And the reason for the Agriisak is that it is a family tradition to keep these important vegetables in existence. In fact, all the wild Agriisak had gone extinct. These were probably the last ones left. One of the main reasons there are lots of them growing here.

At the end of the day, I went home to find out the couch and the television had all been delivered and placed in my room; but by the time I got to lie down, I was already gone. I was exhausted from the day. And tomorrow was another adventure. I'm not waking up early to avoid Isel.

And before I knew it, I was asleep. But this time I was dreaming due to the effects of the boiled Agriisak in the salad. I don't know exactly what was going on. I was hovering above a blue and green planet.

Hiigara was the word that came to mind. It was beautiful. The green areas with the yellow and orange lights of cities on the night side; the blue sparkle of the oceans, the bright blue atmosphere, the yellow blinding light of its sun; and the object in orbit was a sphere. This must be the legendary homeworld only spoken of in the oldest of Gaalsien scripts. The other object must be the Angelmoon; the moon of Hiigara. All this is written on the Guidestone in detail. I turned to face other space expecting to find something more. And I did, but not what I was looking for. I found a battle going on nearby. I couldn't see very clearly. There were two sides. There was a grey side that's markings looked identical to ours. This must be our side, and the other was hard to see. It had black paint on the ships to make it blend in with space. I then realized where I was.

I was in the final battle of our people. The battle of Hiigara as I named it, I don't know if what I saw was real, but it was the closest thing to it. I didn't know which side was winning; but it didn't matter. Ships were exploding on every side. This meant we had a chance. And it didn't matter if we win or lose, we reached Hiigara, and that's all that mattered. I then heard a very loud explosion. I looked but it was no ship. Just then, I woke up.

The dream was weird. Its meaning was confusing. But then it came to me. I would be the one to bring them to their knees. I had to. Or all was lost. No other Kushan could do it. The age of war had ended after the three hundred years of the Hersey Wars. We were not yet ready to take on another. We were peaceful in general. Sure there were the Sobani, but we are the only tribe of the Kiithid that has the strength and the will to fight. Every resistance needs a leader. I could be

that leader. I could now see my calling. It was clear to me. This would be how I rise to glory. This is the war I would fight for. I needed to. Or we would all die and the Kushan race would become extinct. How's that for pressure?

Chapter Nine

The Dream

I walked out the door of my room and saw an officer standing in the middle of the hall.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“There’s been an explosion nearby. We don’t know if it was an accident or not. We suspect another could go off any minute. It’s better if you just leave.” I wasn’t about to argue.

That must have been the explosion I heard. I thought. I then saw Isel walk outside to see what was happening with all the officers. She came up to me and asked.

“It was an explosion of some sort. That’s all I know. But I had an odd dream last night. Let’s head for the observatory to talk about it.”

“Sure,” she replied. We started walking away from the scene like it never happened. As we arrived somewhere in the middle of the Mothership, Isel stopped walking.

“So why did you ditch me yesterday?” she asked. I turned to face her and replied.

“I went to see the old family. Nothing more.” She kept walking. At least she was moving now. It takes a good ten minutes to get to the observatory. I wasn’t going to tell her she was getting on my nerves. I didn’t know if she would rip my head off. So just to be safe, I didn’t tell her.

“Are you okay? You’ve been avoiding me for the past few days.”

“No, nothing’s wrong, I just need a little more time to myself that’s all.”

“Oh.” She replied. We didn’t talk the rest of the way there. The ten minutes passed in silence. Neither of us said a word. I was wondering if I should end our relationship before it got ugly. But if I did that without a reason she agreed with, my face would be the only thing ugly around here. I needed to find a way. Or it might be too late and I would be stuck with her for years. And I don’t want to be stuck with all the shopping and the constant nagging. It’s easier to end it early. But with her that could be a problem. I have bigger problems on my mind at the moment. So I should focus harder on those events from my dream.

We got to the observatory and I had explained the dream to her; every last part of it. I described Hiigara, the Angelmoon, the sun of Hiigara and even the battle going on and the two sides. One was ours and one must have been the Taiidan.

“Really?! How could you see all that so clearly? My dreams are all fuzzy.” She said.

“It’s a root that my family grows. It’s called the Agriisak.” And then I explained what it does and what happens when it’s boiled.

“That’s an interesting thing. I should try it.”

“No, you don’t. Believe me. It’s not always a good dream.” That red root gave me nightmares every day. But after a while I got used to them and overcame all my fears. But at first it was terrifying.

“So witch side was winning?” She asked.

“I don’t know. It was too far away to tell. But I could tell that ships on both sides were blowing up. So it means we have a chance.”

“Not exactly, we don’t even know if any of this will happen. It was just a dream.”

“But Hiigara looked as real as you are now. And besides; my family has a history of foreseeing things. Soban the Red foresaw the beginning of the Hersey Wars and moved the entire population out of Ferrin Sha before the Siidim came in and destroyed it. He warned the Manaani clan that the Siidim would try and slaughter them because of their religious beliefs. Half of them listened and left the city before the ceremony before the attack. My great grandmother foresaw the discovery of the Khar-Toba. And my father foresaw the location of the Gaalsien resistance. All this to say that maybe I am foreseeing our arrival at Hiigara.”

“Do you know how unlikely that is?”

“Yes, actually, I do. But what if it was.” She had no answer. I could not know for certain if it was what I thought it was or if it was simply a dream. But I knew what I saw. And it was my choice if I was to see it again. And at that moment, I heard something.

“I think someone’s watching us.” Isel whispered to me. I thought the same. “I think I’m just gonna leave. I’ll look up possibilities of what you were talking about being true.” She walked out of the observatory. I had been in here many times. I discovered that Karan can hear me in here and I can ask her to put a picture on the big screen / window that was stretching the length of the room.

“Karan, can I see the map please. The one with our coordinates.” And just then, the screen flashed on with a galactic map and our distance from the core. It showed the Kharak system. But it was now very far away. We still had about a week until we exit hyperspace. I then heard the sound of a metal cylinder fall to the floor in a bang. “Come on out. I know you’re there.” And then he did. I looked back and saw not who I was expecting. It was Eric Gaalsien. “What are you doing here? Why are you spying on me?”

“I-I needed to be alone. You were here so I was waiting for you to leave.”

“Well, I’m staying here for a while. So you can either join me or you can leave.” He took a few moments to decide. He walked up to the railing and stared at the screen.

“That’s where it is?” he asked.

“Yeah. I hope.” He didn’t like me much, but I think we found common ground. We both wanted to arrive at Hiigara. “Why do you dislike me? The real reason.”

“There are several.” He said. I didn’t know that; maybe there was more to this guy than I thought I knew.

“Explain them then.” I said. I wanted to know. Maybe then we could understand each other better. Maybe then he won’t hate me so much.

“For one, your father killed my family; you take fame in what your father did and think like he was a hero. He was a murderer. And two, you think you’re better than any of us; and not just the Gaalsien. But us pilots. You think you’re our superior. You act like you are more important than us.” I have noticed I take a little too much pride in what I do. But that’s no reason to hate me is it? Maybe I should stop being good at what I do. I don’t know how to stop that. “And you wish to be as great as your father. In my eyes he was nothing close to great. He was a bloodthirsty murderer to me. And-”

“My father was a great man. Your family pulled terrorist attacks on the Mothership construction and threatened our extinction. You should look at our side of the story first. And I only want to become well known like my father is so I do not have to deal with people calling me the

son of a hero. Maybe I want to be known as me and not my father's son. I already told you this. Why won't you just understand me?"

"The only reason my family did what they did is to stop you from making the greatest sin of all; defying Sajuuk. He placed us on this world for the sins of our past and you are leaving it like it is nothing. Sajuuk will punish us for this. That is why they did what they did."

"Maybe not all of us believe that. You may believe that, but we have different faith in our god Sajuuk. We believe he allowed for us to discover the Khar-Toba. We believe he will guide us home and that our punishment is at an end."

"Well, that is your faith. Mine stays with my people."

"But all your people are gone. and why are you on the Mothership?"

"Because I need to see if my people were right from the beginning and that the Siidim were wrong all along."

"They were. Hiigara exists. And I will prove it. I can't do that right now, but eventually I will. The Siidim were wrong. But there is no reason you had to try and stop us from returning to our rightful home. I am not your enemy Eric. You may see me as it, but the enemy is the Taiidan. This is war. It is no longer Siidim versus Gaalsien. It is Kushan versus Taiidan."

"I know. I just can't understand how you can act calm in situations like this. The Taiidan will kill us. That is the end of it."

"I am not acting calm. I am calm. It is war, but we have a chance. I have faith in us. All it takes is time. You'll see."

"I hope so." He turned around and headed out the observatory. Once again, I was alone. I told Karan to turn off the map and just stared into the distant space. I don't really know if I got through to Eric. But I can hope. I didn't want any hostility between us. I looked at my watch and it showed it to be only nine forty-two. I sighed in boredom and walked out of the observatory. I had nothing else to do but pass the day by. Hoping it would go by fast.

Later on that day, I went to look for John. He wasn't going to be around for much longer so I wanted to see him as much as possible. He was one of the few friends that I had left and didn't want him to feel forgotten. I found him in the frigate hangar that his ship was being built in. Except this time it was full of construction workers and robotic arms.

"John!" I yelled. He was talking to a construction worker but turned when he heard me. He ran over to see me.

"Hey, haven't seen you in a couple days." He said.

"How's work going?" I asked.

"Almost done; actually. It just needs a few more wirings done on the command level and then the hull plating needs to be put on and she's done."

"Cool. Remind me to ask you for a tour when it's done. If you ever get the time of course."

"Yeah sure. I can arrange that. I am the captain after all." We both looked up at the hundred and thirty meter long ship. It didn't have most of the hull plating on so you could see thousands of wires.

"Well, what you been doing these past few days?" I asked.

“Work, this ship takes a lot out of my day so I do nothing but it. Isel was around yesterday, she said you two are going out? Can you clarify my on this? You and Isel? Since when? I mean just a week ago you were making fun of her for being to young to be a pilot. How did this Hap-pen?” he asked.

“I honestly don’t know. She kissed me and I guess I didn’t want her to cut off my head if I said no, so here I am; looking for a way to end it before it gets to serious. But don’t tell her I said that. She might have your head to.”

“Won’t argue with that, so how are you gonna end it?”

“I don’t know, somehow without pissing her off too much.”

“Well, good luck with that. Oh did you want to see the design plans?”

“Nah. I’ll see them eventually anyway.”

“Okay, well I’ll see you around then.” I didn’t want to hold him up in his work so I just de-cided to leave. He had lots of work to do. I just returned to wandering these lonely halls. No mat-ter what was going to happen when we exit hyperspace, I was ready. I could take on any enemy. Turanic or Taiidan.

Chapter Ten

The Great Wastelands

It has been nearly a week. The fleet was moving out of hyperspace into a deep space asteroid belt to harvest resources and build up our fleet. But my mind was just thinking that there was something interesting happening for the first time in nearly a month. We were all in the frigate hangar to watch John's Matriarch he had boarded a minute ago after we said our *goodbyes* and *see you in the battle* speeches. He had just completed the final system checks on the *Ifriit-Nabaal*. The hangar was then evacuated as he was to initiate the primary engine burn. When we were all in secure areas at the left side of the hangar, the frigate-class fusion torch engines ignited with a huge bang and the support frigate lifted off and headed out the hangar door.

"The *Ifriit-Nabaal* has cleared the hangar." John said to hangar control.

"Roger that captain, the ship has cleared the hangar. Tractor beams disabled. Matriarch support frigate *Ifriit-Nabaal*, you are away. Good luck. May Sajuuk be by your side for the battle to come." Hangar control said. We could hear their conversation only because we were in the hangar. If we were out in space, we would be on a different channel than them and would only be talking to other fighters and corvettes.

"C'mon!" Isel was signalling me to go with her to our fighters. We entered the all too familiar elevator up to the fighter hangars. I hadn't painted over the yellow spot that Eric had put on it last week. I just didn't feel it to be necessary. I would repaint it later anyway. We hopped in our blade interceptors and waited for the light to turn green allowing us to launch. When it did, we raced to the end of the hangar, pulled a sharp turn down and then pulled up out the hangar door. Even after a month, I still memorized all the buttons. When outside we found our strike group and I took position as the leader. I saw that we could choose our squadron's colour. I chose the one that was left that I would have chosen anyway.

"Red Squadron signing on." I said.

"Roger that Red Leader." Someone else said over the intercom. Everyone was out now. I saw all the green dots on the sensors manager. And the resource collectors were headed to harvest resources. They were slowly followed by the resource controller. I was not too familiar with the resourcing operations, but I knew that the main crew of them were the Kiith Somtaaw. They were a famous mining Kiith. So it makes sense why they are on those ships.

We were given orders by fleet intelligence to guard the resourcing operation. My squadron with Green squad set to sphere formation around the controller. I was at the top of the refinery ship. Eventually it stopped moving and stayed immobile. I could see a Providence collector harvesting an asteroid larger than the ship itself was. The PDA made short work of it however; and then it moved on to the next. At least it was quiet over here. The Mothership was building other ships and it made a lot of noise on the intercom. Now, we are far enough away not to pick up their signals. There were three squadrons of five fighters and two corvettes here to help. There was a Mercy and a Cavalier. The silence was short lived, because now we got the single most important transmission of the hour.

