

# Introduction

In the beginning, a pilot named Mark Soban lead the *Mothership* fleet's spirits to victory against the Taiidan. They had lost so much on their journey. Their home planet Kharak, destroyed by the very evil they wiped out in the Great Wastelands. They had nowhere left to go but forward into the heart of the galaxy. They are now space dwellers traveling at faster than light speeds towards the central areas of the galaxy. They had penetrated the outer regions of the mid-rim of the galaxy. With the new hope brought to them by Soban, they fear no longer the evil Taiidan that they now seek.

The documentations of the events up to present have been recorded down by Eric Gaalsien who attempts to write the story of the returning exiles as a sequel to his favourite book, one unknown to everyone else, the Khar-Halla. The exiles have one goal left to realize. They must win back Hiigara. They have nothing left to live for but that.

The eyes of Sajuuk guide them home now. Their god and Karan are their most important icons. They rest in their hands. Sajuuk, he whose hands shapes what is, lightens the path. Karan makes it possible to travel there by controlling the hyperspace core and all the *Mothership's* main systems keeping the fleet alive.

The two guide the fleet to Hiigara. Our hero, Mark Soban, is once again his usual self. He did not forget the tragedies of the past three months. Nothing could ever remove that from his memory. With the first chapters done, the journey has just begun.

# Chapter One

## Diamond Shoals

MARK

It has been two months since we were last in normal space. The *Mothership* is on course and we have exited hyperspace into the turbulent asteroid field of Diamond Shoals.

Our ion assault force, now consisting of: 1 Skaal Tel destroyer, 6 Dagger ion array frigates, 8 Firelance ion frigates and 12 Sajuuk Cor ion frigates, were firing their particle cannons at the large asteroids in front of the *Mothership*. It has been like this for a half hour now. Blue and red beams of ions smashing into the asteroids, and after two shots from each ship, they would shatter into pieces for our collectors to harvest.

All the other ships in our fleet were in a row behind the *Mothership* to remove stress on the attack force. So they didn't have to blow up as many asteroids.

The only ion-weapon ship not helping the fight would be the *Rancor*. It is too big and bulky to help in the minefield of turbulent asteroids.

The *Skaal Tel* was already hit with a big one. Thankfully it didn't get ripped to pieces. Its heavy armour held it together while three Mercy corvettes moved in to help. Using the Matriarchs could be dangerous in case they get hit by asteroids. It's always easier to replace a three crewed corvette than a hundred-thirty crewed frigate. I didn't know if Karu was one of those corvettes helping the destroyer, but it didn't matter as they could move faster than the asteroids and dodge them.

I, of course, was watching this whole scene from the observatory. I was above the scene so I only saw the top sides of the ships. From here, even the destroyer looked only an inch long.

It had been nearly two months since we were last in the reality dimension. No one knows for sure what hyperspace is, but we simply dismiss it as an alternate dimension where we move faster than we do in normal space. We left it at that as we had bigger things to deal with. Like finding out where the Taiidan are. We know where their outposts are, we could go there, but we aren't suicidal. The Taiidan probably have fleets even larger than the one we faced. That was a frightening thought. We had just barely survived the battle in the Great Wastelands against that fleet. I'm not sure why I even call it the Great Wastelands. Technically, from the Taiidan records, the Great Wastelands are a vast region of space spanning from the mid-rim spiral arm of our galaxy to the outer rim one. In other words, the Great Wastelands take up half the Galaxy. We're still in the Great Wastelands. But I guess the name has grown on me as the region we stole pretty much the entire Turanic Fleet and destroyed the Taiidan Fleet. I'll probably always call the Great Wastelands that small region of space. I call where we are now Diamond Shoals as that is the name of this asteroid field. Fleet Intelligence had learned a lot from the Taiidan ship records. They have terabytes of information stored in their memory banks only. We now know that our planet was destroyed because we broke a four thousand year old contract that they probably didn't even know about until they detected the hyperspace signal. I mean honestly, who can hold

a grudge for four millennia? I know we couldn't. We haven't forgiven the Taiidan for ordering the Genocide, but we destroyed the fleet that did the dirty work and that was good enough for us. We just wanted to go home. We were getting tired of being in a space ship.

There was a new program of cryogenic freezing like the one the spare crew uses, but now many of the main crew uses it. They just converted an empty level into single manned cryo-beds. The crew maintenance was down to half, but it wasn't that big of a deal as there wasn't as many people to do any damage to the ship.

When we entered hyperspace last, we had another program that might give us a bad name, but we started forcing the Turanic prisoners to fix the *Mothership's* engines. The engines of the colony ship were still incomplete. They worked for the launching, but we were supposed to dock with the Khar-Selim to tune them and make them work on demand. Also, the maintenance systems for it were still incomplete. I wonder sometimes why we lunched the *Mothership* when it wasn't completed. Maybe it was impatience. I don't know. But we are here now and it would be a good idea to fix them as soon as possible, preferably before we run into the Taiidan.

The reason it makes us look bad, is that it's the most dangerous job to do. If they accidentally drop a hydrogen rod, the place goes boom killing everyone in the area. They had to be gentle. This was hard to do because they are pirates. They understood our language, but we were only starting to learn theirs from the information stored in the *Rancor* on translation from Turanic to Taiidan. And the Taiidan speak the same as us for some reason. There are still some differences in pronunciations though. We aren't really the slave driving type, but it's a desperate time, a time of war and none of our crew wants to do the job. I wouldn't either. I enjoy living. Even if nothing that goes on is interesting. Well, nothing in hyperspace anyhow.

"Oh there it goes again!" the *Skaal Tel* was just hit with another asteroid. It had cracks in the hull, but the repair team was doing their job.

I hadn't fully made myself known throughout the fleet yet, but the pilots know who I am. It was kind of weird for them because I'm only a sixteen year old and most of them are in their twenties and thirties with years more experience than me. I mean all I did was give a moving speech and do some either brave or stupid moves in battle. I guess it didn't matter. The thing that allowed me to do the things I did was probably being unafraid of death. If I died, it would be fighting to protect the Mothership Fleet. The only thing I have left is the hope that our colonists will reach Hiigara safely.

I have nothing else. Better me than our entire race. After all, sometimes one must be sacrificed for the sake of many. If I had to be that one, I was ready. It wasn't only honour that I was searching for. If I die fighting, I might see my father again.

I try not to think of him. It makes it easier to live with. I lost everything I knew and gained more than I ever had. I made new friends, I met up with an old one, Jay, I know what life means, I have an important goal to reach, I have more knowledge of the Galaxy than anyone on Kharak ever had as I was moving through it at faster than light speeds, I know more than anyone else on the *Mothership* about Hiigara except for maybe Eric. He showed me a book not too long ago called the *Khar-Halla*. It had everything from our reason for placement on Kharak to every possible natural beauty of Hiigara and its moon.

With all I had learned, I was still just a teenager with nothing but dreams to chase after. It was the sad truth. No longer were fighter pilots needed on the journey and I had to live like a

normal kid; which for me was hard because our situation is about as far from normal as it could get.

There are few places for us to hang out and be normal on the interstellar colony ship light-years away from our destination. Even with more than half of the *useless* crew of the *Mothership* in cryogenic sleep, there are no areas like those that teenagers would hang out like on Kharak. We had skate parks and corner stores. We had bowling alleys and arcades. Here, we had none of that. It was us, the crew, Karan, the Core, and the hull of the ship and more than half a year left in our journey.

We spent a lot of our time in the empty hangars and the observatory was always a great visiting spot if there was no one already there.

Nothing new has happened since the Great Wastelands. It remained static. People looked at me more often and acknowledged me. I felt important. They didn't mind my new look at life, acting my age and all. I was getting tired of acting as mature as my father all the time. I wasn't him. I still have my life and I plan to live it the way I want to. Not the way he wants me to. I have friends my age that I can be around. I didn't need to hang around all the war heroes and generals like he did in his youth. The oldest friend I don't mind being around is John. He's now captain of the *Ifriit 2* as his first ship the *Ifriit Nabaal* was destroyed in battle. With me still docked to the fighter pads. It wasn't your everyday walk in the park almost being hit with an ion beam with the power to turn you into a crispy pile of fused carbon and other elements in your body. But like I said, I'm not afraid of death.

## ERIC

It has been a while since the *Mothership* was in normal space. Eric had been living on the *Mothership* after the events of our last battle. He didn't care to be around when the *Rancor* crew used the chemical to remove the stench of its halls. It's nearing completion and all the civilian zones have been completely removed of the sealant covering the walls. He would head over there after the crew clears the asteroid field.

He had lived his life on the *Mothership* long enough and felt like returning to the quiet halls of the *Rancor* to live in silence so he could write his book in peace. He didn't mind it here, he got to know Mark as a friend and his friends as well, and they got to know him, but there was something about the *Rancor* that he liked. Not the fact it was owned by pirates in the past, but he was drawn to it somehow. It felt like, well it felt like home. Oh how he missed the confined temple of Saju-Ka. He would read and read some more. He had read a total book count of five thousand three hundred and forty-six books in his life. He read every event ever to occur in Kharak history.

As he said a while back, he doesn't have many friends, maybe a handful. He was happy that no one looked at me badly anymore. They treat him like a Kushan being and not scum like they did before. Will however, is another story. He wasn't sure how he would react to his coming back to the *Rancor*. He guessed he'll just have to find out for himself.

## JOHN

The crew of the *Ifriit 2* have been loyal to their captain the whole journey. They never questioned his leadership or asked for more information than they were given as to the region they were in. John was a great leader and a respected one for the two-hundred-manned crew. They had won the first battle, but this was a war with many more to come. The crew was ready to die for their friends if necessary.

John was on the bridge watching the ion force blow asteroids apart one by one, beams of blue and red ions smashing into boulders endlessly afloat in the vast darkness of space. The colony ship they were protecting against these massive rocks was now the central command for a war fleet en route for the ancient homeworld of their ancestors.

John would only imagine what the planet would look like. He only knew of the sands of Kharak. This new world, or in fact, an old, was a mystery to him. He wondered what colour the sky would be. He wondered how much blue water would be there. He wondered if there would be more green than brown, he wondered what the heat of the planet would be. How long the year was. All this was what he anticipated to find out. The image of Hiigara was on everyone's mind. Yet they still needed to arrive in one piece and destroy the Taiidan forces occupying the world of wonders.

"Hey captain! Look the asteroids are clearing." Paul, his new sensors manager said. Indeed they were. The space ahead was empty and without any asteroids in the way.

John sat in his chair and pressed a button. "Get me Herald on the line." The front viewport showed another captain. "Do you see the clearing?" he asked.

"Yeah I do. Finally, we were almost hit out here!" he said with a smile. Herald was the captain of the ion cannon frigate *Nomad Cannon*. He and Herald became friends despite the different ships they were in. They had much in common including their abolishment of the rules on the ship. An ion frigate had an average crew of one hundred and twenty-five. This was not very much, and most of the crew knew everyone else onboard. And the two captains knew everyone on the command bridge of both ships.

"well let me just fire on that last boulder and then we can chat." The screen turned off and John could only see the battle going on outside. He saw the *Nomad Cannon* fire its one red beam and the rest of the ion force joined in. There were also some plasma bombers practicing on the asteroids around the main belt to break them up into smaller pieces so the collectors could salvage them.

"We've cleared the field." Fleet Intelligence said. The fleet moved out of the belt, and then, out of nowhere, just like last time, the Bentusi Tradeship came on the sensors manager of the *Ifriit 2*.

# Chapter Two

## No One Returns

JOHN

“We’re detecting an incoming Bentusi vessel from the clearing ahead.” Intelligence said. The Tradeship was fast with no engines to be found to keep it moving. It was a mysterious ship and a useful one too. John thought.

“Greetings, we have come to trade.” The Bentusi said. The info screen showed that it was something known as drone technology. John suspected it was some form of unmanned drone. Like an artificial intelligence or a gun with an engine. They accepted the trade and received the technology.

“This is a dangerous and unpredictable region. Can you give us information that will guide us through the nebula?” Karan asked these nomadic space dwellers.

“We hear nothing there. Even the Taiidan fear the Great Nebula. No one returns.” And in that instant, they activated their jump drive, and disappeared within the yellow hyperspace waveform. They were gone. And their last words sank in deep into the fleet. *No one returns.* They said. And if this was true, than this could be the worst place the fleet could venture.

ERIC

Eric was entering his interceptor, the *Saju-Ka* was the same as ever, and his stuff was packed into the cargo hold. His book had been copied by Mark, and he was returning to the *Rancor*. The ship worked the same as new, and he took off out the hangar. Captain Refreal ordered an air shield to be built in the *Rancor*’s main hangar to make docking easier for pilots. So he did not need his spacesuit this time.

He left the ship, seeing the Turanic Carrier ahead of him, his only home. It felt like home. The *Mothership* didn’t feel the same to him. It felt the same as the temple of Saju-Ka once did. He liked it. That was the only explanation he had for it.

MARK

I joined up with Isel, Karu and Jay as the fleet was assembling. I know Eric must be gone by now, and I held my copy of the Khar-Halla close to me.

A new ship was just completed. It was a Destroyer like the *Skaal-Tel* but Kushan-designed. Karan named it the Revelation-class.

The fleet moved into hyperspace and our group broke up. The Bentusi said, *No one returns.* That didn’t sound too good. But I know my destiny. And it did not end at this nebula. I would

live to see Hiigara. That much I know.

I headed to the observatory again. we were headed for a nebula. How exiting could this get? A cloud of dust and gas of brilliant colours coming our way. It was something to watch.

## ERIC

Eric arrived safely and went to his room. It was reserved from last time. He went and unpacked all his things. He bought new clothes and other things on the *Mothership* and had to leave some behind as his cargo hold on the *Saju-Ka* couldn't hold it all. He dusted off his old room and put everything in its place. He sat on his bed and thought about the words of the Bentusi. He then shook his head removing the thought and headed to meet up with someone, anyone, whoever he could find really.

After ten minutes of walking down the brown halls, he ran into Brutus.

"I wasn't expecting to see you back here, hi."

"Well, I can't leave you alone here can I? There aren't many Gaalsien left." He said with a smile. Brutus smiled back despite his scarred face.

"I have things to do right now. I can speak later about what happened while you were away. Oh and look out for someone with blond hair would you? One of the Taiidan prisoners escaped while we were transferring them to remove the stinky sealant. Watch out. It's feisty." He said laughing like he ran into her a couple times.

This was something to swallow on. He kept walking with a slight case of paranoia. Every corner he would look before he turned and would run across halls intersecting to avoid the need for a confrontation with a Taiidan. He didn't know how the Taiidan were, and didn't want to find out.

He turned a corner and ran into someone. He didn't know who until he turned. He ran and didn't turn to see who it was.

"Get back here you wimp!" he stopped and recognized the voice. It was Will and not a Taiidan mercenary. He walked back to him and said,

"I thought you were the prisoner." Will cracked his knuckles and walked forward.

"It looks like your bodyguard isn't here this time, is he. Gaalsien." Eric noticed he hadn't forgotten how he made him look like a fool last time they met.

"I see your gang doesn't want to be around you anymore, huh." He said. He stepped back dodging a punch.

"They're just to wimpy to face that brute guard of yours. I'm not scared of him. But you are going to get that beating you've been avoiding for the last month." Eric got a hit to the shoulder but it didn't hurt that bad.

"I haven't been avoiding you; I've been reading and making friends just living my life like a normal kushan should. In fact, one of my closest friends is none other than Mark Soban." He said gloating.

"Yeah right, like I should believe you. We fight here and now. If you run, then I won't let you run the next time. And if you escape after that, then I will hunt you down." This was frightening to Eric. As much as this place felt like a home, it would remain a battleground

between him and Will unless he did something this instant.

“Will, I don’t know the reason for your hostility, but I will neither fight, nor will I run. I am here, and we will finish this. I’m tired of living my life in fear! I am a kushan and so are you! Why must you be like this?” but Will had no sympathy for him. He just rammed his fists one after the other into Eric and knocked him to the ground. a hit to the face and in the gut, then in the back. Will was like an animal. And Eric would not fight, or run. It seemed nothing would stop the madness. Eric could feel the life draining from him. It was a horrifying feeling. But even if he chose to run here, he couldn’t as his body hurt too much. Will stopped to wipe the blood off his fists and came for another blow. It sent him to the walls of the hall.

He thought it would never end. But it did soon. From one of the large tubes leading to the level above, something came crashing down on Will. Eric noticed that the whole fight must have been going on under the vertical tunnel.

He saw the thing that fell as it fell on Will. It was like a Kushan, but its clothes were like a synthetic yellow and red striped suit. And it had blond hair not brown like most. He then realized he was looking at the Taiidan prisoner that Brutus had been talking about.

Will stood up and had a frightened look in his eyes. The Taiidan kicked him in the side and swung him against the wall. It then threw him down the hall and he ran away after that.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Eric was coughing up blood and he had bruises covering him and blood dripping from him in several places. “I’m just fine.” He said sarcastically. He fell to the ground and fell unconscious to the blood loss.

The last thing he heard was the Taiidan yell: “Somebody help him! He’s dying!” and then it all faded away into blackness.

## JOHN

“How long this time?” John asked Fiira about the time they would be in hyperspace.

“Another week and we should be in the nebula.” She answered.

“Okay that’s not too long.” He smiled and told the communications team to connect him to the *Nomad Cannon*. The screen came on and Herald was holding a slice of cake. “What’s all this?” he asked.

“Oh it’s my friend’s birthday. Want some?” He said holding it to the screen. They both laughed.

“So I guess things are going well over there?” John asked.

“Yeah, all’s fine on this end, you?”

“Well, my last sensors manager had a heart attack. But other than that, it’s been average.”

“Sorry to hear that. Want to play a game of battle chess?” he asked. John laughed a little but agreed to play the game.

## MARK



“Karan, how long until we start to enter the nebula?” I asked. She couldn’t physically answer me, but she turned on the countdown screen and it showed to be about a week. “Thanks.” I sighed and left the room. It would be another few days before the view would be interesting. All I can do is wait. Again. Why is it that the suspense needs to linger on until we actually get there? And the trip is always long? Because that is the way it works. I’m frustrated most of the time, but I get over it eventually. My room was my next stop. I want to read the next chapter of this book. It answers so much about the past.

I read half of the chapter and then Jay came in and we decided to head to Dane and Lisa’s house.

“Hey, Mark. I’m sorry to ask . . . but you’ve been acting a little depressed lately.” He said.

“Oh it’s just haunting memories. Nothing permanent, after we reach Hiigara it should pass.” I haven’t been showing it much, but Jay’s my best friend, he knows me. But the thought of Hiigara and the treasures it holds as described in the Khar-Halla almost equalize our losses. And we all know what we must do first. We need to beat the Taiidan. The fleet we defeated was a simple scouting fleet. Things were going to get much larger in scale soon. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

He stayed silent until we reached the elevator. “So what about what the Bentusi said? Do you believe them? That *no one* returns? That the Taiidan themselves fear it? I mean I don’t believe in ghost stories, but if it comes from the Bentusi then . . .” he trailed on.

“I’m not sure what to think about it. Then again, we have a fleet to protect us from any monsters of the nebula. I mean really? If we can destroy an asteroid as large as the *Rancor* then I think we stand a chance against ghost ships.” I said.

“But what if we don’t? What if nothing can defeat them? Do we even know if our weapons can damage them?” he asked nervously.