“Long range sensors indicate a mothership-mass signature. It’s closing in fast.” This came from Intelligence. And as I learned back near Kharak, Intelligence never lies. I looked in every direction expecting a fleet of Taiidan or a clumsy bunch of pirates. But what we then saw was something completely new. It was a tan-coloured ship with no engines. Let me repeat that. This ship was moving in at incredible speeds, but it had absolutely no engines. There were yellow lights on the interior of its horseshoe shaped design. It was not attacking. That was the good part of all this. “Full combat alert, standby for contact.”

“Ambassador away.” The sound of Karan’s voice was a little more calming than that of Fleet Intelligence. The ambassador was the Hammer corvette model but all weapons were removed to make room for extra storage space. And it made for a peaceful approach.

“Trajectory locked in, hailing signal open on all channels.” The ambassador ship moved closer and closer to the odd alien mothership. “Entering magnetic field now.” They were now about to enter the ‘U’ shaped cut that was covered with beautiful yellow lights. “Almost there...Fleet, we’ve lost guidance and are being drawn in.” No one attacked to this. I mean, they didn’t fire any weaponry or anything. So we just watched the show. “There’s a lot of lights...uh...there seems to be some kind of activity inside, I can see.” And then he was cut off. His signal was lost. But just as we were about to switch from passive tactics, we got a transmission from the aliens themselves.

“We are the Bentusi and welcome you among space-faring cultures. The Unbound. The Outer Rim Trade Routes were established in the First Time by our ancestors. The resources you collect are of value to the Bentusi Exchange. They will serve as an acceptable medium for trade.” I just stared at the Tradeship in shock. There were *more* aliens! How many could there possibly be? This was turning out to be some sort of science fiction after all. “It has been our custom to equip trading partners with an exchange unit. It has therefore been provided to your ambassador as a gesture of good will.” and just then, the ambassador had launched from the Bentusi ship’s hangar and was moving away.

“Fleet, this is ambassador. We are clear of the Bentusi vessel, all systems green. Harbour control has released guidance and the exchange unit is secure. Receiving crews, prep the quarantine chamber.”

“Roger that, quarantine chambers standing by.” The ambassador has now safely docked with the Mothership and the erm...whatever it is they gave us is being studied.

“Bentusi trade link established.” Karan said. The Bentusi were trading us some form of *ion cannon* technology. I had no idea what it was, so I thought I’d leave that part to research division.

“Turanic Raiders, servants of the Taiidan are arriving. They must not learn of our contact. We must depart. All that moves is easily heard in the void. We will listen for you. Farewell.” And then a yellow door, much the same as the one the Mothership uses to enter hyperspace had popped into existence, and the Bentusi Tradeship entered the door and vanished. But my mind was concentrated on what they said last. The Turanic part.

I looked around but saw nothing. We waited and set to delta formation for an attack.

“There they are!” someone screamed. They were coming from the topside. My sensors manager showed eleven. Fleet Command had not yet deployed any probes. So we relied on the sensors of all other ships in the area for their location.

“We can take them.” I said. “Just focus on the primary goal; getting out of here alive.” I set to aggressive tactics to try and kill them off before they knew what hit them. These pirates were the same as the ones we met in the Kharak System all right. They were the clumsy pirates like before. They must have followed us here. But how would they know? Unless they had some form of tracking device. Or maybe they could detect the core’s power signature. However they did it, they managed to follow us. But they did. And I’ve been dying for a fight.

“Turanic Raider ships are attacking. Prepare for more hostile ships to arrive.” Sometimes I wish that Intelligence wouldn’t point out the obvious so much. But they were indeed attacking. But we were far quicker and agile for them to keep up. I fired the *Ferin Sha*’s guns and the bulky pirate fighter blew up easily. The battle appeared to be going good. We were winning at least. One of us was lost, but that was the small price to pay for the survival of millions.

“I have thirteen more on my scope.” Said Green Leader; I checked his statement but there were even more on mine, five missile corvettes.

“This isn’t going to be easy is it?” Isel said. We all headed to the battle near one of the collectors. It was badly damaged. The battle lasted a long while. My squad was trying their best to keep up with me, but there was so much going on that we eventually lost touch. I had to constantly make sharp turns here and there, try and stay out of the line of fire and keep the gunfire headed for them.

This time it wasn’t in our favour. Our numbers had been cut nearly in half. Even one of my wingmen was killed in the battle. The damaged Providence was now venting something into space. I just hoped it wasn’t the atmosphere. Then I saw a body fly out the hole and that confirmed it. We were beaten up bad. I saw all this from the resource controller as my fighter was being repaired. The Raiders still had half a dozen ships along with four reinforcement heavy corvettes joined the battle. But these ones were different. They could capture ships just like our Porters. The repairs were complete and I to off to join the others in battle.

“Isel how’s the red team doing?” I asked.

“Not good. There’s only three of us left including me and you.” This meant that I, Isel and one of the other pilots who I did not know, were the only ones left. Green squad was in worse shape however; as the leader was all that remained.

“We’re being slaughtered out here! I’m calling for reinforcements. This is Green Leader to Mothership, we need reinforcements.”

We waited a few minutes for a reply. “Roger that Green Leader, we are sending two assault frigates.” This was the voice of the strike commander. And just after that, the Turanic ships were moving towards us at full speed. There were only the four of us against about nine...ten ships.

This wasn’t looking too good. Green leader and myself were rank eight which made us extremely good pilots, Isel was rank six but I knew she could handle this, and the other pilot in my team was but a rank four.

“Let’s set an X formation and set to evasive.” I suggested. They listened seeing that there were no other options. We sped forward trying not to get hit by the gunfire from the pirates who were bloodthirsty, crazy, hate filled, and probably a little drunk. Luckily none of us got hit. But we managed to take out one of their junky fighters each. I just remembered the most important thing I learned from these guys. They were slower than us.

“Break up in opposite directions and turn around. Repeat what we just did. Our only advantage is speed. Let’s keep it that way.” I said. Our fighters then flew off in opposing directions and turned around facing the group of Raiders. I felt like an insane moron flying into the grouping of ships firing at me with all force. The Thief heavy corvettes had left to attempt to capture the damaged Providence that was just lying there like a derelict. I realized I could not help them so I just concentrated on the battle. Lucky for us it was just their interceptors and no missile corvettes. If we had to go up against them, I don’t know what would happen to us.

“Pilot down!” Green Leader had announced that the last one of my wingmen from my squadron had been lost. There were now three of us; on our third run with still five Raider ships. Randomly at some point an additional one would come into play and we would make short work of it. But then on our fifth run.

“Ah I’m hit!” I yelled. I felt the rear hull smash open. I had no idea how bad the damage was because my rear view camera was destroyed with the hit. I came to do the turn but my ship wouldn’t move fast. I switched to aggressive tactics to see if that would make a difference. But it didn’t.

“I can see the damage. Y-You’re not gonna like this Mark. The engines have a big tear right through them. There’s fuel leaking out. You need repairs now! And I mean now!” she was right. My fuel was leaking fast. There was nothing more I could do. But I was not about to leave these two alone with five, make that four, Turanic fighters. The space pirates had finally caught on to our plan and were trailing them. They couldn’t do much. But like before on the Hammer, these guys took their shots carefully. The engines were completely destroyed. I could maybe move another thirty meters. Then I was done. The fuel would be gone. I had to make a choice. Rush over to the battle with the fuel I had left and save my friends, or save myself and repair my fighter then come back after my friends were defeated, and by that I mean dead. Well, I sure wasn’t going to let that happen. I pushed forward on the speed throttle and headed to the battle not knowing if I would blow up first or if I would save the day. But halfway there, my fighter stalled.

“No, no, no, no! Don’t die on me baby!” a few sparks set off and the power shut off. I hit the dash board with a powerful punch and it turned back on.

“Thanks, I’ll fix you up later for this.” I was talking to my ship and thanking it for not blowing up in my face. I usually don’t go out in uniform so I had no ejection possibility. I flew as close as I could to the battle before the fuel was empty. I then used the backup propulsion jets to turn where I wanted.

“Mark what are you doing? Get out of here!”

“I can’t do that now. Fly closer to me. I’ll take ‘em out.”

“Are you sure?” she asked in disbelief of my abilities. I Took aim at the fast approaching targets and opened fire. One blew up and then the other.

“Told ya! Now go help Green Leader out. I’m calling for a Mercy for repairs.” She sped off towards the Blade interceptor that was flying around looking like an idiot running away from the state-of-the-art junkyard ship 2.0.

“I’m Coming!” I heard Karu’s voice over the intercom. He was headed over with his Mercy repair corvette to assist my demands. It was a hard docking procedure because he had to dock with me. I couldn’t do anything. But it worked after a minute of two.

“I gotta tell ya. This is the worst damage I’ve ever seen on a ship. One more inch down the hull and it would have pierced the power plant and well...Boom! Well, at least that didn’t happen. Isel might have cried that her boyfriend is dead.” He said almost laughing.

“Shut up Karu.” She said. I guess she can hear us. The Turanic ships were all gone and the two Blades were headed to dock with the Mothership after a long battle.

“Well, I sort of fixed it. You should at least be able to make it back to the Mothership. But after that I’m not too sure.”

“That’s all right. We’ll look at it together later.”

“Sure thing. Hey I’m getting something on my scanner. It looks like...more ships!” I checked my sensors manager after I launched and there were several other Turanic corvettes headed our way.

“Don’t worry; we’ll handle ‘em.” A frigate captain said. I saw two yellow and red Kudaark assault frigates. The ships we captured at Kharak. They were recognizable as ours by the Kushan insignia on both sides painted over the Taiidan imperial symbol. The white stood out against the red but not so much against the yellow from far away. But I knew these were ours because there are no Taiidan here. At least I don’t think there are. At least I hope there aren’t. “You all just go dock with the Mothership and let the big guns deal with these pirates. He was treating us like kids, but hell I wasn’t going to argue. I was now off duty. All I wanted to do is get out of this ship before it fell apart with me in it. The Mothership grew larger in the view from my small fighter. And this was a good thing. I was nearly within the safety of the Mothership’s reinforced hull.

There was still one question on my mind though. Where were all the combat corvettes and the rest of the fighters? Why did they leave us there alone in a near hopeless battle? I guess they were just surprised or scared. But still; why would they do that? I needed answers. And I was going to get them.

Chapter Eleven

The Rancor

“There are several Turanic Raider capital ships emerging from hyperspace around the Mothership.” I was in the Fighter hangar closest to the door. I parked here in case the ship didn’t make it up to the main bay. I paid no mind to the announcement by Intelligence. The ships out there could deal with them. I did look at the television on one of the far walls. It was some sort of ion frigate with two triangular solar panel-like things on each side. I didn’t know what for, but who cares; they’re pirates.

I did not know why the other pilots did not help us. However after we deal with these Turanic scumbags, I was going to find out. It doesn’t seem like a big deal because we’ve been in a swarm of pirates before and in greater numbers. But that was different. They were pushovers compared to the one’s we were fighting. They actually had tactics and manoeuvres. Not randomly smashing into or firing at whatever ship they pleased. I guessed the Taiidan ordered them to stop fooling around with us and destroy us before we became a threat. And if so, that meant they feared us. Not much; but slightly. That meant we *did* have a chance after all.

The hangar was empty with no one but me inside. I looked at the temporarily repaired damage and sighed. It was so much work. But I had to fix it. I decided that was a job for another day.

“We have located the Raider carrier.” I looked at the screen at the far right of the hangar and headed to get a closer view. Lucky there were electric platforms built into the hangar floor for fast transportation to the fighters. This system was installed on three fighter hangars and two corvette hangars only. There was a reporter on the screen.

“This is live footage from the probe launched not too long ago to seek out the Turanic carrier.” The screen showed a video with a big carrier ship with a red glowing hangar at the rear end above the engines. “The image is fuzzy and blurred; but it shows a good view of the never-before-seen Turanic *Rancor* Attack Carrier as Fleet Command has named it; guarded by two Ion Array frigates. The ship is so big; it won’t fit in the Mothership’s Capital hangar. We have already captured five of the Turanic ion frigates and are taking hostages to the prison levels to await interrogations. We have also discovered they breathe oxygen like us, but they are used to a liquid environment. We now go live to Graal Manaan for further details.” The screen showed another man with one of the pirate ships behind him.

“Thanks Lynn, the ship you see behind me is the sixth of the eight Dagger-class Ion Array frigates that we are attempting to capture. Of course we can only do two at a time because of the lack of hangar space. They are opening a hatch on the ship now.” The camera zoomed in to a couple of officers cutting a hole in the metal with a cutting torch. As they neared completion, some form of either dark blue or purple liquid came pouring out of the ships drenching the officers and flooding the hangar floor. Then came some odd white-skinned, and I don’t mean the white-skins that live in Tiir, no I mean they had bleached white skin. And they were tall; about seven or eight feet tall. Their eyes were red or green. They came rushing out in large groups car-

rying some form of gun and a sword. Some even wore eye patches. It was just hilarious to watch. They would either be shot dead or be unarmed and taken prisoner. These guys were the perfect stereotypical pirate from the southern legends of times before the Hersey Wars when a clan of rogue Kushans rode wooden boats with cannons on the sides and would devastate harbours taking Paktu trade freighters by force and leave without a trace. I almost cracked up laughing at the sight of this. It was almost unbelievable. But each frigate only carried about a hundred to two hundred crew members. They were easy to fight off. And then a couple marines went in to scout out for an entrance of some sort; an actual entrance and not a cut in the hull. The Raiders didn't seem to be going quietly. They were yelling and speaking in some alien language we did not understand. They were then thrown a bomb of sleeping gas. After that they were quiet. I saw a large part of the frigate open up and descend to the hangar floor still covered with the liquid oxygen. The marines had found an entrance and a hundred Kushan crew were walking up the ramp into the ship. We couldn't do much with these ships until one of the hostages translated their strange language to us. The main controls were similar to those of our ships; but labelled differently; in the meantime the officers from earlier had patched up their hole and moved on to another ship that had just entered the hangar.