“We don’t even know if *they* exist yet. Don’t worry man! Nothing is going to happen.” I hope . . .

## ARAZIS

“We are here today to honour Kadesh, our protector from the evil beyond.” An old priest was standing atop a platform inside the Temple of Kadesh on First Colony, the first world colonized by the ancestors. It was a green world with a hazy red and pink surrounding it. The sun of the system was also red. A small red light within the vast nebulousity spanning hundreds of light-years was the world the first ones chose as a home for the religiously driven people of Kadesh. As the priest raised a staff with a blue crystal head to the opening above, a purple light shined in the room brighter than the dim sun. Many spectators covered their eyes to the sudden flood of light, but not Arazis. She wanted to see the whole event not missing a thing.

The entire kadeshi population was standing on the planet to celebrate the two thousandth anniversary of the Garden. It had been two millennia that the kadeshi have lived in this nebula undisturbed with the exception of passing ships that are dealt with by the military faction. The

rest of the population was peaceful and found no need for conflict.

This utopian civilization has thrived here without disturbance. None that entered the nebula ever left sometimes not by will, but also by force of the military when encountering a race of travellers. Many of the ships have been small compared to the standard military Needleship. They are boarded and its crew imprisoned until landing on one of the colonies. They are then showed our knowledge and judged by the colony governor.

Arazis met many of the travellers as she is part of the military and her father is the governor of Third Colony. Very near the border of the Garden. Sometimes she could see the darkness beyond with small twinkles of light in the distance.

She wondered of the worlds beyond. Although every time she asked her father or one of the high priests, they would tell her it is forbidden to speak of the land beyond the Garden. Great evil wonders silently waiting for us, forces of the old god, who abandoned the people and allowed the evil ones to take them from their home and force them into the darkness in the Prisonships. Many of them lie in relic or ruin scattered in the Garden. Many fly above the Seven Colonies used only as training missions for spacewalks outside the ships. One of them, the one where the Messiah led them away from the group of Prisonships to the safety of First Colony, lies here, in perfect preservation as a memorial of the past, as a relic or museum of a time long ago when the kadeshi were led across darkness to die alone without a sound. And one man, said to have been spoken to by Kadesh, and led many into a religion of peace. Away from the war-loving Sajuuk to the comforting arms of Kadesh.

The other half of the convoy was never heard from again after the separation.

The ceremony lasted hours. It was a major event. Once every year, they returned here to whiteness this event. Arazis had seen it fifteen times in her life. Yet every time she watched the whole ceremony.

By the time it was over, she was headed to the docking fields where a couple dozen Needleships were parked. She was a Swarmer pilot in the higher ranks. She knew every part of the ship from the electrical systems that fire the weapons to the very last bolt that keeps the ship together. Her father enlisted her so she would have a better life than he did when running the colony. He left it to her brother to do that job. He was three years younger, but in time he would take on the role.

She took a transport to Needleship 1092, an older ship that she was assigned to. it had been put to the test amongst some massive ships in its past. She had to fight off a fleet of Turanic Raiders of a mass of several carriers and frigates. The Swarmers made quick work of the fighters. But the ship had her hull damaged heavily by the enemy pirates. But she came out alive. The hull was completely replaced after that battle, but the inner supports tell the tale of a time when a race almost escaped the Garden. She was grateful to be assigned to such a noble cruiser.

The ship's captain was Jeremiah II, a clone of the first captain. It was more of a new body as the first was getting old and feeble. It was something only the royals, the Needleship captains, and the elders were given. The royals had enough money to bribe the scientists, the elders had the knowledge and wisdom that kept this society together, and it was highly believed a captain shall go down with his ship. A captain was given the option of infinite runs at life in order to sustain his ship until the day the ship failed from within or was sent in to be deconstructed after a lifetime of five hundred years. A long life, but a proud captain would choose to live longer than

his ship.

“Welcome back Arazis. I am happy to say that we are going out again.” it was Jeremiah II talking to her. They had gotten to know each other as friends on their many journeys across the Garden. “And we are headed near the outskirts!”

“At last! Somewhere I can see the outside!”

“I knew you would be exited. However we are merely going on a mining trip.” The kadeshi never harvested the nebula’s resources, but there are many asteroids near the outer regions.

“That’s okay. I would like to have a chance to take out my Swarmer sometime soon though.” She thought of the last time she had been in a battle. In fact, she had only been in one previous battle, a minor threat of escorts that refused to join and required Swarmer assistance. She knew everything to do in a battle situation, but rarely got the chance to do any actual piloting.

“In time, Ara, in time.” He said sounding like an old Wiseman. Their ship along with two others headed to the opposite end of the Garden would be the only ones leaving for weeks. The ceremony’s aftermath caused celebrations and parties among families. The military stayed off duty for that time as the commanders were doing the same. But some were sent out early to mine and scout out the areas of common enemy sightings and set up a hyperspace inhibitor network. There were three of them going out, the 1092 *Amun*, the 1254 *Suteh*, and the 1415 *Ptah*. Arazis was a member of the *Amun* and a well-known member onboard. The large ship was only run by five hundred and fifty crew members with two hundred spare in frozen sleep. Not many people to get to know, a small community and her community. They live together and fight together. They will venture together into the farthest regions of the Great Nebula.

Arazis, being one of the youngest members of the *Amun*, was treated like a child and restricted from many rooms in the ship. She got frustrated by that at times, but was promised by Jeremiah to be allowed unlimited access to any room when she turned sixteen. This was in five days.

The crew quickly boarded the ship and prepared for the departure from First Colony. On the way, she ran into her friend Saiin. He was a short kid about two inches shorter than her. He was a nervous and very uneasy with space travel. He was only a year older than she, but acted far younger. Though he did not seem like the type fit for the job, he enlisted in Swarmer pilot training.

“I-Is this going to hurt like last time?” he asked the aged captain in the row of seats opposite to them.

“Ha ha! Yes, my young man, it will be just like the last time. But don’t worry; the *Amun* will hold herself together.” Jeremiah said confidently. Saiin buckled up and waited for the lift-off to begin. He felt the shattering hull and heard the screeches of old steel rubbing against itself. The stabilizers had started up and the Needleship lifted up off the landing platform shaped perfectly to dock it. The supports let go, and the engines fired sending the ship flying up in the red lit sky. Saiin griped Ara’s hand hard as the seats supported by metal beams banged and shacked against one another. From the side viewport, he could see the white clouds passing by fast, and he could feel the ship smashing into winds and clouds, getting blown down by fast air currents. But in the end, the *Amun* did survive the takeoff, and was now afloat safely in the vastness of space, surrounded only by thin gaseous nebulae.

Arazis laughed and let go of Saiin's trembling hand. This has only been his second liftoff. He was new, just assigned last year.

"Have a nice flight?" she asked. Saiin could only get out of the safety supports and take a deep breath of artificial air.

"I hate living on a planet." He said.

# Chapter Three

## Triikor

MARK

Jay and I spent the day on the farm, helping Dane with the harvesting. Many of the vegetables were done growing and needed to be picked, but not the Agriisak, which can live up to years in the soil. Although, the longer it lives, the less severe its mysterious effect is.

“It’s a lot of work out here!” Jay said wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“Duh, it’s a farm. I used to live on one you know. This was an everyday thing for me. On Kharak, there was no harvesting season. Things were grown all year long with much more work to do than this.” I replied. He took a deep breath and tried to drink some water from the sprinklers. “I wouldn’t do that. It’s filled with growth hormones for plants. You could get sick by drinking it.” He spat it out and kept walking down the fields with me.

“So was all this worth running away from? I never had a family like this. Sure it’s hard work, but they all love each other. Why would someone leave that all behind?”

“Well, I wanted to know about my true family. So I ran away to find out. And it was worth it.”

“If you say so.”

We headed over to the house to get a drink. The heat was so much we had to take off our shirts. It was set to Kharak heat, but it was very humid. And we have been working all day. It was good exercise, but it also reminded me of my old life. My childhood. I was trying to become my age like I should be. I stopped acting like a great leader and more of an ordinary teenager like I was meant to act. And this helped.

“Hey you two, how about you come on inside and get something to drink.” Lisa said.

ARAZIS

The kadeshi walked over to the front end of the ship to the observational platforms. From the front, the outside was visible through the thick hull plating as if it wasn’t there. But the outside looking in did not show the same effect. They were in hyperspace moving to the location of the mining site. Nebulous as passed by the ship colour by colour. The outer parts of the nebula had more red than the inner regions. It was just an interesting fact about what kind of world she lived in. Half her life she had lived in space, in ships like these. She turned to Saiin standing next to her. He lived his whole life in ships. He only set foot on one of the colonies for ceremonies or funerals. He was a space dweller living his whole life on warships or the artificial colonies near the centre of the nebula. Those were massive interconnected levels of metal lit only the same way the Needleships were, invisible walls and a dim blue glow from the fluids flowing in clear tubes powering the cooling systems.

She felt that space was a lonely place if she wasn't near any of the crew, so out of the way of everything else.

"When will we be arriving?" she asked the captain as he passed by.

"Tomorrow morning. You might want to get some rest." He said. It was getting late.

"I will." She said. She said goodnight to Saiin and headed for the sleeper tubes. She was told of a time when the people used to fall asleep on their own and slip away from consciousness. She had never done that. The tubes were filled with liquids that kept the body clean and healthy. There were no diseases or cancers, no migraines or fatigue, and there was never a need to bathe. She knew nothing else. It was the way they lived and expected other races to do the same. But from what they learned from the captured subjects from other races, they all slept the old way, all but a race known as the Bentusi.

Long ago, a ship more massive than two Needleships put together was passing through the Nebula. It was a story that her father told her long ago of the largest battle of the Garden. The ship offered an alliance but refused to leave. And from what they understood, the species were genetically integrated to their ships. The ship was said to be a mere trade ship. But the weaponry on that vessel was far greater than that of a Needleship. Its front ion cannons fired without end on a target. The fleet had to call for backup. And so did the Bentusi calling upon two other Tradeships. They acted as if they ruled the galaxy and the nebula as well. None ruled the Garden. And it was a holy sanctuary. The Bentusi defiled this place and seeing as they would not join, were sentenced to death. Ships of various sizes were constructed to repel them, such as the multi-beam frigate. A small ion powered ship that could fire four ion cannons for a long period of time causing lots of damage. The battle came to its end as the Bentusi, one by one, were eliminated. It took the power of five Needleships along with fifty frigates and hundreds of warmers to combat their fighters. But like always, the power of Kadash brought them victory.

Arazis entered her room and locked the door. She got undressed and entered the sleeping tube. It filled with a liquid that she could breathe inside. She fell unconscious and fell into what the kadashi called sleep.

## ERIC

Eric was in the hospital with sensors all over his bare chest. He came back to consciousness after what he was told was three days. The doctors told him he suffered major blood loss and broken bones. It would take some time before the bones would heal maybe a week, maybe a month. He was told to report to the hospital once every three days to get check-ups and x-rays on his bones.

"Can I leave now?" he asked.

"After we ask some questions as to how you feel." He took off the sensors on his skin and put on a shirt. The questioning didn't take too long. Just a few questions like *Do you feel dizzy?* or *Can you breathe right?* in the end, he was allowed to leave freely.

He left the hospital walking and limping at the same time. He just hoped that William got what he wanted. But he was still confused as to why the prisoner helped him. He remembered it yelling for help.

*Why would a Taiidan want to help me?* He asked himself. He walked to the scene where it happened. Sure enough, the blood was cleaned up, but he found someone walking along the same path he was.

“Hey are you all right? I found you here a few days ago and thought you were dead!” it was one of Will’s old followers.

“I’m fine. Well, not fine, but I’ll live.”

“I found the prisoner calling for help and she was arrested and taken back to the cell where she belongs. What did she do to you?” he asked. Eric was confused by his words.

“*She* didn’t do anything. She might have saved my life! It was Will who did all this.” The other looked confused now.

“What? Will? Really? We all thought it was the prisoner. Are you sure you saw what you think you saw? I didn’t see Will anywhere.”

“Well it was. And now that innocent prisoner takes the blame. Not innocent, but this was not her fault. And besides, what did she do that was so bad?”

“Um . . . being a Taiidan, causing damage to the security systems and breaking cameras, murdering some of the Turanic prisoners, oh and she killed a guard.”

“That still doesn’t seem too serious to me. Do you judge me just because I’m Gaalsien?”

“No, but she helped destroy our planet. That should be a big enough crime.”

“I guess. Where is she being held?” he asked.

“Prison level block 3b. Don’t do anything stupid. I can blame you if something happens.”

“No worries.” He said. Eric headed for the prison level to speak to her.

## TRIIKOR

Triikor sat in the prison cell that she had been sent to for being captured. She was stuck with two guys she didn’t like. Greasy scumbags, the Taiidani that destroyed an entire planet. She did not partake in that dreadful event, though these two seemed to have enjoyed it. She had secretly been giving the Rebellion information on the location of weak Imperial garrisons. She was discovered and sent to prison. The only way she could get out was if she fought in the Great Wastelands. She did, and her fighter was captured. She regretted helping that weak kushan as they are called. But something told her she had to. The ones who came to help him thought she was the one who did the damage when it was some scrawny punk who deserved a good beating.

“Hey Trix, Now that you’re stuck here with us, how about treating us to something special.” She learned a while back that these two meant that they wanted her to strip dance for them.

“Ew! In your dreams!”

“Maybe it is!” she was disgusted by these perverted freaks on the *Saarkin-Cho*, and now on the *Rancor* as well.

“Come on Trix!” they started to walk towards her but she punched them both to the ground.

“Why can’t I be locked up with the civilized half of the prisoners? I bet the Turanic are better than these two.” She said talking to herself. She leaned on the bars of the cell, and heard a door open.

## ERIC

Eric entered the prison level to find that the guards of block 3 were gone. He didn't know why. He broke in and looked past a couple of cells to try and find her. She walked past a few cells and saw her leaning on the bars. She didn't even turn to acknowledge him.

Eric poked her shoulder and she turned and put her hand around his throat.

"Oh it's you. What do you want?"

"I just wanted to thank you for probably saving my life. Will has issues with the Gaalsien clan. I don't know why, but he was about to kill me."

"Yeah well he looked like he deserved a beating. Hey can you do me a favour? The keys are just over there. I'm tired of being trapped with these two retards." They were still lying on the ground in pain.

"I-I don't know if I can. Someone suspects I would. And I'm trying to stay on the good side of the crew." Her expression turned into a frown and she stared at the steel floor. "But I do owe you one. Here." He took the keys from the hook and held them in his hands tight. She grabbed them but couldn't pull them away.

"Hey! Give me them! Please! Those cameras are broken by the way."

"Oh. Well then I could just say you stole them from me." He let go and she unlocked the door and go out. The two others tried to but she locked them in.

"Hey! Trix let us out!"

"Sorry but you two might give me a bad name. And besides, I don't like you." She ran out the door and Eric followed.

She ran fast. Turned a corner, and was gone. Eric heard someone coming. They were close. And just as they were about to turn the corner, someone pulled him up the tube to the next level.

"How did you—"

"Gripped magnetic boots. I can walk on metal."

"Oh." The alarm sounded after that, and they needed to find somewhere to hide.

"Come on! Over here!" she held a plating of brown metal in her hand and told him to get inside the wall. He did and she closed the wall behind them.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"It's a system I created of secret doors. I've had a month to make it." She turned on a light and they walked farther in. It was dark and wet. It was probably the only part of the ship not dried yet.

"So you live here. How? Where do you get the food?" he asked.

"I have an entrance to the cafeteria."

"Oh. I don't even know why I'm here. Any you helped destroy my home!"

"No actually I didn't. I refused to take part in that battle. So did many of us. When we heard what was about to happen, we decided to rebel against them. But we were then locked up. I was stuck with those two from earlier. They were both convicted with rape on several occasions."

"So you're not bad."



“What is the point of your seemingly endless crusade?” she asked.

“To reach Hiigara.” she took a serious look on her face.

“Why?”

“Because it’s our home.” She grabbed him by the neck.

“Say again?”

“Thousands of years in the past, our ancestors were exiled from their home for committing the same sin your people have done to Kharak. None of the authorities know more about it than the act we are from a planet named Hiigara in the galactic core.” She let him go so he could speak. “I read it in the oldest book of Kharak, a book written not on the world, but on the Exile.”

“Then why are you headed there if you were banished?” she asked.

“Because we have nothing left, nothing but the slim hope that we may be able to see the planet for ourselves. And it is our home. We want it back.”

“It is my home to, you know? I lived there my whole life. The Empire’s capital is on that world. There is no chance you can retrieve it.”

“Then we will die trying. If Sajuuk has led us here, it is for a reason. And if he has chosen us over you that is for a reason as well.”

“I’m sorry, but who is this Sajuuk you speak of? And who said he has control over the Empire?”

“What! You know not of Sajuuk! He is everything and nothing. He is he whose hands shapes what is.”

“Oh a god. Well, great. Now I have to deal with a bunch of religious nut jobs.” Eric realized she was not a believer. He sighed at her ignorance to the truth. He then knew why Sajuuk chose his people. These Taiidan have drifted away from the lord and this was their punishment. It was a near Judgment Day.

# Chapter Four

## Entering the Garden

### ARAZIS

She had woken up as scheduled when the liquid drained from the tube. She got up slowly, dried off and put on some clothes. She walked out of her room heading for the observation platform in the front. All along, the walls were clear and the nebulosity was visible outside. She had gotten used to this like it was an everyday event, but some new people were stunned at the magnificent appearance.

“Hey Jerry!” she said calling to Jeremiah on a support deck below. He was walking by and looked up. “Are we out of hyperspace?” she asked.

“Yeah, we’ve been out for a while now.” She looked to the side and saw that the nebulosity was as red as her hair.

“I guess the asteroid gatherers are away?”

“Yeah, we already received our first shipment.”

“That's good.” Unexpectedly, an alarm sounded.

“Captain Jeremiah to command bridge, Jerry, we’re detecting a hyperspace reading. Our probes have detected it will be crossing the inhibitor field in ten minutes.”

“Sorry I have to go.” He ran to an elevator quickly almost tripping over a man leaning over the railings observing the nebula from the bottom. The poor man was only hanging on by his arms. A woman ran to his assistance.

She headed to the command deck to find out what was going on.

When she arrived, she was let in by the guards. Jeremiah was in the captain’s chair staring out through the front of the ship. Needleships were cheaply designed on the interior, but the hull was incredibly strong and the weapons were also very powerful. Like the huge ion cannon in the centre in front. It stretched through the platforms like a beam of complicated systems held in place by hundreds of supports. And when it fired, even on the inside of the ship it lit up with a blue glow.

Jeremiah pressed a button and the inhibitor field was set to full power. They waited a few minutes, and then there were sparks of charged particles going off everywhere, and the intruders were dragged out of hyperspace. It was a fleet of Turanic Raiders. Not many and they seemed to be damaged. The pirates started harvesting the nebula, and then the *Amun* closed in on them fast.

“Launch the Negotiator.” He said. The Negotiator was a Swarmer used as an ambassador to communicate with the trespassers.