The first news reporter was then back on screen. "Thanks Graal for that amusing footage." She must have been laughing also. "We have just received word that the last of the ion frigates had been neutralized by the Porters. The Mothership has suffered damage, but nothing that can't be repaired. The *Rancor* is on its way alone; to try and take on our fleet. Will these pirates stop at nothing? We have just received word that the Capital Hangar's door has been removed from magnetic attachment to allow the *Rancor* to be partially docked with the Mothership for boarding. We have also received information that the liquid oxygen from the last ship will be sucked into a folding chamber originally meant for fighter fuel; but seeing as the Scaffold was destroyed before we could finish the construction, the tank is free for a large amount of this precious element in any form. It will be filtered then added to the ventilation systems of the Mothership." There was a point there. With every ship that left the Mothership, it used a portion of its air supply to give the other ship some air for its crew. We were already running low on the oxygen in storage cylinders. I got bored of the news report until they mentioned my name.

"In other news today, Mark Soban, Isel Manaan and Jeroll Siidim were combating several elite Turanic fighters alone. Their squadrons were wiped out, but Jeroll had this to say: 'It was not our fault our comrades were killed during battle; if we could have had some help out there we could have saved them.' we asked other pilots why they stood by and watched; they replied that they were scared to go in alone and that no one else would go with them. These three pilots will be awarded tomorrow for what they did. And just a heads up for the others, the General is furious. So if I were you, I wouldn't try saying anything to him. This has been the three-o'clock news report. Tune in later to view-" I turned the television off and headed to the Capital hangar to watch the show.

"This guy just can't stay out of the spotlight can he?" Eric was in his bunker watching the television. He wanted to be there but he had other things he was being told to do at the time. He

thought he could have been the hero to save the day. Instead he has getting the fuel ready on the Mothership for those who needed it. He detested feeling useless but it was all he could do. After seven years of training he was given the rank-eight honour to him but almost never lived up to its standard. He was threatened a demotion several times. He detested that this Mark Soban guy could come along, do work for four years and then become rank eight and people would look to him as if he is doing a good job. He wants to be recognized to. But he was a Gaalsien and was disrespected in many ways. He just wants to show people he is not like the rest of his clan. But they didn't listen to him because they thought he did not matter. But after that one day in the observatory with Mark, he was rethinking his statements about the pilot he detested so much. He was starting to think he was wrong and that Mark isn't a bad guy. He just wants to be recognized as himself and not the offspring of the famous Markus Soban. Mark's father; whom he respected so greatly. He ended the feud between them and stopped disturbing his peace. But still he wanted to be treated as his equal. Eric was a year older than Mark, yet the later treated him as if he was giving a lecture to a kid.

Eric decided to head over to the Capital hangar where the *Rancor* was being docked. He got a pass allowing him to stay on the ship to get away from most of the people who were treating him badly. He thought it was a better idea to be on a ship with less people so he could be known by more than a handful. His ship was in the A hangar and would need to fly over to the carrier and leave everything behind that could not fit in an interceptors cargo hold. He didn't mind however, seeing as he did not own many possessions.

He walked out his front door with a suitcase saying goodbye to everything in the room for good. He walked to the fighter hangar first to put his suitcase into the cargo hold. As he walked by, people would call him things like *Gaalsien scum* or a *Disgrace*. He kept his distance from people like them. He bumped into Isel on the way to the fighter hangar.

"Oh sorry." She said in a calm tone. He was surprised because she already knew who he was and that he disliked Mark. But she didn't seem to care.

"No, it's my fault. I shouldn't be going so fast." He said taking the blame for no reason. She gave him a quick smile and turned to walk away but noticed his suitcase.

"So where are you headed?" she asked.

"To my fighter. Don't tell Mark. But I'm leaving the Mothership to go live on the *Rancor*. It could be much more peaceful there. Less people to hate me." He turned to continue with his journey when she stopped him.

"He just wants to be friends you know? But I'm not going to stop you. It's your choice not mine. And besides; I'm not sure we'll be seeing each other very often anymore. He's been avoiding me a lot. I think it's over between us." Eric had no comment on this because it was of no concern to him.

The two parted ways and headed to their destinations.

The *Rancor's* large front end was dragged into the hangar and a plank extended from the hangar wall somewhere and acted as a bridge for the officers and marines headed for the Turanic ship. Also, there were several dozen pipes that were left afloat in zero-gravity. It was an interest-

ing way to generate gravity that we used. The floors had a type of energy field that kept someone on the floor. But this didn't work both ways. So if someone tried to step on the roof it wouldn't work. Another cool fact is that if you were to jump off the observatory platform you would only fall maybe a few feet and then you'd be floating there until someone came to help you.

The pipes floated to the carrier and hit the side. There was a buzzing noise for a few seconds. There was a magnetic field that activated and the tubes started to drill holes into the side of the hull. You couldn't see this of course. It was on the inside of the tube. I just read about it. Whatever fell into these tubes didn't matter because it was to head to a filtration plant first with a modified PDA that would suck any material that was not oxygen out and process it into Resource Units for the fleet to use. The crews waited for the signal that the water—oxygen—was below their entrance level. The tubes were mainly on the bottom of the ship to drain it out using gravity that was probably generated in the ship to keep the liquid stable to work in. This was seen on the Dagger frigates to do the same effect. But no one has ever seen the inside of the *Rancor* but the Turanic Raiders.

Knowing how they lived suddenly made sense as to why their fighters were so bulky. They had to contain enough liquid oxygen to last however long the battle would be.

The signal was given and the officers with their metal cutters started to shred up a huge hole the length of the bridge. They removed the piece of metal and tossed it down the hangar into some type of scrap pile magnetically attached to the hangar not to fly out into space. The pirates then came rushing out the ship as expected. But unlike before, these ones were better armed. Yes there were a few of them with eye patches, but their fighting tactics were more skilled. They had newer looking guns, fewer of them used swords, and they had mobile cannons that shot out some form of blue plasma. There were hundreds of reinforcements on each side. I was watching from a safe distance from a window that showed the battle in a bird's eye view.

Unlike the frigate captures, this one looked hard. The Raiders wouldn't stop. Each time one got killed, another one would come out the ship and join the battle. It seemed like it was never to stop. It had been twenty minutes of watching them battle. I would help but I'm only a good pilot. Not many of our soldiers were killed. But how many of them could there be? We didn't know as we never seen any ship like this. This entire journey was best guess.

I looked down at a lower level and saw Eric Somtaaw sitting with his feet hanging into the open hangar watching the fight that was nearing its end. I thought I should go over and talk to him. So I did. I headed out from where I was and headed over to him.

Eric was sitting watching the ending of the Turanic Raider's battle against the Kushan marines. It was a long battle that he watched for about thirty minutes. Then he heard Mark walk in behind him.

"Hi there." Mark said. Eric was only thinking about what to say. His plan was to watch it until the crew was to board. And then leave to his fighter and permanently leave the Mothership; without the need to say farewell to Mark Soban. But that wasn't going to happen now.

"Hi. I'm going to need to tell you now. I'm leaving the Mothership fleet. I got a pass to be on the *Rancor* so I can be away from everyone."

“I understand. I don’t know how you feel about everyone hating you, but I can understand you wanting to be alone. Just know that I don’t hate you. I respect you. But if leaving is what you want, I won’t stop you. I hope you find the respect you seek on the *Rancor* as I have found mine on the *Mothership*. I hope we meet again Eric.” He said. Eric just stayed silent as Mark left the area. He knew in his mind that they would see each other again someday, either on the battlefield or on one of the two largest ships in the Mothership Fleet.

Eric was headed to his fighter, the *Saju-Ka*, as the marines finished off the Raider defences. The pilot had nothing else to do on this colony ship but leave. His fighter was nothing special. It was a standard Blade Mk.5 interceptor with the grey-white colour scheme. It was not upgraded or customized in any way. Well, aside the pictures taped on the walls. Eric didn’t get the time to do any work on his ship yet. But he would have plenty of time on the *Rancor*. The light was green on the control panel and he was able to take off out the hangar.

Chapter Twelve

A New Journey Begins

I woke up in my bed like usual this morning. But then realized it was the first time I slept outside of hyperspace in a month. Time seemed to pass by faster in hyperspace. I felt well awake and full of energy for the first time in a month. The reason for this is that the resource vein in this area was so dense. It took all night—or day depending on which it is—to harvest the resources. I was watching the news earlier and it said that we built a total of 15 frigates, enough fighters for eight squadrons and some Hammer heavy corvettes.

I was asked to be on the Alpha or leading squadron in the battle against the Taiidan. We were now ready for the fight in ship numbers, but were we ready in strength and will? The meeting I was on my way to was to congratulate me for my bravery and I was to give a speech on what I thought of my fellow pilots who were too afraid to help. I needed to help them beat their fear of the enemies so we can win the battle. It wasn't going to be easy but if I didn't, we would lose against the Taiidan and vanish from existence. So I needed to make it good.

I entered the hangar filled with pilots and corvette crews and other people who were attending the meeting. Isel, Jeroll and I were in a group walking up to the stage. I could feel people staring at my black eye and other various bruises. I broke up with Isel yesterday night after the *Rancor* was launched. She didn't take it too well. She wasn't talking to me now. I did deserve it. But I did find a reason. Our personal relationships cannot come between our duties as pilots. And her being in my squadron was not helping that. It was a reason I believed and not something I made up. But I was still feeling bad about doing it. At least for now I could concentrate on other things. Like what I was going to say in front of these people. We decided that I would go last because mine would be longer than theirs. But I had no speech planned. It usually just comes to me on the spot.

Isel went first to get her award. It was some sort of medal. She stepped over to the microphone and started giving her short speech.

"I am grateful to receive this award, but why none of you fought with us is what I want to know. I'm just glad that Mark and Jeroll were there to help." She stepped off the stage and gave me a smile. The first I've seen in a while from her. I guess she understood the reason I found for breaking up with her. It's better not to let our personal lives get in the way of our duties. She did not say anything, but I was starting to think she was going to forgive me someday for this.

After Isel, Jeroll went up to the stand, received his medal and walked to the microphone in the same way Isel did. "As she said before, I want to know why no backup came before my comrades were killed. If you all came, the battle would have only lasted a second and no one would have gotten killed. But now it's too late." He walked over to us and it was my turn to go up.

I did, not feeling even slightly nervous. The crowd were so in shame, they couldn't even look at us. They glimpsed at me but immediately turned their faces to the floor. They were awaiting someone to yell at them. And they thought it would be me. Well, it was going to be me, just not as bad as they were probably thinking. I accepted the medal and walked to the stand.

They were now looking at me instead of the floor.

Good. I had their attention.

“The same as them, I am angry at your poor decision. We are all that remains of our people. We can’t just see lives as nothing. When your friends are under attack, you *need* to help them. Even if you don’t like them.” I saw Rob in the crowd as I said that. “It might be that you are afraid of the aliens. But the truth is we are better than they are. We have better technology. I can’t say that about the Taiidan, but if they have fear enough to send pirates to do their dirty work, they can’t be that great of a civilization. Fear is what they want of us. Fear is how they can win. We cannot let them win. If we are defeated, our entire race is lost. You need to understand. You are now more important than you ever were. This does not mean to run and hide, this means go fight for your people. So the Kushan will live on and reclaim our long lost home. We are not positive it exists, but I believe it does, and even if you do not, why not at least fight for all of us, our species, than cower in fear and die lonely. Hiigara is all we have left to believe in. Sajuuk cannot and will not stop the Taiidan. This is *our* war. Not his. Kharak is gone forever and we can never return to our peaceful life in its deserts. And why is this? Do I need to answer that? If none of the reasons before help than seek revenge on those who have committed genocide against us. It is all we can do. This is what I am doing; for my people, my friends, my home, and my father. If you do not seek war, you can leave your ranks behind and become a civilian! Because we are once again at war. If you do not fight, you can live in fear not knowing when you will die. I choose to fight for everything I know and believe. You should do the same. Beat your fear and join the fight.” They looked to be gaining faith in themselves. That was what I needed. They need something to believe. They need hope and a reason to fight. I gave them both. And now they are ready. “Are you ready?” I asked to them all. They replied in a roar of positives ranging from a simple *yeah* to a phrase of agreement. They had what they need. And I was done here.

I headed to the other two and then the general walked to the stand and thanked me for my speech. He was almost crying because he thought it was really good. He sent us off to our daily routines now that the meeting has ended.

In the elevator, we had broken the silence by saying something.

“That was an amazing speech, Mark. How did you make that up?” Isel asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I was right in my dream. Maybe I am destined to be their leader.”

“Maybe.” She replied.

“I thought it was something a great leader would say.” Jeroll said not knowing what we were talking about by *the dream*. I would rather keep it that way too. I don’t want people thinking that I’m nothing more than a teenager with hopeless dreams he can’t stop chasing after. The pilots I just helped would lose faith in themselves.

The elevator stopped to the familiar service room with the info desk and the big television monitor. Nothing ever changed here. Not even the channel! The screen always showed advertisements unless some important news was happening. And so far, nothing interesting was happening. Interesting things *did* happen, but that was yesterday.

Jeroll headed his own way and we went ours.

On the *Rancor*, Eric Gaalsien just woke up in his crew cell that had been given to him. The carrier smelled like rotten fish and smoke. He could barely stand the smell. The researchers on the ship were looking into a formula to neutralize the smell but would take time. He got on a pair of clothes he packed and headed to...somewhere else. He didn't know where to go, so he was going exploring to find the various areas of the ship. Onboard, he was given a card for his mobile map for the *Rancor* so he can find where he's going.

He got lost a couple times, but finally made his way to the front of the ship. The viewport showed the Mothership in front of it. He never saw the Mothership like this. He was not part of the fighter testing that took place above Kharak, he did not have a ship when the first battle took place against the pirates and in this recent battle; he was not able to go outside. And when he transferred to the *Rancor* yesterday, he went by the back of it facing away. So this was the first time he could actually look at the Mothership from this perfect distance. Not too far that it looks like a tiny smudge on the window and not too close to it that it takes up too much space in the window. The other ships were visible from here to. The two dozen frigates and the resourcers are there too.

They must be done the collection here. Eric thought.

Not even a minute later, the ship started making noises and he saw they were getting closer to the Mothership.

"This is Captain Refreal Sjet of the Lord-class carrier; the *Rancor* making my first announcement. We will be entering hyperspace shortly. We are moving into military parade formation so we can leave here. The Resource Collectors have exhausted every resource in the area and we are ready to leave. Sorry about the smell, we're working on it." The voice on the loudspeaker sopped and Eric though it best to head back to the main crew sections of the ship.

Just as he turned a corner, he bumped into someone.

"Ouch! Hey watch it!" it was a man about six-foot and had a scar on his face. He had very dark skin even for a Kushan. He must have been one of the many desert nomadic clans.

"Sorry I didn't see you." Eric was trying to avoid a fight with this guy. He didn't look too friendly.

"Oh you're a Gaalsien." He said. Eric was then about to run for his life not to have his face punched in.

Just as he was passing the guy, he grabbed Erik by the shirt and pulled him back.

"Relax Kid, I'm a Gaalsien to. The name's Brutus Gaalsien." Eric thought the name fit him for his appearance frightens probably everyone.

"M-My n-name is Eric Gaalsien n-nice to meet you." He could barely talk to this guy without stuttering in fear.

"I'm not gonna kill you! We are two of the only Gaalsien left. We can't be biting each other's heads off." Eric has started to rethink how he should react to this guy. Maybe they could be friends. Or maybe he can be a big bodyguard against the people who like to beat him up because of his family lineage. But either way, he knew this guy was not going to hurt him. They were in this together now. He had no idea what this guy did for a living, but they were kin. And they needed to stick together.

The *Rancor* was now in position to make the last hyperspace jump until we meet up with the Taiidan. We repaired the damages caused by the Turanic Raiders. Combat and sensors systems are returning to optimal functionality. Our first hyperdrive test leads to near-genocide. Kharak...destroyed. All of us, all that's left, hunted by two alien races. But we must focus at the matter at hand; Elimination of the fleet that destroyed our world.

“Engaging hyperdrive...”

Chapter Thirteen

What To Do with the Ferin Sha

I was with Jay and Karu in the fighter hangar where the *Ferin Sha* was sitting. Half destroyed. However we were talking about other things concerning my speech Isel was bragging about all day; and stories about our past life on Kharak. Jay and I were pretty much the same stories as we were together most of the time.

Karu was an interesting guy. He lived in Tiir climate domes witch explained his pale shin; he didn't have much of a family either, he took up corvette piloting but then decided to move up the ranks to captain. He was nineteen years old, three years older than I was, and had a lot more experience than I did. I didn't realize this before, but I was one of the youngest pilots for my rank. Even Jay was a year older than I am, and he's but a rank four. Like John, the only family he has are in cryo-sleep on the Trays. We had about another two weeks 'till we get to the region that we are detecting the Taiidan.

We all stopped and looked at the wrecked interceptor behind us. It was totally trashed. The paint was done for as it was charred black because of smoke, the hull was pierced by both large and tiny shards of debris, and even worse, the huge cut in the engines was horrifying. It was like it could never be fixed.

"Well, we better get started." Jay said. We got the scrap metal earlier and all the tools were supplied in the back of the hangar. We thought we would start by the easy part, taking out the debris shards in the hull. We each picked up a pair of metal cutting saws. It looked like it could take an hour.

John was sitting in his captain's chair thinking. The room was empty except for his secretary Fiira LiirHra. She was very quiet and this annoyed him.

"Do you ever say anything besides work?" he wanted someone he could talk to. If he had to go through this same schedule every day for the next two weeks, he was going to go insane. The space life is a boring one. There is never anything to do on a frigate class ship. There is not nearly enough space to have recreational areas so everyone just runs around the main halls to the front of the ship and back. There are no gaming areas or anything for entertainment. Already five weeks in the journey, he was beginning to imagine things. People who didn't exist would talk to him in his hear and he would see things that weren't there. He prescribed for anti-illusory pills that would keep him from going coma toast in an eternal dream. The days were long and hard. Only five weeks and he missed life on the Mothership, with his friends that he could talk to. People he knew. They were his family on the journey ahead. And now they were gone.

The crew of the *Ifriit Nabaal* were quiet and were sort of loners' with nothing to do.

“Does anyone on this ship talk to *anyone* else?” he was angry at the silence. He usually enjoys silence. But there was too much of it now and he just wanted to have a civilized conversation with someone that wasn’t related to work.

“I’m sorry sir, but we are not allowed to speak through the ranks off duty.” His secretary said.

“Who made that rule?” John asked.

“Well...you did sir. Not you personally, but the captain that told us all the rules did. The one who gave us the job.” She said lowering her head hinting she did not want to speak.

“Can I change that rule?” he asked. She was his secretary and she is the one who would know this sort of stuff. Not him. John was simply given the role as a leader to the *Ifriit Nabaal*.

“Well, yes you could sir; you are the captain after all; but only on this ship. If the *Ifriit* was to retire and we be assigned to a new captain, the rule would remain. If you chose to alter any rule that does not affect the rest of the fleet, go right ahead.” John was thinking of a few rules he wanted changed on this ship. and now he knew he had the power to do exactly that.

He pressed the interruption button on the armrest of his chair. “Attention fleet of the *Ifriit*, I hereby remove the rule disabling crew to speak between ranks. This is not a joke. I’m getting tired of the silence.”

He stood up from his chair and walked to the large front window. He stood there with a smile on his face that maybe things would become more interesting now.

Back in hangar E on the Mothership, we were almost done fixing the hull of the *Ferin Sha*. All the shards of debris were cut out and the holes were almost patched by the scrap steel that we had melted down.

While half the hull was cut off, I decided to put in a layer of high strength carbon fibre under the hull to help the hull integrity and keep the ship together if even worse damage occurs when battling the Taiidan. It would also soften the blow for the wiring inside. We had to take the hull of the ship entirely to patch up the damage anyway, why not make an upgrade while you’re at it.

We were replacing the last piece of hull plating in the front section. The carbon fibre had the unique ability to bond with itself and anything it touches. This made the steel stay together and connected itself to the other sections of carbon fibre. We put on a layer an inch thick. I had enough money for it as I was rich because my dad’s fortune is now mine. And it was so lightweight; it would only raise the weight by about three kilograms. It’s not much compared to the ship’s original weight.

When the panel was screwed back in place, we were done the front section. I was going to keep the centre plating off for a while because I planned on replacing a few pieces that broke or that could be upgraded to benefit me. I will not name the long list of parts because it would take too much time.

Jay thought we should use the two engines he found in his Porter a couple days ago, but the technology needed research first. And I didn’t want to become the lab rat. The junk shop on the

lower levels had some parts so I thought I should go check him out. Jay and Karu were taking a break until I got back.

The shop was large enough, with all sorts of metallic wirings and systems. There were several doors to the back. So there was probably a lot more.

I walked up to the front counter to a large greasy man with a beard that had white powder stuck in it. He didn't smell too good either. I had to ignore this because if I need a part, he probably has it. "Do you have any of the parts on this list?" I asked him. He put on some glasses and took the list.

"Well, I have the SV1.7 booster engines and the Blade Mk.5b engine and the EE2500 power plant in back. The ventilators for it are on display in the front. The BI5c backup batteries are over to the far right and the pistons are there as well. The other parts are in the back."

"Okay can you get them while I get the ones up here?" I asked.

"Yeah sure thing, I'll be right back with them." He walked through a door to the back of the shop. I headed to the things he said were up in the front. The shop was empty and that was probably because no one fought in the last battle. The ventilators were very large so I decided to get them first. They weighed a lot for ventilators. The stronger armour must have meant extra weight to. There were two big one and four smaller ones. I placed them all on the counter and headed to the right side of the shop for the batteries.

They would be needed to power the ship's electrical systems when the engines are not in use. The ones that were with my ship got damaged and I needed new ones. They were about a foot long and cylindrical in shape. There were plugs on every side.

The pistons for the heat regulation systems were damaged as well. These new ones were needed so I don't either fry up in there from the engine heat or freeze to death by the cold space.

The shopkeeper came out the door with a trolley with a box full of parts. The picked it up easily and placed it beside my pile.

"How much do I owe you?" I asked with my credit card in my hand.

"That'll be three thousand credits. This stuff ain't cheap kid, its state-of-the-art technology straight from research division. You asked for quite some stuff there kid, are you building a ship or something?" he asked.

"More like fixing one." I answered.

"Oh! Hell I know who you are! Here, you can get half off. Anything else I can do for the son of Markus?" there's that phrase again: The son of Markus. Well at least I got a discount. I could have paid the three thousand, but saving money is good too I guess.

"Here, have a five hundred credit tip." I transferred the credits to his tip account by clicking a button.

"Whoa! Thanks! Is there anything else I can do for ya?" he asked.

"No not really. I have enough hands working on my ship already. But thanks for offering."

I tried to pick up the box for myself but it wouldn't budge. And I've been working out half the day.

"Take the trolley kid, don't hurt yourself." He said. I went to grab the handle as he put the box on it. It moved easier and could transport everything I bought. I headed out the front end of the shop when the shopkeeper told me to come back sometime soon.

“I sure will. This will now be my first choice in all mechanical parts.” That should make him feel good about himself.

I had to drag the trolley full of parts into the public elevator as the service one I used to get here in the first place was too small. There were people looking at me with confusion. All I could do is smile and scratch the back of my head hoping they wouldn't call me an idiot. When I got to the hangar bay, now running with the trolley behind me, Jay and Karu were surprised and tried to help me stop the runaway transport with all their strength. It slowly came to a gentle stop right before we got to the *Ferin Sha*. Lucky we didn't hit it. With all it's been through, it might explode. We started to get to work on removing the parts I was replacing.

Eric was getting ready to go to the job he applied for. He applied to become a janitor to make some extra credits to spend. That and he had nothing better to do. The thrill of being in spaceship light-years from home had lost its thrill a while ago. O now it was an everyday nuisance to him. And they still didn't fix that horrid smell that he disliked.

Eric had just reached the halfway point to his janitor's closet when a gang of people turned the corner headed straight for him. He kept walking casually not to bring their attention to him.

Hey Gaalsien! Bad luck buddy, we're here to!” it was the bully that was bugging him on the Mothership.

“What are you doing here? Leave me alone!” Some of the gang members held him to a wall. Eric struggles trying to break free but he was unsuccessful. Will was the gang leader and he was getting ready to punch Eric in the stomach. He was a Siidim and disliked Eric because he was a Gaalsien.

“Stop! Why are you doing this? Ouch!” Will punched him and he fell to his knees. “Why?” was all he could say in his pain. Will's minions picked him up against the steel walls once more for another go. Will was about to swing at him when Brutus turned the corner.

“What's going on here?” Brutus asked walking over to the gang. The four minions let go of Eric and he stood up straight. He had bruises on him everywhere from the past month and a half of being picked on by these guys.

“You kids need to stop this right now! Leave him alone or I'll make you leave him alone!” the four that were holding Eric were slightly frightened by him with his huge muscular body. But Will was calm to his threat. He was tall for his age. Will was the same height as Brutus. Brutus was thirty two while Will was nineteen.

“Why stand up for this wimp? He's just a Gaalsien.” With that said, Brutus was angered by this as he was a Gaalsien as well. He swung at Will and knocked him into the wall five feet away. His minions ran away scared while Will was on the floor bleeding from the face. It knocked against the metal walls and cut his skin. He was struggling to his feet while Eric looked at him unsympathetically.

“I am a Gaalsien as well! Do not insult my family. I will not stand for this any longer. It stops here, Siidim.” Will got up and glared at Brutus. He then walked away silently.

“Thanks Brutus.” Eric was feeling sick to the stomach and had to sit down.