The Raiders launched a missile at the Negotiator as it asked them to join and surrender their ships. This meant attack time. Three dozen warmers launched and so did a few fuel pods. The battle didn’t last long, but Arazis leaned against the glass observing the whole event. Their fighters and corvettes were no match. And the ion frigates were rammed and fired at by the cannon when in range, although one of the raider frigate rammed while firing its cannon into the

frontal cannon damaging it to the point where it would need repairs. Then, the carrier at the heart of the fleet fired at the *Amun*. The carrier, unlike the rest of the fleet, was fully repaired and operational. And if the *Amun* rammed that, it would surely be destroyed. Three multi-beam frigates launched from the Needleship to finish the battle. It was not much of a battle, but the crew of the *Amun* loved battle. And watched anxiously at the fight hoping some surprise would pop up. But there was none the kadeshi MBFs, as they were called for short, finished off the carrier before it could cause any damage to the *Amun*. And the harvesters moved to salvage the remains of the fleet.

“Well there was some action, not much, but something fun to watch.” Jeremiah said cruelly. But if it were any race other than the Turanic, Ara was sure his reaction would be different, more regretful than excited.

“Is that all? Oh well.” Ara was disappointed also. Usually Turanic fleets put up more of a fight.

## MARK

That day at the farm passed by. Like always, Lisa made the Agriisak salad, and I had the dream. This time, it was blurry and even harder to tell what was happening. But it was over after I woke. I didn't tell anyone this time. It was three days since that day. And it had been a while, but it was Isel who woke me up. We hadn't been talking much recently.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“You have no idea how long you've been out do you? We're almost inside the nebula! Come on! Everyone is in the observatory! It's amazing!” that was enough to wake me up. I jumped out of bed and ran out the door.

“Put on some pants!” I noticed I was only wearing a pair of boxers and my socks. I ran in my room half embarrassed, but it was only Isel. I got dressed and ran to the observatory. She was right. the place was packed! And not just the one room. All ten of the levels were full of people. Three quarters of the crew must be here. We met up with Jay and Karu leaning over the edge with their arms hanging over the side.

“I bet I can spit and hit the top of the platform below us.” Jay said.

“I bet I can make it land on that guy's head.” Karu challenged.

“I bet it won't do anything.” I said popping up behind them unexpectedly.

“Okay then, I'll wager ten credits.” Jay said.

“Sure.” They both spat down, but the spit ball floated away in microgravity.

“Ha ha! Only the floors have gravity you dopes.” They lowered their heads and admitted defeat. The nebulous gas was passing by the window fast. It was very red. Almost the colour of blood.

“Wow!” was all I could say. Yet again, the universe amazes me.

## JOHN

On the command bridge, John had his face glued to the window. “Captain, you’re going to leave a permanent mark on that window if you keep that up.” Paul said.

“Hey it’s my ship; I can do what I want to it. But besides, look at all this! Has anyone ever seen such majesty? I think not! I bet not even the Kiith-Sa of any tribe has not seen this!”

Paul sighed and returned to his sensors screen. “I’m detecting high levels of disturbance in the sensors systems. Not only gaseous and resource caused. But there are high electrical discharges everywhere.”

“So, fix it.” He said half paying attention.

“I-I can’t sir. Whatever . . . you’re not even listening to me.”

“No not really.” He gazed at the nebula some more and returned to his chair whipping the condensation off the window.

## ERIC

Eric had gotten out of the maze inside the walls and walked freely around the ship not being acknowledged by anyone, as usual. William must have disappeared again. He hadn’t been seen since they last fought. Not by him, or anyone else. Him and Triikor, as she was called, got along rather well despite their major religious differences. He slept well that night. He saw that the fleet was entering the nebula and went to go tell Trix. She liked to be called that. He opened the entrance near his room and closed it without anyone noticing. The walls were soundproof so no one could hear anything inside them.

“Trix! Hey where are you?” he didn’t even know if she could hear him because of how big the network of walls was. “Hey Trix!”

“Yeah?” She was hanging from a metal pole that looked like liquid ran through it.

“Did you know that we’re entering a nebula? Come on I’ll show you.” She seemed interested and followed him. Finding a socket on the floor, he plugged in a long wire that lit up white. It was a long wire that brightened up the tight halls with wires of all sorts bolted to the walls. He let it roll off the spindle as they walked.

“Great idea!” she said.

As they were walking, Eric tripped on a loose wire and fell hard on the ground. “Ah!” he yelled.

“Still hurts?” she asked referring to his many wounds.

“Like hell!” he got up and they kept walking. After a few minute’s venture, they found a door that lead to an abandoned storage room near the front of the ship that had a viewport. “Looks safe to me.” They got out and stared out the window into the shades of red and pink.

“Wait a minute. I know this place.” She backed away from the window. “We’re going into the Great Nebula aren’t we? You have no idea what kind of danger is there, do you?”

“Huh? Oh you mean the *no one returns* part. Please . . . do you expect me to believe in that ghost story? I think Sajuuk would lead us around if he found it too dangerous.” She said.

She grabbed him and swung him against the wall. His back hurt suddenly. “Keep your god to yourself. An entire Elite Imperial Guard fleet once entered the nebula and was never heard from again. A search team of even more powerful force went in, and they never returned either.

Once, three Bentusi Tradeships entered the nebula and never came out. If the Bentusi say it, it is the truth. No one returns! You hear me? No one returns!” she had frightened tears in her eyes and let him go.

“Well, I have faith. That’s all I need.” He said.

“Well, I need more. I need fact, I need numbers and calculations. Not pure chance and myth. I’m going to die soon. I can feel it in my gut. It feels like I’m going to die here in this nebula. And I’m scared.” She took Eric and hugged him. He let her. And he felt warm inside.

“Nothing’s going to happen. I promise.”

“Okay. I trust you. I’m not sure why. But I do.” This made him blush a little. But thankfully she didn’t see.

## ARAZIS

She was on an observation platform with Saiin. They were staring out in the dark areas of the beyond, an area outside the Garden, somewhere else in time and space. Because the farther a star in the darkness is from you, the farther back you are looking in time. The mysterious ways of science were known to her, and she accepted that even if it sometimes questioned her god. The two were great friends. They knew each other very well. But she did not love him. She simply thought of him as a wonderful guy to be around. They saw two sparkles of light in the distance. But they were gone after a few seconds.

“Attention crew, we have trapped an enemy fleet. We are not sure of their origins; they have vessels of what seems like three different races. One is Turanic. The other two are unidentifiable. We will be approaching them soon. Be prepared. Their fleet is more massive than ours. They must have driven the Turanic Raiders from earlier into the Nebula.” Saiin and Arazis ran to the Swarmer docking bays to their ships parked beside each other.

They put on their pilot suits over top of their clothes and Arazis ran to the ship and climbed on the top sliding into the cockpit. It was very unlike a chair, she didn’t sit in it. Her legs were held in place by braces, and her arms were free to control the ship in whatever way. Her feet controlled the speed. She was ready for battle and waiting for the launch signal if needed.

“Hey Ara, we don’t need to get in yet.” Saiin said in front of the one-way view screen. She deactivated the cover and he could see her now.

“I know, I’m just being prepared.” Saiin laughed and slid off the Swarmer.

## MARK

“Alert! We are being pulled out of hyperspace. Hold on tight.” The big blue door opened and passed over the ship. The sudden speed stop sent Jay flying overboard into the microgravity below. He floated to the window.

“Help!” he yelled. He reached the other side of the opening and kicked off the window with full force. He was caught by someone on the level below.

“And I was about to spit on his head!” we both laughed and headed out the room almost

forgetting that we were in trouble.

# Chapter Five

## Garden of Kadesh

MARK

We left to the fighter hangar just in case. I was excited to use the *Ferin Sha* once more. It stood out from everyone else's ship as it was custom painted.

"The nebula is incredibly rich in energy and resources. Energy levels are so high that our sensors are having trouble compensating."

"Sometimes he's just pointing out the obvious I think. Like really, we're in a dense nebula. Of course we're going to have sensor trouble." I said sitting in the seat.

"It's his job." Isel said.

"Yeah but he doesn't need to tell us every single detail." Karu agreed with me at least. He and Jay then headed down to the corvette docks. I had two other pilots assigned to my squad; I was beginning to wonder if they would all just keep dying on me. Eric was in my squad also. We took off and took our positions outside.

"There is a contact closing with the *Mothership*. Sensor instability makes it difficult to identify." I looked at the little red blip that looked stable through all the randomly flashing lights and lines on the screen. "Preparing the Ambassador." The ship launched and moved to the dot. We were given a live feed on one of the screens. It showed the ship from the Ambassador's camera. It showed a huge ship, larger than the *Rancor* approaching fast. A tiny fighter-sized ship launched from the alien mothership. The tiny ship was half the size of one of our fighters and moved incredibly fast.

"This is the Garden of Kadesh. For thirteen generations we have protected it from the unclean." The other pilot's voice was very deep. "The Turanic Raiders who came before you refused to join and were punished for this trespass. Like theirs, your ship has already defiled this holy place." That didn't sound too good. I noticed Eric moving in to join the squadron formation. "If you have come to join we welcome you and will spare your ship until all have disembarked. If you have come to consume the Garden, you will be removed at once." Oh great. Removed sounds friendly. But in what way? I asked myself. "What are your intentions?" it asked.

"We were unaware of the significance of this location. We mean you no conflict. Please allow us time to prepare our engines so we may withdraw as requested." The Ambassador's captain said.

"If you will not join, then die." I swallowed at that last phrase. It was a terrifying thought.

ARAZIS

She was waiting patiently for the signal. This was the type of conflict that she didn't like. These poor people were merely trying to pass by, but now they will be destroyed. "There is no

*withdraw* from the Garden.” The Negotiator docked, and the warmers all launched simultaneously out of the hangar surrounding the whole ship followed by the fuel pods in the second hangar. They broke off into their individual squadrons, and preformed magnificent patterns to show off their power.

## MARK

“Shit guys! Here they come!” there were maybe a hundred small fast-moving ships coming towards us at high speeds. Faster than any ship but mine using its boosters.