“What did I tell you yesterday? We need to look out for each other. We are some of the last Gaalsien left. People like him sicken me. Hurting others and insulting them for no reason. They may say they have a reason, but that reason does not apply to them or us. They were not in the Hersey wars and neither were we. They have been over for hundreds of years and they should get over it.

Eric nodded in agreement and got up. “How did you get that scar?” he asked.

“Do you really want to know?” he replied.

“Actually I do.” Eric insisted.

“I got it a long time ago. I think I was around five or six years old at the time. A group of Soban and Siidim soldiers were invading our remote city. They claimed that we had some type of super weapon developed there. Of course, we actually didn’t, but what better way to make the people hate us even more? Well, my father was shot on sight holding a double barrel rifle to one of them. I quote him literally when I say this, he said, “Get the hell out of our peaceful village you military scum! We have no such weapons you speak of. We are peaceful desert dwellers who prosper without any conflicts in our social affairs, and then you idiots show up. Will you ever leave us alone? The Hersey Wars are long at an end. We know we were right about our origins, why would we want any more than that? Leave or I’ll report this senseless invasion to the Daiamid Council.” And then the soldiers took out their newer heavy duty rapid fire machine guns on him. They said, “Subject terminated. Need there be any more inconveniences and you shall all die here. The Daiamid council does not approve of you any longer. We have their vote.” My mother ran over to my father and cried out to Sajuuk to make these demons leave. She was shot as well. One by one they killed us off as if they were playing with us. I can never forgive them for what they have done.” He leaned against the wall and continued. “Then when most of us were either dead or hiding, I was left alone by the corpses of my deceased parents. I was praying they would become alive again. I was young and did not yet know the actual meaning of death. One of the soldiers walked up to me ready to fire. I turned around crying so much it wet my dirty brown shirt. He showed no sympathy for me. I then recognized him as the one who killed my father and mother; him and three others. He was almost laughing at me in his sick mind. Instead of shooting me however, he took out a knife. I stood up fast stepping back away from him. He ran towards me with his weapon. I tripped over my parents and fell just as he whipped the knife at my face. I guess my parents saved me one last time from the villainy of the military. Because any farther and it would have killed me. And on top of that, the soldier had tripped and fallen on a broken pipe. He was still alive, barely, I took his knife, and in my anger, I stabbed him in the back piercing his lung. I then took a vow that I would kill all the soldiers that invaded my home. And don’t well anyone, but I did. I took down their names on a classified military record of the event of the Diirakus Mine, the city we lived in. I hunted them down one by one and killed all sixteen of them.”

“Were you part of the Resistance?” Eric asked. The resistance was a large group of Gaalsien and others who rejected the Daiamid’s claims to the Gaalsien fate. They battled the military in hope of one day defeating them and winning the right to be called citizens. They failed, however, but the Gaalsien were later welcomed into the public of the first class citizens. The problem was that they were still treated like garbage.

“Yes, I was. I served in it for twenty years until we were recognized as citizens. After that, I took up the only thing I was good at, weapons engineering. I now fix all the damaged weapons on this ship. I'm one of the four that work on this ship.” Brutus looked like that type of guy to seek destruction on his enemies. Eric was just glad he wasn't one of those enemies.

“Don't worry, I won't tell anyone.” He said.

“I know.”

“But how did you live? Wouldn't you die of bleeding?” Eric asked.

“I walked over to one of the mine shafts with my shirt over the cut and one of the older ladies helped stitch it back up. She adopted me after the tragedy that had just occurred.”

“Oh.” Now that Eric knew a little on this guy's back-story, he trusted him a little more. Brutus had scared off Will, his long-time bully, so he felt safe now to walk to his job.

I had just finished replacing the power plant and the backup batteries. The cooling system was finished an hour ago. Jay left a while back as he had a crew meeting with Rob and Bradley. Karu and I did the rest of the work ourselves. Although I did not know too much about this guy, I trusted him the same as any of my friends. And he was directing me when we ran into a major problem. Like that we had to move a lot of the wiring to make room for the larger power plant. He knew what he was doing so I let him lead the operation. We had been working on the ship for seven hours by my count, and I felt like I wanted a break.

“Hey Karu, let's call it quits for today. We're almost done so let's finish it tomorrow.”

“Yeah I think you're right. This is a long job so it's better we take our time not to mess it up.” We headed home for the rest of the day.

Chapter Fourteen

First World

The next day passed by and the *Ferin Sha* was slowly completed. The engine was replaced without many problems. Like the power plant, it was larger than the first one but not by much. But to do the engine replacement, the entire backside of the ship was removed. This was because the engine we were replacing took up the entire back of the ship. It was a pain to get off and the new one in. We had to make some new parts so the new engine would fit in without a problem. The engine came into place fine and we started attaching the SV1.7 booster engines. They went on fine as well. We made the new hull plating almost the same design as the original one and added an extra half inch of carbon fibre to do extra protection against direct hits to the engines.

After all the work was done, we looked at it for a second. There were patches of dark-coloured steel where we patched up the hull and the back of it looked a little uneven, but I didn't care. We made the design more aerodynamic and it looked better this way.

"All done." This time we did the paint job ourselves and to be honest, it doesn't look to bad. It was like the painters did it themselves like experienced people in that job.

"Looks super awesome!" We turned around to see Isel. She just enjoyed showing up unannounced like that.

I like it to. I guess John was right; black does go well with the red." The paint was now a dark black colour that well emphasized the crimson red stripes and the Soban Blood badge on both sides, a true work of art. It was the best looking ship I've ever seen in my years on the military base.

"It could be camouflage too because it's black like space." Karu said. True, it would do exactly that, but I just liked the look of it; like it was officially my ship. Like I now officially owned it. I felt a connection between me and the *Ferin Sha*.

"Nah the Taiidan probably have infrared. They could tell if there's an engine on it." Isel replied.

"I guess so. But it would still be difficult to shoot at."

"Okay you win"

We were leaving the hangar to let the paint dry.

John was having a drink with some of his crew members at a diner-type area. With his new rule in effect, there was suddenly more life in the ship; more conversations and more fun events. No one regretted his new rule; they actually preferred it this way. And who wouldn't? If it's too quiet, everyone would become socially unstable and more would commit suicide than reach the next destination. There were more smiles now. Only after one day did the entire mood of the ship reverse to a more positive one.

“I say John, what is the most important thing to you?” one of the group members asked. His name was Hariik Sjet, the First Lieutenant of the *Ifriit Nabaal* and one of the few people he knew on the ship.

“I would have to say it to be my family. No more like the hope that my family will one day live on Hiigara in peace. That is what I think to be the most important. To serve my duty so my loved ones can have a better life. What about you?”

“For me, it is nothing more than serving my duty for our survival. My family chose to say behind on Kharak see, and now with them gone, the most important thing to me is our survival as a species.”

“I see. So then there used to be something or someone more important to you than that?” John asked.

“Yes, my little Ricas. She was my six year old daughter. She meant the world to me. But I could not take her with me. She already had a life on Kharak and I wasn’t about to tear her away from that. She stayed with her mother. And now I wish I had taken her with me when I had the chance.”

“It’s not your fault Hariik. It’s the Taiidan you should blame. Not yourself.” John tried to cheer him up by ordering him another drink.

They sat there and talked about various things from unwanted laws to their newly made friends in the Mothership fleet.” Well I know a certain Sobani who can do pretty much anything possible with a fighter such as an interceptor; one of the surviving pilots in the red and green squadron fight of the Great Wastelands. His father was a well known war hero.”

“Oh you must be speaking of the young son of Markus. Yes, he is quite skilled for his age. But then again, look at his father, he probably taught young Mark his tricks.” Hariik said.

“He doesn’t like being referred to that name. But maybe Markus did teach him a few things. Mark still is the best pilot alive in my eyes.” They talked until they got alcohol poisoning and left the area assisted by someone who guided them to their cabins.

On The *Rancor*, Eric was just finishing up his job as a janitor by emptying trash containers. Incredibly enough, the Turanic ship already had a recycling centre similar to the Mothership’s trash Phased Disassembly Array centre. The PDA on the Mothership would break down all the matter into its original compositions and sorts them by atomic number in the resource containment designed specifically for crew usage. On the *Rancor*, it was nearly the same thing. It was essentially a PDA, but it did not break down the matter. It simply ripped the different substances apart and sorted them the same way. Instead of safely breaking down, it ripped the Carbon atoms from the Silicone and so on. Eric’s thoughts on it were that it fits their pirate-like customs. It worked just the same however, and he didn’t argue with it.

Will had not bothered him today, and he was happy about that. Brutus must have scared him off for good. The rest of the *Rancor*’s crew did not mind him being Gaalsien. They must all have their own stories and mistakes they had to carry to the grave. So he fit in there. Not because of what he did, but because of what blood he has in his veins. And the only person he could think of with the same problem was Mark Soban. He was famous and welcomed warmly in the eye of

the public for what blood ran in his veins, as Eric was rejected and hated for the blood in his veins. They were opposites who have the same problem and could not do anything about it. They are opposites that are the same as far as Eric cared.

The trash was never even half full, but it gave him something to do until he made more friends. He kept worrying about that as he was never good at making new friends.

A half hour passed and he was done with his job. He headed for his room, walking down the winding halls. There were even some weirs halls on the roof connecting to upper levels. There were few sharp corners on the ship. They were all rounded smooth. There were many odd designs for walkways on the ship. They were tall to. Probably because the Turanic Raiders are seven feet tall while the average Kushan adult is only five and a half. The rounded artistic-looking walls were most likely caused by the liquid oxygen that probably filled the area. And then it occurred to him.

Maybe the holes on the top of the halls are for swimming to another level. This made sense as there were very few elevators, maybe one or two on the whole carrier. There were stairs to lead to the other levels that the Turanic probably used when they emptied the liquid oxygen for cleaning, replacing, docking with a larger ship, or more. The reason didn't matter, it was just a good thing these pirates were thinking when they designed this ship. Eric didn't get a look at the frigates, but it was probably the same design.

One other thing that he had noticed on the *Rancor* was the colour of the walls. They were a light sandy brown colour that reminded him of when he was living in the underground habitat built within the ancient Gaalsien temple of Saju-Ka. The sunlight crept in through huge cracks in the sand covering the walls. There were lights on the very top of it as well. The entire temple was made of sandstone and was the strongest standing building on all of Kharak. Even the climate controlled bubble-dome buildings of Tiir City were not as strong. The thing had been standing before any recorded history and stored thousands of years of recorded history in its library. The Siidim tried to destroy the Temple in the Hersey Wars, but only managed to bury it under the sands of the Great Desert. The Gaalsien Remnants excavated it with the help of some Somtaaw miners that joined the Resistance. It remained their sanctuary, their home until the day they were once again citizens of the Kushan society. The place was concealed perfectly. Someone could be standing on top of it, and it wouldn't appear as if they were on a mountain. The sandstorms had built up a desert inside the valley after the Siidim had devastated the systems created for keeping the sands of the Great Desert from entering the North. The Gaalsien had dug through the tough sand to reach the Temple of Sajuuk. Eric was young at the time, but still remembers the tough journey he had to take. The miners had stolen a few hundred explosives created by the Nabaali to help the mines. But later found out using them caused the sand to break and pour in the cavern. When the convoy reached the temple, it was only half buried on the inside. They then had to start moving the sand into the tunnel that they dug for the past four years to get into the Temple. It served as protection from others hunting them in there by blocking the way they came. The convoy brought every resource needed to start a civilization. They brought soil, seeds, cattle, tools and other various things they would need. They even brought thousands of pounds of wood until they could get the trees growing. The Temple, buried under two hundred feet of sand, was cold and shielded from the intense heat of Khar-Illum. The light that came through the cracks in the ceiling was faults in the rock hard sand burying the Temple. They planted their farms under them

for photosynthetic growing. Eric remembered growing up in that place. Their elders told stories of why they had to stay in the Temple under the watchful eye of Sajuuk because of the evil men outside. The Somtaaw then found a rich vein of metals which they could mine with the tools they used to get this far. It soon turned out that it led to an ancient abandoned mine with lights and instruments that still worked. They took the old generator into the temple and turned on the power while scaling up the Temple walls to hook up the lights. Luckily the Somtaaw are usually very good in technological engineering. They set up the power supply that would be needed for the years inside the Temple of Sajuuk.

Eric remembered those days in detail. But what he didn't get about the walls of the *Rancor* was why they were not rusted from being submerged in liquid all their life. It could be a special material or a coat of anti rust paint, but he had never heard of such things as he was a desert dweller. But this is his home now, no longer the Temple of Sajuuk where he read the old books and learned new things and read about past events from centuries ago.

This was his memories of the past life, his Kharak life. The one he left behind to see if the legends he read about in the ancient story of the Khar-Halla, First World, and his favourite story. It was one of the stories passed down in legends and tales. He had found the book in the Saju-Ka library as he was seeking knowledge. It was the story of an ancient land called, Hiigara.

Chapter Fifteen

Riot, Riot, Guns a Firing

With three days left until we exit hyperspace, there were some public disturbances and people pleading we stop while we had the chance. The officers were good at their jobs when there was some hostility in the areas. At first, it hardly ever came to that. Then, there were more outcries as we approached our destination. Now just these past few weeks, there were riots in the public areas and the officers were overwhelmed. They had to awaken additional officers in the backup crew freezers. It was a level of the Mothership that was like the Cryo-Trays. There were single person pods that were hooked to the walls that housed extra crew if needed. There were ten thousand of them. They were sorted in sections on their job. There were officers, pilots, captains, engineers, repairmen, resource collector crews, and so on. Five hundred additional officers were awakened to help stop the riots. They would be used to do their job, and then put back into their pods until they are needed again. Every corner you turn, there is some fight going on about one person wanting to stop the Mothership's voyage here so we can live as a space-faring people forever. But the officers were on the other side. They knew we could defeat the Taiidan and arrive safely at Hiigara. The rioters thought differently. They were on the fearful side. They feared we would be wiped out before we knew if there even is a Hiigara. At least the pilots weren't like that. My speech changed them. It gave them hope. They believed the Taiidan could be stopped if we tried.

Isel and I walked into a food store. These were new now that the produce was done growing on the farming level that my *family* lived on. I had visited a few more times since the battle at the Great Wastelands; once with Jay, once with Jay and Isel, and once with Karu.

The small hostility there was between me and my sister was almost gone. She was able to look at me while talking and was able to smile at me again. But I knew she would never fully forgive me for leaving them like I did. Isel took a liking to Jen while Jay preferred playing with Ellen. They played together like five year olds. Jay was never as mature as his age, a year older than me and acts like four years younger. Karu told me he liked my sister a lot. Meaning he had a crush on her. I laughed at him as a joke. So did Isel when I told her. At least he didn't mind us laughing at him. Well he was pretending to laugh along to. But we knew he wasn't actually laughing. And when I brought Isel into the house, Lisa acted like all mothers do the first time you bring a girl to the house. Acting horrifyingly embarrassing and thinking she was my girlfriend instead of just a friend. I let her have her fun before I explained that she was my ex-girlfriend and not my girlfriend. Jay of course was in the other room playing with Ellen, so it seemed as if we were alone there. And every time I went there, Lisa made the Agriisak salad. We had good dreams that night; I dreamed the same dream as before. Like a repeat to remind me of my destiny.

The food store was filled with different vegetables, breads and spices. Everything but the red dream root was here as it is still illegal to buy. The only reason we are allowed to bring it with us is that we need to preserve every species of plant from Kharak. We were looking for

something to make dinner with so we don't need to take those flavourless pills again for the hundredth time.

Just as we were leaving, there was the sound of a gunshot.

“Ah!” a voice screamed. One of the officers had been shot. The riot started to grow out of control in just minutes as we were in the store. There were a few dozen officers rushing this way and a few hundred rioters running from another direction. People started to run away screaming. There were only a few of us left in the area. The shot officer was hit in the leg and was crawling towards us. It was the same one I encountered right after awakening from my dream. The explosions from that day were a group of Gaalsien terrorists. The face I thought of after that was Eric's. But I shook my head to remove that mental image. Eric was a good guy. He wouldn't do that. I wish I had more time to know the guy. We could have become friends. But my attention was immediately turned to the man with the gun in his hand.

He was pointing straight at...me! Why me? He was shaking in fear.

“Y-You bring these people hope. W-Why? This is a hopeless journey. We are going to lose. The Taiidan destroyed all of Kharak. How do you think we, a small group can stop them?” I knew he wouldn't shoot that handgun at me so I stood up straight not to let him think I'm a coward.

“Because we are stronger than all of Kharak, and not just by our highly advanced weaponry either. Our spirits are expecting a fierce battle and we have the will to fight them. They destroyed our home and we want our revenge. They should be the ones fearing us. Not the other way around. It is not the strength of the fleet or the weapons that wins a battle. It all depends on who is mentally and spiritually stronger. We want to destroy them, and we will. They want to run, hide and repair their fleet. We just need to strike first. They are not expecting any survivors. We are expecting them. Don't you get it?” he didn't change in his appearance.

“You're wrong.” I stepped forward to him but he stepped back. “You're wrong you're wrong!” I walked to him but he fired the gun. I stopped. I felt something pierce me in the chest. The man ran away into the riot crowd. I looked at my white shirt and it was red in one area. I held my hand to it and there was definitely a hole where there shouldn't be. I fell to my knees and then to my back. I could barely breathe. The last thing I remember is Isel screaming for help and guns firing by both the officers and the rioters. Then everything suddenly turned black.

John was in the main command quarters, an area of the Matriarch frigate used for communicating to different ships while in hyperspace. It was also used to make battle strategies by specialists. The second role of a Matriarch is a remote command ship for fighters and other frigates when the Mothership is farther away. It eases some stress off Fleet Command.

“In a riot you say.” John was on the phone with Isel. “Is he all right?” he asked. But Isel said he was in the hospital area. John was sitting in a chair with the video call on the main screen. “Will he live?” he asked again.

“I'm not sure. He's not looking too good. He could be in there for a couple days. I'm not sure how long exactly. He's asleep right now or I would have brought him here to talk.”

“I see. Well, everything’s fine over here, no riots; no one fears the days to come. They are actually looking forward to it. To be honest, so am I. I really hope he feels better soon. He’ll be pissed if he misses the battle of a lifetime. Give him my regards will you?”

“Sure thing.” She said.

“I’ll see you soon. We’re coming in for our resupply after the battle.”

“I hope to see you. Bye.”

“Bye.” He ended the call and left the room.

He entered the main bridge and sat in his captain’s chair.

“Are you all right captain?” Fiira said.

“No, I’m not. One of my best friends was just shot on the Mothership. I’m telling you Fiira, there are bad things happening over there; riots, rebellion, officers being shot. I don’t think were as ready as I thought.” He leaned his head on his hand rubbing his forehead.

“I’m sorry to hear that, captain. Things are all fine here.”

“I know Fiira. But Mark is the one leading their hope. If one of them will actually go as far as to shoot him, they are not ready. And if he dies, their hope will die quick and then we’re screwed.”

“Speak you of Mark Soban, sir?” Fiira asked.

“Yeah, I met him on the shuttle that brought us to the Mothership. He’s a great guy.”

“Oh.” She said silently. She knew that Mark was inspiration for the pilots as it was her job to know as much as Kushanly possible. And she feared if he died, they would indeed be *screwed*.

Eric heard of the news about Mark’s accident. Being a pilot, he was aware of it. If a squadron leader was injured, the news traveled fast to whatever ship in the fleet. He felt no pity for him personally as he did not suffer enough physical pain in his life, but he felt sad that one of the positive influences in the fleet was injured with unknown chances of a recovery.

On the lighter side to his life, the scientists have found a cure for the horrible smell that lingered the *Rancor*’s halls. It was the walls making the scent. Well, more specifically the anti-wetness layer on the walls that stopped the liquid that used to be in these halls from rusting the ship. The science division discovered a magical liquid that would dissolve this layer of un-needed substance and not damage the walls. The downside is that it would take some time to make enough of the fluid to do the entire ship. And while this procedure takes place, the chemical reaction will give off an even worse smell until the air is filtered. And that could take anywhere between four days to two weeks to do depend on the amount of air being filtered. The scientists also claim that the gas created is toxic for our lungs so they are sealing off certain areas at a time. The scientists said it was better to do lots at a time to avoid long-term problems. Eric thought of returning to the Mothership during this time. But that was the least he had on his mind. There was the approaching battle that would turn the fate of the Kushan race to a well earned victory, or utter destruction. He wanted to be part of the battle, part of the fight that would bring them home; home to the First World, Hiigara. So long had he read of this world of wonders in the book he carried with him on the journey. He made a copy and left it with the Kushan on Kharak and took the original with him.

He pulled it out of a locked drawer. It was a modern-looking book, like any you would see today. It was preserved for three hundred years in the library of Saju-Ka. And even longer before that. It was a hard covered eight hundred-paged long novel on the ancient world of Hiigara. No records ever show of this story existing in such a book like this. The Gaalsien tales of Hiigara were casted as fiction and child's tales. The book however, was as real as the journey they were on. It was the first book he had ever read as he was too young to read when they first arrived in the Temple. And it was the first book he found interesting in the library of Sajuuk. It was big and blue as opposed to the same-sized red and grey ones that he remembered so clearly. The cover showed a single word in green: *Khar-Halla*. He flipped the cover and the author's information was there. The author was named Ramedaan Gaalsien and the year published showed two dates: 8326GSY, 32KDS. The first Eric new as year thirty two Kharak Dating System, the dating system the Kushan still use today, as for the second, he wondered his whole life. His final answer to what it was is the dating system that the ancient Hiigarans used.

He turned another page and it had these few words: *In memory of our home. The one Sajuuk banished us from for sinning against him. Never shall we do again to them what we have done. Know that this is the warning from the past. Behold the wonders of Khar-Halla. The true name of this First world is forbidden to speak of.*

He turned the familiar page to the prologue labelled Hiigara and started to read.

The land of our ancestors, the place of our origin, the First World. The land we live off now is not our first home. We once lived in another world named Khar-Halla. The true name, forbidden to speak, is written above. Do not speak it unless our punishment on this world has been paid and Sajuuk leads us home to our homeworld beyond the stars and the great red cloud in which our brethren reside, into the heart of the bright nigh time band of light; to the land forbidden to us by God himself. The story I tell you is passed down our family line for millennia. From a time when we were prisoners in metal boxes afloat in space, before the Khar-Toba came to be. Before the Guidestone had been carved by the Guardian Angel of Khar-Halla. Back before the Exile, the story of the land of dreams, a land that out beauties Balcora, the heaven we go when we die. The story is here for you, now read and know our history. The world we had lost because of what we have done may the Exile's one day return to the land of dreams and unimaginable beauty. The Exile's Return and be pardoned for their sin.

Chapter Sixteen

The Unimaginable Sin Twice Over

Two days had passed; Eric read the first chapter named: The Unimaginable Sin, which was basically the Hiigarans destroying a world named...believe it or not, Taiidan. He had memorized every single word in the book and as time passed by, more and more did the book start making more sense and became more in touch with reality than fiction. Metal boxes floating through space could have been spaceships, Khar-Halla was obviously Hiigara, as written as the prologue's chapter, the Taiidan removing their right to hyperspace technology might have been part of the exile, the world beyond the stars was a world deep in the heart of the Galaxy, the word Taiidan being in this millennia's old book meant something real.

But the most important thing was that the great sin that the Hiigarans were exiled for was the destruction of a world named Taiidan. And the Taiidan had destroyed a world named Kharak. Eric considered them even now. And the war is now at a beginning in his eyes. He will see who Sajuuk favours most.

His reading continued for the next few hours.

MARK

I woke up in the hospital realizing that we would be returning to normal space tomorrow. I was getting up, but my stomach still hurt badly from the gunshot. I had no idea what happened, but Isel was sleeping in a chair next to me. I wondered how long she had been there. I hoped not all night. I saw there were medical sensors attached to me. I was going to pull them off when a doctor stepped in the room.

"Aren't you supposed to be dying?" he asked. I felt horrified that someone would ask that. And he didn't have a joking expression on his face. He was serious.

"No! Why would I be dying?" I yelled. He left the doorway and I pulled off the sensors, grabbed a white shirt and ran out the door. Only when I was out the hospital area did I wonder if what I just did was stupid. The doctors were only there to help. And if one can say *I thought you were supposed to be dead* with a straight face, maybe I was supposed to be dead. Maybe I died and came back. Maybe I was strong enough to beat death. I didn't know, but before I could head back to the hospital, I ran into someone I never expected to see in public.

"Lisa?" I asked. She ran over to me and squeezed me a little too hard. "Ouch! It still hurts you know!" she let go of me and looked at me with a serious face.

"Did you run?" she asked.

"No I didn't." Then three doctors ran out from where I just came from. I lowered my head in regret. "Yes."

"Mark!"

They brought me back to the room Isel was in and she was awake.

“Mark? You’re alive!” She ran over to me and gave me a hug the same as Lisa did. She then let go remembering that the wound still hurt.

“You shouldn’t be out of bed for three days. If you keep running around like that, the stitches will come undone and it will start bleeding again.” I saw a nurse walking towards me with some two inch long needle.

“Hey what the hell are you trying to do to me lady?” she was going to stab that thing inside me but I did sort of a flip and kicked it out of her hands and it shattered on the wall behind her.

“It’s a sedative.”

“I don’t care what it is you’re not sticking that thing in me!” I always had a growing fear of needles. But this one was the longest one I think I’ve ever seen.

“You need to rest Soban, if you die; the hope for winning the fight will be lost.” Lisa said. Just what did she mean by that?

“Why?” I asked the simplest question I could think of.

“You bring the pilots hope and faith that they will win the battle. If you die, that is lost and they will once again fear the Taiidan like the one who shot you.” She replied.

“Face it Mark, you’re a natural born leader.” Isel said. Now that was something I wanted to hear. Was my dream of surpassing my father becoming reality? Or is it just because of the speech I gave. I dismissed it as both.

“What day is it?” I wanted to know how long I’ve been out for.

“No one knows that.” Isel replied. Of course no one knew that. Well almost no one. My alarm clock in my room knew the date, but it didn’t matter anymore as we no longer used the Kharak Dating System. Now, we simply judged the time by how many days until we exit hyperspace.

“How many days until we exit hyperspace?” I asked again.

“Tomorrow.” Lisa said. I sprung up again ignoring the pain of the bullet hole.