“Hyperspace module charging. Ready in eight minutes.” Karan said. I was happy for that.

“Okay team, just eight minutes and we’re out of here!” we accelerated towards the enemies along with the other fighter squadrons. Our tactics were set to evasive the whole time, and we were firing on their fighters. They were rather strong for a ship its size. And it moved and manoeuvred very fast. I thought for a second that they were drones.

“Mark! We’re being followed by some!” Eric yelled out. I signalled to them to pull up and behind them, but that didn’t work. They followed us.

“Um . . . okay, cut the engines for one second.”

“What?” Isel yelled.

“Trust me on this! One, two, three!” we all cut the engines and allowed the warmers to speed past us. We activated our weapons and engines at the same time firing at the seven ships. Five blew up in smoke, the other two got away.

“Don’t worry about those two. Keep in Delta formation.” I ordered. So much for being a normal kid.

## JOHN

The captain was screaming orders to the crew and telling them where to move, and who to repair. This battle was even more intense at the first minute than the whole battle at the Great Wastelands. The chin gun was firing as many times it could, but the targets were just too fast. But he noticed a weakness. Apparently so did the captain of the *Skaal Tel*.

“All available frigates follow me or the *Revelation*. I found a weakness. The fighters use up their fuel faster than ours. That’s what those larger ships are for. If we can take out as many of those as possible, their fighters won’t be a problem.”

“I’m with ya!” John said ordering the pilots to follow the destroyer.

“So am I.” Herald said. “*Nomad Cannon* at the ready.” There were several Daggers following also. They broke up into two groups setting course for the fuel ships.

## TRIIKOR

She was in the storage room staring at the horrifying battle outside. The *Rancor* at least was



not participating in battle. There were a few of the enemy fighters swarming the ship, but no major damage was done. She stared as the enemy mothership slammed into a Dagger frigate and smashed it to pieces.

“Hey you there!” a tall guy with a scar on his face was running towards her. She could have easily taken him down, but she was scared at the battle outside hoping that she would live to escape the nebula. He pinned her down and put her in hand cuffs. She was then brought to the prison level crying. Some crew members felt sad for her. They knew she was Taiidan by her yellow and red jumpsuit, but they felt bad that she wanted to live. And that she thought she was going to die in the Garden of Kadesh as the so-called Kadeshi called it. The officers had only met Taiidani as being brutal mercenaries living for nothing but destruction. They had not planned on meeting a civilized pilot. They threw her in her own cell this time. She didn’t even care that she was away from those two creeps from her earlier cell. All she could do was stare out the porthole across from her cell. She didn’t even acknowledge the guards trying to question her. She was too frightened by the sight outside. She had lived in training as a pilot to deal with minor threats, but this . . . this was something else in her book. There were hundreds if not thousands of small crafts buzzing around faster than any ship she had ever seen.

Suddenly she felt homesick. Not for the Saarkin-Cho carrier she had lived on most of her life, her home on Hiigara with her family. She missed her mom and dad, and her annoying little brother whom she has not seen in five years. She missed the clean natural air, the wind in her face, and the sounds of all the life around her. Here in this desolate cell onboard the raider carrier, with hatred-filled eyes staring at her as if she were some kind of monster, which she started believing as her kind had destroyed an entire world just to stop a couple of desert-dwellers from finding their rightful home. She had second thoughts about the Empire and felt this huge tear ripping her into millions of pieces. She had no idea what to do. So she fell to her knees, and cried.

“Not so tough now, am I?” she whimpered half to herself.

## ERIC

He was trying his best to not be killed, and trying to shoot at as many enemies as possible at the same time. Always under the leadership of Mark Soban.

“The enemy is relying heavily on fighter class ships.” Intelligence said.

“Really? Honestly I think we noticed genius! Tell us something useful!” Mark yelled over the intercom.

“Our research division reports it can design a new type of corvette especially suited to combat multiple fighters.”

“Finally! We’re getting our asses wiped out here!” another pilot from the squadron said. Eric noticed the grouping of fighters around one large frigate-sized ship.

“Mark, you seeing what I’m seeing?” Eric asked.

“Yeah, I think I am. Okay all fighters aim for those ships surrounding the fuel ship!” he ordered.

## ARAZIS

Arazis was docked with a fuel pod along with Saiin. They stuck together most of the time. And then what seemed like out of nowhere, a single squadron of five fighters came in and shot unmercifully at the out of fuel Swarmers hovering, waiting to dock. They were all destroyed. There were maybe ten of them grouping helplessly together waiting to be fuelled. The light turned on saying she could leave. She took off about the same time as Saiin and some other Swarmers and headed to the squadron of ships that just did what she saw. They caught up fast, and they fired on the ships. One blew up, and then they all aimed for the leader, whose ship was painted a black and red pattern.

“This one must be important. Let’s finish him!” she yelled. They all sped up and opened fire. Soon after, another enemy squadron came in from above and destroyed the group. All but her and Saiin, and then left to battle their own chasers. Arazis sped up almost directly behind the ship, but she was rammed from the side.

She looked, and the figure was visible from the inside. It looked exactly like a kadeshi, but with dark hair and brown eyes. It had an angry look on its face, and rammed again. She deactivated the view blocker and showed her face to the enemy.

## MARK

“Mark, I see it! The enemy! It has hair like blood! Get away!” Isel rammed the enemy again and it gave up and left along with the other fighter.

“Good work, but don’t kill yourself! I already lost one wingman I don’t want the next to be someone I know!”

“Alright then.” She replied.

The battle was hard and I was getting sweaty under my pilot suit. I don’t think I took my fingers off the trigger the whole time.

There were fewer fighters than before; I noticed two groups of capital ships destroying the enemy fuel ships. Red Squad just moved in and took out the groups of enemies as Green Squad attempted to watch our back. And Yellow Squad would do the same. I just lost the only Defender pilot in mu squad. Now it was all Interceptors. Like the last few times. The Porters were also proving to be useful by capturing some of the fuel ships along with the immobile fighters. I didn’t use my boosters yet. I didn’t need them. I fired on another group, avoiding some to let the Porters feel useful.

The Mercy corvettes were not very efficient in this battle. They were a very common target. They worked to repair the frigates inside a swarm that I was headed to right now, and each other. The enemy mothership was approaching no them, and the frigates fired on it. In return, it tried ramming them. The destroyer was almost hit. I saw that Karu and John were both in this group. Karu was being fired at, but then repaired by his wingman. The large mothership then smashed into a Dagger frigate and blew it to pieces. The other capital ships backed away after that.

The mothership started venting smoke and debris. This was a good sign. It would be almost

over.

## ARAZIS

Arazis was in a swarm very near the *Amun*. It was badly damaged. She saw the black ship approaching and tried to avoid it. She told Saiin to do the same. The Needleship launched a lot more backup Swarmers and fuel pods to help the fight. The damaged Swarmers in the swarm left and docked with the Needleship in fear of being destroyed while being repaired.

She saw that the enemies were moving vertically while attacking to avoid the ramming procedures of the Needleship. Her weapons were beginning to jam and decided to dock with Saiin for the rest of the battle.

“Saiin, come on. We should let the experienced pilots do the work. And my weapons are jamming.” She agreed and followed her in to dock.

“That was an amazing fight! Incredible really,” Saiin was very happy and excited by the events.

“Well, it was the best fight of my life. And they are a match! This fight could last so long! Let’s go watch.” She said.

They ran to the observation decks and saw the battle going on. There was a red beam of ions that smashed right next to them on the invisible armour, but didn’t even come close to penetrating in. A next wave of Swarmers launched and then the *Amun* started venting atmosphere in critical amounts. Fire was seen in the space to the starboard side. There was then a red door of the waveform overhead and then they passed into hyperspace. The best thing of all, the hull naturally moulds back into form in hyperspace in a matter of milliseconds. And the next second, the waveform opened and they dropped into normal space. That was an illusory auto repair procedure that left them thinking the fleet was gone. But then, the

*Amun* launched several waves of Swarmers onto the resource collectors nearby.

“That was close.” She said.

## JOHN

“Are they gone?” Fiira asked.

“Well, sensors can’t tell. There’s too much stuff here to see clearly.”

“This is the captain of the *Ifriit 2* calling anyone who knows the answer to this, is the enemy mothership gone?” he asked.

“No captain, this is the *Redemption* resource controller, I have the ship in my sight. And it has no damage at all. It must have repaired while in hyperspace. I’m also requesting defence over here for the resourcing operation. They just launched a hell of a lot more fighters!”

“Roger that, the battle is pretty much over on this end I’ll come help if I can. I’ll bring a few squads with me too.” John replied.

“The captain of the *Revelation* and its guards are reporting to assist as well as some new drone frigates.”

“We have detected an inhibitor field. We cannot launch the hyperdrive until the field is destroyed.”

“Oh great. What next?” John asked rhetorically.

## MARK

The battle was finished when the last fuel pod in the area was captured by the salvagers. The fleet slowly moved over to where the *Redemption* said the enemy mothership was. My squad was one of the first to arrive at the scene. It was as if we were never going to get a break. The fleet had completely rebuilt itself. But luckily for us, a wave of twenty multi-gun corvettes launched from the *Mothership* in squads of five. They fired on all the enemy fighters and took them down easily. The Blades were now officially obsolete with this new ship. I would still use the *Ferin Sha*, but now people might call them old and out-dated. I'm still gonna use the ship though.

“We’re winning fleet!” someone yelled. In fact, the battle never seemed easier the fighters were taken care of easily with the Tempest corvettes assistance. And the destroyers, now three as another Revelation-class was constructed, were focusing fire on the mothership, while the frigates fired on the fuel pods.

The needle-shaped mothership approached our *Mothership* and opened fire from a hidden frontal ion cannon. The beam was heavier than four destroyer cannons put together. The second shot made a hole through the top of the ship to the other side. I didn’t even want to know what important systems were up there. All the ships in the fleet turned to fire on the enemy’s mothership. It lit up in fire, but before being destroyed, entered hyperspace once more.