“Tomorrow? I need to get ready; so much to do; so much to get ready for. I need to finish adjustments on the *Ferin Sha’s* systems and...”

“You can’t go into battle like this! You need to stay in bed for at least another three days!” the nurse threw the deadliest words of all at me.

“You’re joking right?”

“No, I’m not. Your wound needs to heal.”

“You think I’m going to miss the battle of a lifetime? Do you honestly believe I’m going to miss that?” I was now yelling at her as she was getting more sedative in another needle. “I am a Soban. I am a warrior. If I die fighting, I die fighting! That’s all there is to it. If I don’t battle, they will think I’m a coward and that I’m weak.” I said with confidence.

“You are weak right now!” the nurse said.

“You are wrong! I’m fine! See?” I stood up and ignored the pain once more. “This small sidetrack of my day can’t stop me! Not even the Taiidan can stop me from doing my job. Not even you with your needles.” I walked out the door passing everyone with surprised looks on their faces. The nurse was so surprised; she dropped that spear of a needle.

I went to my room and took a shower, got a new change of clothes and I also brushed my teeth to get that horrible taste out of my mouth. I was walking around, the pain of the wound was forgotten, and I was once again in public. There were faces staring at me in surprise. Everyone

was looking at me with puzzled looks as to why I'm not in the hospital. "What?" I asked. They didn't reply. I just kept towards the hangar elevator as I was going to calibrate my fighter's systems. The *Ferin Sha* just had some of its major systems replaced and I wanted to know if it would still work.

I was almost to the elevator, but there he was. Rob was standing in the way. I thought about it, I hadn't seen him for months. I guessed he was leaving me alone.

"You shouldn't be up Mark. We were all worried about you." The most unexpected words to come from his mouth, he was *worried* about *me*? That didn't make any sense. I thought he hated me.

"No, I'm doing just fine thank you, how are you?" I asked casually.

"I will never forgive your father for what he did, but you are innocent to all of that. And therefore, I start over with you. Hi, Mark, I'm your uncle."

JOHN

"Really? He's walking around fine? Well, that's great news to hear! Can I talk to him now?" John was once again in the command quarters on a video call with Isel.

"I would, but he ran off somewhere, probably to his fighter. So how's life doin' ya on the *Ifriit*? She asked.

"It's all good down here, I made a bunch of new friends and we're all ready for tomorrow. How about your end? Any riots?" he asked.

"Not as much, they mostly calmed down seeing as we're only a days away and within the Taiidan's sensor range. There's no running and hiding now."

"That's good. I don't think Mark would enjoy waking up just to be shot again." He said. They both laughed at the joke.

"Well, I hope to see you soon in the battle, I'm gonna go find Mark."

"Okay, bye." The call was ended and John walked out of the room with a positive expression on his face. Like last time, he went to the bridge and sat in his chair. Fiira was there doing work on something that looked important.

"Why, don't you look cheery today?" Fiira said.

"Mark's walking around fine and he's ready for the battle. I'm just glad he's all right."

"Excellent news! Now the battle should be won for sure!" she said exited.

"I know, isn't it great?" he was glad to see the fleet had their inspiration back and their hopes rekindled. There was nothing else that could help the battle than that.

ERIC

He was awake in his room, still reading chapter one. Each chapter had about twenty pages in it, and the writing was small and compressed. The book itself was separated in seven parts. He was on chapter one of part one. It explained the unimaginable sin that forced them into exile. Ramedaan explained it as being *raining fire from the skies* and *explosions on the land and the air*

sucked away by the hand of our ancestors. He read the interesting fiction-like story of the destruction of a world. But the more he read, the less it felt like fiction. The *fire in the skies* was like what he saw back at Kharak, watching it burn and the sand turn to glass. It was a horrifying sight to him, and he then understood their banishment. He knew how the Taiidan felt, because this had happened to him. It was enough pain for an entire race to be punished by God. And Sajuuk did just that.

He read farther to the decision of the angels that made them banished. He knew not then exact meaning, but he thought of it as being some form of council that voted the ancient Higarans into exile.

He read the following lines:

The people concealed their power inside one of the prisons afloat to wherever they go; the power to travel across the galaxy in the blink of an eye. The Taiidan were angered by not being able to find the power, and tore some prisons open, taking the breath from many of the exiles. They did not, however, find the power and left in search for it on the Angelmoon. No longer did the Exiles need to fear the Taiidan. They long forgot of them and their eyes on the fleet had died out long ago.

He translated this power source to the one they use on the Mothership, the hyperspace core. The technology they were forbidden to use for four thousand years. The Taiidan must have torn apart some of the ships looking for the core but never found it and moved on to look elsewhere. The *eyes on the fleet* could have been long-range probes and monitors.

He became interested in the book once more and read for the rest of the day. The first chapter was all about what just happened; the second was about the people before they *sinned*. It was an everyday walkthrough of a simple day on Khar-Halla.

MARK

The *Ferin Sha* was looking as good as new in the hangar. I had finished calibrating the systems and I was on my way to find Isel or Jay or someone. The day had been short, I was ready to fight the Taiidan, and I wanted to make the most of the time I had in case it was my last.

Chapter Seventeen

Taiidan Battle

MARK

Only Minutes until we return to normal space. I was sitting in my fighter waiting for the light to turn green. I was alone in the hangar as everyone else was in the A hangar. It was silent and I enjoyed it. I was fully ready for the outcome of this fight. I was ready to die if it was my time. I had done what I needed. The fighter pilots no longer feared the Empire as they did before. They would fight. And they would win.

I was given three new members to my squadron as the previous ones were killed against the Turanic. They were higher in rank than the lasts. They were ranks six and seven, better than the earlier ones. Pilots I didn't need to tell what to do and I did not need to protect as much. I knew not their names, as many of us may die in this fight. The legacy of the Soban is fighting for freedom. And it continues through me to the other members of this crew. My father was a leader, my grandmother was a leader, my great grandfather was a leader in the Hersey Wars, and Soban the Red was a leader to many in the first years of the Sobani. It ran in my blood, and I was proud of that. But I was not naive. This fight would be near impossible and I could die. If I did, the Bloodline shall end, but Soban spirit will continue on through those I have inspired.

“Pre-jump coordinates are aligned. We are on target.” Karan said.

The light was green and I took off out the hangar followed quickly by everyone else. I set my squad in a claw formation for better damage against enemies.

Research division apparently had designs for new fighters, but would require more time. They said it was an anti-frigate fighter. That could prove useful if the time came and our frigates were overwhelmed.

“We detect large resource pockets but no vessels. It could be possible that the Taiidan are using these pockets to hide.” Intelligence said. That was a good sign. If they were hiding, they were afraid of us.

I can smell victory already.

The uplink stayed silent for a while. The fleet was setting to the battle strategy made by Karan herself. The fighters were to go in and take out as many of their fighters as possible, then the frigates would deal with the corvettes and other frigates. Simple enough, but for the time being, the fleet is setting up a sensors network using probes. If one detects something, it will transmit every bit of data possible to sensors division on the Mothership. And if one is destroyed before it sees anything, it will set off a ping so everyone knows something is going on there. The last of the probes was moving into position near the large resource vein that was messing with our sensors.

“Profiles and markings of the ships match those found at Kharak. There is no doubt this is the fleet that destroyed our planet. Destroy them.” This was the queue for all fighters to move

into position. As we moved closer to our mark, the asteroids became more frequent and large. The battle was about to begin.

“Don't die out there, Mark.” Jay's familiar voice came on the intercom.

“I'll try.” I won't. I said reassuring him. Although I wasn't certain I would live past this day.

ERIC

Eric was in his spacesuit going out to his fighter. Unlike the Mothership, the *Rancor's* fighter bay did not have an energy shield to keep air in. When inside the *Saju-Ka*, he turned on the systems and lifted off the magnetic hold on the side of the hangar. He flew out the hangar with ease. This was a day he would never forget and he knew it. He joined the group of fighters moving to an area in the middle of the resource veins.

He saw five squadrons and four others without squadrons. One of the squadron leader's ships was dark and hard to see in the space surrounding. But the strikingly visible Soban Blood symbol on the hull identified it as Red Leader. Mark Soban. He flew over, and by the time he arrived, the battle had started. Mark had just given the order to fall back and draw the fighters away from the Taiidan frigates getting ready to fire.

MARK

The attack force of the Taiidan was visible and frightening. There were fifty fighters and about two dozen frigates. Some of the pilots moved away from the group.

“Fall back! Fall back! Move away from the frigates and draw the fighters to us.” The rest of them listened to me well. The enemies were already badly damaged. They must not have gotten enough time to repair their ships. We were out of the frigates firing range and we all turned to fire. There are thirty interceptors and six heavy corvettes in our group. The two Cavalier light corvettes were retired as they were completely useless in a fight like this.

Red squad was quick and agile. The enemies didn't stand a chance against us. The *Ifriit* was nearby as a docking pad for whatever fighter needed it. I wasn't going to need it any time soon. The Taiidan weren't as easy targets as I thought. They were swift and had a unique centrifugal balance force making it able to turn three-sixty and fire backwards while moving forward. If you were chasing one, you better blow it up fast or else it would turn and shoot you down fast. There were about twenty of us left not counting the corvettes which were good odds. The battle lasted merely minutes. I raced past fighters both my own team and enemy. I could have used my booster engines, but as equal exchange to my speed boost, it drained my fuel faster. I should have got a larger fuel tank when the *Ferin Sha* was already in pieces.

One after the other, the Taiidan either blew up or was left with no fuel for the Porters to salvage it easily. Before we finished them all off, the probes pinged near our resource operation. There were only five fighters protecting them.

“I need three squads with me. They’re attacking our collectors. We need them.” I said. Three squads followed me. I came to see the five fighters being greatly outmatched by the Taiidan. Like before, there were around fifty of them.

“We need backup near the resourcing operation.” I said.

“We have our own problems here, sadly.” I checked the sensors manager and the same thing was happening near the fighters we just left. The frigate team moved in to assist them. There were fifteen ion cannons and seven assault frigates. Ships from three races: Ours, Turanic and Taiidan. They had the Kushan emblem painted on them marking them as ours. And the Taiidan Kudaark assault frigates that were re-supplied were painted our colours of grey and white removing the Imperial Yellow-Red colours.

The fighters defending the collectors were down to three.

“Damn it! Isel, take over!” I activated the booster engines and it sent my ship flying forward at very fast speeds. After five seconds, I was in the battle. I flew over taking out as many Taiidan as I could. They tried desperately to keep up, but they couldn’t. I was just too fast. One by one, I took them out. Then the others came and helped. I turned off the boosters and rejoined my squadron. This battle wasn’t going to last much longer.

ERIC

Eric was in the battle that just arrived after Mark left with four squadrons including his own. The Taiidan took advantage of this and sent in a couple dozen fighters and corvettes with the arriving frigates. Luckily, our frigates arrived as well. There was a large amount of gunfire and ion cannon beams firing in all directions. Eric set his tactics to evasive and avoided the Taiidan frigates. He took shots at any ship when he got the chance. An additional squad of fighters was built from the Mothership and joined this battle.

Eric had just dodged an ion beam by a few inches. He saw the two meter-wide beam fire over his head.

That was close. He thought. He was definitely right when he woke up. This would become a day to remember.

JOHN

John was sitting in his captain’s chair yelling orders to the other crew members. His face was sweaty. He moved the ship closer to the battle happening near the resource operation. The Matriarch-class fired its modified PDA at one of the damaged collectors. The hull gradually repaired itself and it came back to life with power. It continued with its collection run and John made the *Ifriit* move closer to the fighters. The battle seemed to rage without end. The chin-mounted single cannon on the support frigate aimed for the arriving corvettes.

“Fiira, get me a caffeine drink!” he yelled in a stressed tone. Not a moment later she walked over with it. John took a sip and didn’t even show sign of being burned by the hot water. He just kept yelling commands to the crew.

The battle moved away from the collectors and was now closer to the other battle going on near the front lines. He was headed to the damaged frigates on the Kushan side. The Mercy corvettes were too few to repair the entire group. And the other Matriarch couldn't do it alone.

"Captain, there's an incoming transmission from Red Leader. He's being chased by two Taiidan interceptors." said one of the crew.

"Turn the Chin Gun." John said.

MARK

I told my squadron to head over to the main front line battle now that the battle over here is over. But as I arrived, I got a red flashing light reminding me I did not have enough fuel to reach the Mothership.

"Isel, sorry but you'll need to take over again. My fuel's in the red. I'm headed to the *Ifriit*." I left the squadron and Isel took the leader position.

"Just hurry back okay?" she said. I was halfway there when I felt a shutter in the ship. I was being fired at from the bottom. There must have been twenty rapid-fire shots to the lower hull. My guess was the carbon fibre was doing its job. They were now tailing me. I didn't have enough fuel to use the boosters. I was about two hundred meters from the Matriarch. I set to evasive and tried to dodge as much as possible. I then felt a huge hit in the side. Now there was a Taiidan heavy corvette firing at me. But then I saw one of our Vengeance-class assault frigates turn its gun and fire at the corvette; just as the round hit its hull, it ripped in five pieces.

There were ships exploding in huge flashes of light on both sides of the battlefield ranging from small fighters to large frigates. I had to dodge the back blast of debris while dodging the two fighters on my tail.