## ARAZIS

The Needleship’s main cannon was repaired, and it fired twice before the enemy fleet attacked full force causing the ship to need to abandon the outside fleet that didn’t manage to dock before entering hyperspace. It was sad that the *Amun* needed to abandon almost half of the crew in order to survive. Hundreds of souls, left to wonder endlessly in space. Souls she knew. Unless destroyed by the enemies. At least Saiin was with her. They both lowered their heads in despair for the lost battle and their lost friends.

# Chapter Six

## The Nebulans

MARK

The enemy mothership was not seen again after it entered hyperspace. Unlike last time, it disappeared for good. We didn't know if it was destroyed or not, just that it was gone. Four collectors and one more controller were built after that event, and resource collection had started up again. We wanted to get as much resources possible before leaving. Although there was still danger, Karan decided to keep moving forward. I was in the fighter hangar with the repair crew fixing minor damage to the hull. The screen on the far wall flicked on and Fleet Intelligence started doing a report.

"The enemy mothership appeared to be equipped with a powerful field generator. This field deformed our quantum wave front and dragged us out of hyperspace preventing us to leave. We also observe that the enemy's hyperspace module has an identical power signature to our own. This raises interest in questions considering our own technology was reverse engineered from the wreck of the Khar-Toba. Our hyperspace systems are now functioning properly and this jump will carry us clear of the nebula." Now that was information. Our hyperspace systems are not similar, but identical. I wonder what this could mean. I would have time to figure it out later.

The enemies were commonly referred to as the Nebulans, so that is what we are calling them now. The Nebulan mothership managed to escape. That was bad for us. They could alert others of our coming. I wondered how many they had of their motherships. If it was only the one, than fine, but this nebula is huge! So I doubt that the one mothership was enough to be feared by the Bentusi. I tried to get that thought out of my head and headed back over to the *Ferin Sha* finding Isel inside.

"Nice upgrades." What was she doing? I got up the ladder and saw she was just playing with the new control panel I had installed.

"Why are you messing around with my ship?"

She turned to me and smiled. "Because your ship is cool, it has so many advantages over an ordinary one."

"After all that happened all you think about is my ship?" I asked trying not to seem angry.

"I-I'm sorry. I guess I'm just trying to get it all out of my head, that's all. So that's why. She was just trying to mentally repress it.

"Well, I'm sorry to break it to ya, but things aren't about to change. This is happening. It's not a game; it's not some kind of joke. Its reality and it hurts. We may even be fighting distant Hiigaran relatives. But we can't surrender to them." If they won't accept our peace offering, then so be it. We are at war. Nothing can prevent us from reaching Hiigara. I'm not stopping at any cost, and I think can say I speak for the fleet as a whole.

I spent the remainder of the day wondering about what was happening now and compared to the earlier fights. I thought our victory in the Great Wastelands would have been enough, but it

looks like this is just the beginning.

## ERIC

Returning to the *Rancor*, he felt safe once more. He got out of his interceptor and was met with a crowd not sure whether to cheer or stand there confused. They were doing both. There were some familiar faces as he made quite a few friends on the ship, some even waved for him to join them. But he had other plans. He needed to find Triikor.

Upon arriving, he hadn't even had the chance to get to his room for a quick rest. The fleet was now in hyperspace, but he ran into a familiar face that he knew too well.

"Hey there!" called a deep voice, Eric spun to see his old friend Brutus.

They ran to meet each other and then he said, "I'm glad to see you survived out there. Weird stuff isn't it?"

"Yeah . . . almost spooky." He said.

"Well I guess we found those ghosts the Bentusi were complaining about." Brutus said in his deep voice without showing even a hint of fear.

"I just hope we don't have to run into them again." they both nodded to the thought of there being an even bigger battle than the one before.

"Well the thing I wanted to tell you is that we captured that Taiidan escapee." He said all confident.

"What!" he yelled out loud but not in joy. He had just said the one thing to completely ruin his day.

"Yeah, found her myself. I tackled her before she even knew what hit her. I got a job as a crew officer now. See?" he showed Eric his badge. "Uh . . . you don't look too thrilled about any of this. Is there something wrong?"

"No. Nothing. Congratulations." He tried to fake a smile but then thought he just looked really dumb. "So where is she?" he asked.

"In the maximum security holding. She's never getting out of there." Eric turned and winced. It was like waking up from a nightmare, into another nightmare.

He decided he couldn't hide it any longer, so he just said, "Is she allowed visitors?"

This made Brutus almost jump in surprise. He had not expected that from his friend. "Wh-What! Why would you think about that?" he almost yelled in anger.

"Just answer the question! Can she?" Eric was holding back tears. He had just learned a few hours ago that she had strong feelings for him, but the thought of never seeing her again pierced his heart.

"Well . . . uh . . . yeah with an officer, but why would you—"

"Just shut up! I can't take it anymore! I helped her escape the first time." Brutus' eyes were wide, almost angry. "I've gotten to know her. She's not some kind of monster you know?"

"That's enough! You're lucky I'm your friend or I'd arrest you right here. This is just . . . this is just . . . wrong!"

"How? How is it so wrong? Because she's a Taiidan? How do you know the Taiidan aren't ancient Hiigaran relatives too? Huh? They look just like us don't they? Why is it so wrong! How

come you're all such huge hypocrites? First you help convince the Kushan that us Gaalsien are good enough to be treated as citizens, and now they look up to us! Now since I have a friendship with a Taiidan I'm some kind of enemy of all society? I'm sorry, but I would rather be by her side than live this huge lie! What on Kharak are we thinking!"

That's just it. There is no more Kharak. *They* destroyed it. That is why it's so wrong."

"So what? When the Siidim bombed my home village and forced us underground I forgave them, why not now seeing as she was not even part of the destruction. She told me herself. She refused to go along with the plans and was arrested until the job was finished. She was forced to watch as millions of people died before her eyes. Don't you think she's suffered enough?"

It took Brutus a while to take it all in, and came up answer empty. "I'm sorry, Eric. I didn't know." That was all he said. A simple "sorry". He now felt bad for being the cause for more suffering laid on her. She would be taken to the interrogators soon. That would not be fun.

"Will you take me to see her?" Eric asked calmly. He had time to vent while Brutus was coming up with an answer.

"I might. She'll be taken in for questioning soon. I'm telling you now, though. She's a Taiidan. Taiidan almost never survive the interrogations."

"Then let's hurry." He said. They both ran as fast as they could towards the high security level.

## ARAZIS

The *Amun* was eerily quiet. There were no pilots talking and no passengers walking about on the observation decks. Jeremiah had sent out a distress signal to the other two ships, the *Suteh*, and the *Ptah*.

"How you holding up?" came a familiar voice. She turned to see the captain himself on the catwalk behind hers. She turned and faced him. She was felling jumbled up emotions and it was all incomprehensible.

"Fine, considering I feel like I've lost half my family,"

"That you did. It was a tragedy. But if I chose to wait for them, there would be none of us left. This ship's getting old. Her repairs and reinforcements won't hold forever. She's seen the largest battles ever to enter the Garden in my two lifetimes. The other two can help us. They are newer models with much stronger hull. More loading capacity and more. But I will never abandon the *Amun*. I will live longer than she will, or I will die along with her."

"I don't understand." She said quietly. "Why do you feel such strong feelings for this ship? What is it in this assembly of metal and wires that makes it so important for you?" she asked.

"That is something you can only understand in time. When you've been the captain of the same ship for as long as I, you start to feel as if the ship has a presence. A spirit if you will. Like a soul. I feel her. When she whines, I know what's wrong. Not only because of my experience, but because I understand the language of the core. The hyperdrive is technology we do not yet understand. It's mysterious. We were able to duplicate it, but never understand it until you speak to it."

"I do not understand, are you saying the core brings the ship alive?" she asked curiously.

“In a sense yes, it is artificial life only created when it is fused with other machinery. The core is the source of the living, but it could not live without the ship to interact with.”

“It all seems so . . . unreal.” She said.

“I know, you don’t believe me, but when you understand, life will be so much better.” She turned away from him and stared out the bow of the ship through the clear material. The nebulosity was getting denser by the minute.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it.” He asked.

“Do I need to answer that?” she replied in a smile.

“It is the reason we cannot let them escape. They know of us. They have harvested the nebula. If the Evil Ones find us here, they will come and take it all away from us. I can’t let that happen. Not to anyone, especially you.”

She turned to him with a puzzled look.

“I have thought of you as my own daughter. I cannot let you know what life was like before Kadesh. It was painful. It was suffering. People died for no reason, their souls to endlessly wander the galaxy never to reach Balcora.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is forbidden to speak in too much detail about it. You know about the exile from our home because of Sajuuk, and how Kadesh took us in and hid us from him and the Evil Ones. But I do not think you know why no one can leave. If Sajuuk finds us, we will be doomed for betrayal against a god. The exile would continue with even more suffering than before. Our people have grown. They prosper. No one can leave or it will be taken away.”

“So we must destroy them for something they do not understand?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry it’s like that, but that is the way it has to be.” He frowned and leaned against the railing.

“What if you give them another chance? Ask them to join once more and explain their situation.”

“That is exactly the way we have kept it for generations. You are the perfect image of our society.” He walked down a flight of stairs to meet her. “There is so much out there. But we will never know the whole truth. That is why no one must know but the elders and a few other border patrol officers such as me.”

“But why does Sajuuk want us to suffer?” she asked him.

“Why else but because he is a god. They are selfish and thrive on excitement. They want to have fun. Gods are not to be feared but to be hated. They cause an unimaginable amount of pain. You cannot live with a god and have peace. You must abandon them and try and hide so you can live your own life.”