I was nearing the Matriarch and I sent it a docking signal hoping John would turn the Chin Gun and blow up the two Triikor-class Interceptors up before they did that to me. And as I neared the *Ifriit*, the gun turned and fired two shots. They whistled past my ship hitting the two Triikor's behind me. Good thing too. I had to slow down in order to dock with the frigate. And if the shots missed, the Taiidan would have blown me up right away. I selected a docking pad closer to the front and the tractor beam turned on. It took a while to repair, as usual. I watched the battle going on. It was a sight unimaginable to me only three months ago when I was still living my daily life on Kharak.

My attention was suddenly turned to a Sajuuk Cor-class Taiidan ion frigate headed straight for us. It charged up in blue light and then fired a two-meter in diameter beam of bright blue ions at the *Ifriit's* hull. I was blinded for a few seconds, but when I was able to see, radiation had melted a hole in the side of the ship right where the rear fighter docks are. I thought myself lucky to have docked in the front. I thought of what would happen if it hit me. The *Ferin Sha* would have been a melted pile of steel fused to the hull of the *Ifriit*. And I would have been dead. My fighter was let loose as the systems on this side probably no longer worked. I sent a transmission saying I was sorry about the *Ifriit* and hoped he was okay. The damage was irreparable. The red molten hull was right near major systems. The ship would need to be scrapped and made into a new one.

I went to join my squadron now that my fuel was *almost* full. Our side was winning. The Porters started to grab onto the Sajuuk Cors and that was good for us as it replaced the lost ships of our fleet. But it would never replace the crew lost in battle. There were a hundred people per frigate just to give an idea.

I had no time to feel sorry for them as the fighters just kept coming; fewer and fewer every time. I raced over and took out three at a time with my booster engines. The fighters whistled around us like flies all the time. I lost one of my wingmen by a Kudaark frigate that was now being salvaged. I knew Jay's was collecting one of the Sajuuk Cors because of my targeting uplink screen. I set all the Taiidan ships we encountered on it as well. I had a good memory of ships, so I simply set the Kudaark-class assault frigate to simply Kudaark. And so on.

All I could think about was: *I'm still alive*. And maybe I wasn't going to die after all.

JOHN

"Docking procedure, engaged." John sighed as the *Ifriit* docked with the Mothership. The damage was too bad and the ship was being retired. John was sad that his first ever captained ship was being scrapped. And he could do nothing about it. The only positive thing to come out of this was that he was getting a new ship.

He powered down the systems and left the command bridge turning off the lights on his way out.

John walked all the way down to the area of the damage before exiting. He found a large gear-type object lying on the floor. He picked it up and hid it in his pocket as a memory of his first ship. He stepped off the *Ifriit* and headed to the debriefing area.

He was to be captain of the next ship, another Matriarch-class ship that was already being built when his ship came to dock. It would have all the same crew and it was an identical design to his. He named it the *Ifriit 2* and that was painted in the same area as the *Ifriit* on the first ship. It was newer and had more upgrades compared to the first models. But it still didn't feel the same.

ERIC

The battle ended, he docked with one of the Mercy corvettes as he was damaged and needed fuel. There was calm in the vicious rage of battle. The Taiidan forces have been stopped and salvaged, the fighters quit coming to the battle hopelessly attempting to make a difference but end up being salvaged instead. The Kushan forces were regrouping and the new ships captured were joining the front lines. The only ships that the Mothership fleet had to build were Porters, Blades, and the occasional Mercy to add to a newly made salvage team.

It gave everyone time to recap the recent events. The once thought hopeless battle was turning into a victory. Or so they thought.

The battle seemed to be over. But just as the newly constructed Matriarch launched from the Mothership, a second group of ships came into battle. It was a group of frigates guarded by a

lot of fighter class ships. They were unknown as to what type of ship they were, so the fighter groups had to be cautious. The fight began once more. This was a smaller group, however, and did not pose as much threat as the first battle. The frigates were the same as before, about the same number as before, and the fighters did not act as fighters. They stayed in a sphere formation guarding the frigates. Eric went over to the battle along with red and yellow squad. They fired at the odd stationary fighters, and they all fired back. It was a painful blow to Yellow Squad. Not as much to Red Squad as they were far quicker to react to this. Mark activated his boosters and zoomed past a lot of the ships causing little damage. They were stronger than most fighters. Eric joined him as well did the rest of Red Squadron. The frigates of the group were taken out with ease with the twenty something frigates on the Kushan's side. It was a long battle. Several squadrons joined to help Mark. Eric was doing the best he could with three of the fighters. They had much more armour than any other.

Finally after about five minutes, the first of the three fighters Eric was battling blew up, then the second and the third. The battle was once again calmed as a Porter went to salvage the remaining one so research division could scan it.

MARK

The second wave of battle passed. I knew it to be Eric in the fighter assisting me. But I had nothing to say. I could thank him after the battle that seemed never to end. It was a hard one. We were already down to half our fighters and combat corvettes. The frigates were dispatched in different areas to protect the resource and research operations from surprise attacks and we were left with seven frigates. They were two Daggers, one Kudaark, one Vengeance, two Firelance ion frigates, and one Sajuuk Cor. It was an odd mix of ships, but it was what we had left over here on the front lines. And as it turns out, we were far from done the battle. From my point of view, I saw them, the rest of the Taiidan Fleet that attacked Kharak.

Chapter Eighteen

Beginning of a New War

The three ships that were most relevant were all three times the size of a frigate. They were large, and powerful. I knew the one with the fighters launching from its front hangar to be a carrier, but the other two identical ships were an unknown class to me. There were another fifty something fighters, both the new class we discovered and Triikors.

I immediately turned my squad to leave as soon as possible. We were close to the *Mothership's* safety. Maybe it was time to let the big guns deal with this. But the other squadrons had arrived.

“What are you doing Mark?” Jeroll asked. He got a new squadron as well. I came to my senses and turned the ships around. There were only twenty of us left. The *Mothership* was building new unknown fighters and the *Rancor* is building more Blades. We rushed into battle hoping not to die. The battle was fierce. It was even worse than before.

The frigates took fire on the two unknown capital ships and as it turns out, they are like a super frigate; no, a Destroyer. Yeah that's it, a Destroyer. It has two frontal ion cannons that were each more powerful than our Firelance's. And it had two dual turret mass drivers on the top of the head. As I got close to it, it was amazing how much it looked like a desert animal from Kharak. It was a scary-looking yellow demon that fired lasers from its eyes. Not a wanted sight. And that was probably the trick it used to stun its enemies. Just the same way the Skaal desert predator stocked its prey. It was an unwanted creature in populated desert towns. But if there were a pack of them, you'd better pack up and leave. They were strong and vicious. If you encountered one, you were dead. There was no running. Unless you had a weapon such as a gun, no one would stand a chance against these creatures. Just the same way none of us stood a chance against these massive Destroyers.

The battle was hard on us. We removed their interceptors but were still stuck with these other ships that Fleet Command named Defenders. With only few ships left, the battle was hopeless. The frigate groups were not doing as much damage as we thought they would either. With two shots from its ion cannons, it could destroy two ships at a time. The frigates tried to stay out of the cannons firing range on the underside where the armour was its lightest. But no luck there, the defenders were in that area. Lucky for us, the other Destroyer moved over to the *Mothership* and started giving it a pounding. Not so good for the fleet, but there were salvage teams there. The carrier was the biggest threat of all. It constantly resupplied the Taiidan's numbers in fighters. We were dying, and there was nothing we could do. Even with the extra Blades from the *Rancor*, who itself was in the battle firing its two ion cannons at the destroyer, were not doing us any good. The *Rancor's* hull defence guns were causing the most damage on the Defenders than we were. The rest of the frigates joined in too. The assault frigate tried to blow away at the Seejur-class Defenders. It was working except for that we were still outmatched. Not in numbers, but in strength. They had a suicidal strategy that was working better than ours. I could only watch the horror show as we were killed off one by one. Even in my fighter I could do little

damage. I could avoid all the gunfire with the boosters, but could not cause more damage than anyone else.

I hit something and it knocked me unconscious. I saw the all familiar dream of watching the battle take place above Hiigara. it was the third time in my life that I saw it. And it seemed to be trying to tell me something. But I didn't know what. I heard a voice just after say: "Never give up, Mark." It was the sound of my father's voice. I woke hearing people's screams over the intercom. I kicked into gear and went to aggressive tactics turning off the booster engines so I could fire for longer. Constantly firing at the Seejurs; never missing one single shot. I was hit with a couple shots from them, but I knew my upgrade would help the *Ferin Sha* hold herself together. I had long left my Squad in the hands of Isel, who was still on the targeting uplink meaning she was still alive. So was Eric. Jeroll was there as well. I saw that the Saarkin-Cho-class carrier had stopped building ships. They must have been out of pilots. But so were we. Only six of us left. The Taiidan still had twenty out on the battlefield. Our frigates were all damaged and the repair teams of Mercy corvettes and Matriarch frigates could not repair all the damage, but could repair enough to keep them together. The Skaal as I called it, was venting flames of the burning atmosphere inside. It had holes everywhere and was ready to blow any moment. The other destroyer was captured successfully by the Porters and was moving in our direction repainted to our colours. But then the frigates retreated for some reason. I could not see why, we were winning! Why would they do that? But then I say why.

There were newly built Thunderbolt-class attack bombers coming in delta formation. We evacuated as well. They were ordered to fire plasma bombs at any ship they see. If we were caught in the crossfire, we would be hit too.

"C'mon let's get out of here!" I yelled over the intercom to whoever was listening. I flew away from the battle scene just in time to. The Thunderbolts fired blue balls of plasma from their front ends and they hit all the Taiidan ships. The Skaal three massive explosions on three separate random areas of the hull and then exploded in a big blinding flash. I looked at the targeting screen in that direction and it took several of the fighters with it. The bombers went to do another run on the carrier. We decided to join them to fit in and have our fun. The five of us set into a delta formation and followed the bombers. Our guns caused little damage, but I felt like I was doing something. And I get to say I helped destroy the Turanic carrier. It took three runs, but the carrier started to vent out burning atmosphere and then small explosions rippled across its hull. There were some larger ones, and then with the fail of its nuclear reactor, it exploded in a ball of flame, debris and light even brighter than that of the Skaal. We all flew away from the explosion as it happened and headed to the Mothership. And just to show off, I activated the booster engines and sped up past everyone else.

The battle was won. We all headed in to dock, me being the first one out in the battle, was also the last one to dock with the Mothership. Those fifty two bombers that launched the final siege on the Saarkin-Cho had done their jobs well. And so did I even though I lost my entire squadron except for Isel. Again.

JOHN

John was screaming in joy along with the rest of the cheering crew of the *Ifriit 2*. He knew the battle would be won if they tried. And it was won lead by not anyone but his friend, Mark Soban. He stood up laughing and headed to one of the front viewports.

“Crew of the *Ifriit*, let this day be known in greatness and passed down in memory as the day all of Kharak was avenged. Let this day be known as the day that we, the last remnants of all Kushan kind led the fight to the Taiidan and beat them. Remember this day as the one that Sajuuk confirmed to us that indeed he is guiding us to our ancient home. Hey Fiira are you getting all this?” he said looking at his secretary who was writing faster than she could speak.

She had a lot of pages written down. She had been documenting the entire events of the past six hours. When she finished writing what her captain just said, he collapsed in a chair and someone brought her a glass of water.

John smiled looking at the remaining dust cloud that the Providence collectors were already harvesting. He looked out the window at the returning fighters and at the *Rancor* that was rebuilding the ships the fleet had lost.

The gear from the first *Ifriit* was placed in glass casing at the back wall of the command bridge with a carving on the wall.

In memory of the Ifriit Nabaal, the last remaining part of the first support frigate of the Homeworld War to have served the Mothership fleet.

ERIC

Eric was entering the Mothership welcomed warmly by the crew members. They knew he was Gaalsien, but treated him the same as if he was Mark Soban, the man standing next to him who he hadn't seen in a month. A month in space is a long month when there is nothing to do. The two pilots exchanged smiles and went to the debriefing area to take off their battle suits. Eric would later retrieve his possessions on the *Rancor*. Although, he had all he needed. He brought the Khar-Halla with him on the battle. The only thing he treasured more to him than his life. The story of Hiigara continues as he is documenting the events of the exile's return to the homeworld. The book titled: *The Homeworld War*.

Fleet intelligence then came on the loudspeaker with news on their next destination.

“We've completed decrypting data from the enemy frigate we captured in the Kharak System.” The screen in the hangar flashed on. “It appears to be an imperial broadcast.” The screen showed several large space bases. “In order to stay clear of these outposts, our course will take us into a turbulent asteroid field and through the heart of a nebula.” This was the Mothership Fleet's next destination.

Epilogue

The fleet of the Mothership have defeated the Taiidan that destroyed their world Kharak. The battle was led by the young pilot Mark Soban who gave them faith in Sajuuk to guide them to Hiigara. Eric has started documenting the events of the Homeworld War in his book, titled *The Homeworld War*. John is happy that the first battle has been a victory and hopes for many more.

After the victory in the Great Wastelands against the Taiidan, the Mothership fleet has a new perspective on the journey ahead. They no longer fear their doom. Instead, they now believe Sajuuk will guide them to Khar-Halla. To Hiigara.

This is only the first chapter of the Exile's Return. The Homeworld War has just begun . . .

TO BE CONTINUED