“But wait, I thought Kadesh was a goddess?” she asked.

“Oh no my dear,” he stroked her short red hair as if she were his daughter. “Kadesh is the Garden. Nothing more. Kadesh symbolizes protection and peace. It is not a goddess. But we must love her. Just look at all she brings!” they both stayed there staring into the distance. They had no idea where they were going. They could only trust that the core would bring them there safely.

Arazis stood there on the platform with Jeremiah for a while. She thought over what he said, and understood why these invaders could not be allowed to leave. But still, she hoped this



would not end in more bloodshed.

## TRIIKOR

The poor Taiidan lay alone in her cold steel cell awaiting it all to simply end. She had gotten over crying about herself now, and has nothing else now but to lie there, alone, waiting for something to happen.

Only a couple hours in there, she was already feeling the loneliness. All the cells around her were filled with Turanic Raiders. Not a single Taiidan or Kushan in sight. She thought it was probably for the better. Talking about it would only make it worse.

She was about to fall asleep when she heard the sound of someone walking in the doorway down the hall. She sat up awaiting another guard to torture her with pointless small talk. But who she saw brought a small amount of happiness to her totally depressed mind.

“She’s in there.” The tall scary-looking guard said. She recognized him as the one who captured her. She didn’t put up a fight then. She was too horrified by the sight of the battle outside. They have been told of war in training. But there has never been a need for a war. There were small rebellions and revolutions, but that was no battle like the one she had to witness. But now, seeing that tall scar-faced guard was a reminder of how she couldn’t afford to let her guard down.

Eric walked over to the bars of the cell and she did the same from inside.

The guard pressed a few buttons on the wall and asked for a few moments alone to the other guards. They shrugged and walked out.

“What did you do?” Eric asked.

“Turned off their ears.” Was his simple answer.

The two turned to face each other again. “I’m sorry Trix. But there’s nothing I can do to get you outa here this time. Its maximum security and even blocking their ears is risky for his job.” He said pointing to the tall guard.

“So? I don’t even know who that is. To me he’s just the bastard who stuck me in here!” she yelled.

The guard lowered his head in regret.

“I know this may seem a little much, but he’s actually my friend. One of my best. He didn’t know. He does now. His name is Brutus Gaalsien.”

“So he’s related to you?” she asked.

“No, why do you ask?” the young Gaalsien looked confused.

“Well you both have Gaalsien as your last name, so doesn’t that mean you’re related?”

“Well . . . ya maybe by a couple dozen generations, but I don’t see the point of asking such a simple question at this time.”

“Yeah. I’m sure I’ll find out eventually. But you’re not the one stuck in this prison cell for the rest of your life.” She said letting a tear fall from her eye.

“If it helps,” Brutus started, “they’ll be taking you in for interrogations soon. It’s not a good thing because Taiidan never survive, but it’s not in the cell,” he stopped talking seeing it was only making things worse.

“So this might be the last time I see you?”

“Yeah. I really am sorry. If only—

“What? It’s the way it’s supposed to be I guess, you told me so much about Sajuuk and your religion. Maybe he won’t allow a Taiidan to be with a Kushan—

“So you believe now?” he asked.

“Well, yeah, it makes so much more sense than my old life. I finally understand how things work in the universe, even if it’s not the best for me, as a Taiidan. But you know what else; I can honestly say that I believe you will reach Hiigara. It’s a long journey, and there are many defences. It will be hard. I have never seen a war, or even understood it. But seeing the battle outside was what lit my mind. The war ahead is going to be near impossible.”

“What are you saying?” he asked.

“I’m saying I’m on your side now. I’ve had a long time to think my life through in this cell. All I can say is that I hope the Empire falls. There are many rebellions in the inner rim. They may be able to help. I don’t know if my family will ever forgive me, but I’ve chosen a side. Seeing what they did to your planet is horrifying. The Taiidan have made an uncountable number of enemies in our rise to power. I cannot allow them to do that to another world.”

“What are you planning? I’m glad to hear all this, but what exactly can you do to help us?” Brutus asked.

“I’m going to tell these interrogators everything I know. Who knows, they may allow me to live.”

Brutus’ eyes lit up with a slim hope. “It’s a very slim chance, but still a chance. Neither of us is allowed to be near you while it happens. You’ll be on your own with this.”

“That’s okay.” If I die, then it’s off to Balcora. Who knows? Maybe I’ll meet this Markus everyone talks about all the time.” She forced a smile out, but none of the trio felt like smiling.

“And if you live,” Eric continued.

“Then maybe we can be together, hopefully.” Eric actually smiled at that. Not a forced or a faked one, a truly happy smile.

“And you can show her the son of that hero, right?” Brutus said. “I’ve heard he’s become somewhat of a legend himself.”

“Yeah . . . maybe someday.”

Just as they finished, a group of guards barged in the room. They didn’t even say goodbye. The two of them just stared into each other’s eyes not saying a word. They both knew exactly what the other was thinking. Eric nodded and turned to leave with his tall, bald, scar-faced, friend. Maybe someday she’ll be able to forgive him.

The group of guards were unlocking her cell. Seeing Eric walk away felt like a lifetime in a few seconds. She knew now how he felt. It was the same as she did towards him. All she could do was sit there and think it through. Her emotions were a mix of fear, pain, hope, and betrayal from the empire. None of it made sense. And at the same time, it all did. She hoped she would get to see Eric again. That was enough to keep her going. She knew now. She knew how he felt. They were in love.

The time for that would come later. Right now, it was time to go meet these interrogators, betray the Empire she once served, hope it helps them reach Hiigara, hope they let her live, and most of all, hope she can see Eric again.

# Chapter Seven

## Questions, Answers, and Freedom

MARK

We're getting some rest here on the *Mothership*, and I believe so is the rest of the crew. It's dangerous to build ships in hyperspace, but we need all the time we can get. If something else happens, then we *need* to be ready. I seriously doubt that that battle was it. The Nebulan mothership escaped. And this is a huge nebula. There's got to be more. I just hope they miss us.

I'm not even sure what they are called. There's a debate about that. Not a real serious one, but they can't decide whether or not to call them Nebulans, of Kadeshans, or Kadeshi, or Guardians, or, or . . . we're all too clueless. We just call them all of the above for now. Every time one of them is interrogated they don't answer any questions. Not even their name. They would rather die than speak. That is the only thing they tell us.

I decided it was enough thinking about it. I needed my rest. What people don't realize is that piloting is a hard job. It works you to the limit physically and mentally. You need to concentrate hard, stay focused, and make the right moves or you die . . . especially when the enemy is faster and better than you are. I had trouble out there. They were good, but I was better. They were fast, but I was faster thanks to my upgrades on the *Ferin Sha*. I'm just glad that none of my friends died out there. I couldn't imagine what it would be like if Isel's fighter went down, or Jay's corvette, or even if the *Ifriit 2* exploded.

That would have messed me up and threw me over the edge. It didn't happen, and I was able to keep my cool and make it out alive. But what *if* it happened? What then? Would I lose focus and crash? I had to shake that thought out of my head. The good news was that we were all alive with only a little stress to stop our concentration. After a good night's sleep, we'll all be ready to take on another day.

I lay down on my bed, and couldn't even decide what to stop thinking about. Because before I could get the chance, I was out.

TRIIKOR

She was led through the prison level to a small room with a table. She was forced into a chair and braces were locked around her arms and her legs so she couldn't move. The people who brought her there left without speaking a word. She had millions of thoughts flowing in her mind, but had to put them aside for after this *meeting*. It may be her last hour alive, but she decided it best to stay calm.

Three people entered the room a few minutes after the others left. They didn't look like the officers. They had on suits with ties, and a briefcase. They sat in the three chairs opposite to her and opened the brief cases to hold out some pieces of paper. One word came to mind,

*interrogators.*

They exchanged glances and began. "You have quite a reputation on the *Rancor*, don't you? Well, here in this room, you are just another disgusting Taiidan. You killed Kharak; you murdered our families and our friends. How does that make you feel?" the one in the middle said. He seemed to be the leader. The other two looked like they were just noting down the questioning.

"Well, truth be told, I didn't take part in that genocide."

"Liar! You are a Taiidan, and therefore an enemy."

"But I didn't! I was locked up until it was done! I threatened to go against the Empire and they locked me up and forced me to watch the horror. I'm telling you the truth." She was telling the complete truth. She didn't feel like lying to them.

"But then why were you captured in an interceptor while the battle was at the Great Wastelands?" the middle guy asked again.

"Because they said it was the only way for me to regain my honour, the only way for me to get out of that prison. I was in there for the entire time we were in hyperspace. I couldn't stand it. I would have done anything to get out."

"You would even kill?" she had to think a while before answering.

"Yes. I'm being completely honest. But I tried to miss as many times as I could. I set to evade the whole battle. I promise you I tried not to kill anyone." The interrogator didn't look even slightly happier.

"And when captured, you escaped somewhere into the ship. Where?" This was it. She could tell him about the passageways she made, but it could be risky. She decided it best to stick with the plan. She was scum in their eyes. She could only hope they would see that she was no liar.

"There are paths between the walls of the *Rancor*. I created doorways into them. I had to hide because I knew where I would end up if I didn't. I couldn't be put back into a prison after all I've been through."

"And then you were caught once more. And you escaped again. But this time it wasn't alone was it?" the guy on the left pressed a button and a screen rose in the middle of the table showing video footage of her taking the keys from Eric. "And then just before you were taken in today there was this." The screen showed Brutus and Eric entering the prison. "You may have blocked our ears, but we know that that is the same guy from the first time. Who is he?"

This was the worst thing that could have happened. She didn't want to lie, but she didn't want to bring Eric into this. "I-I can't tell you." She stuttered. She wasn't lying and she wasn't going to sell him out.

"What? Why not? Are you protecting him?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well . . . uh . . . I don't know how to answer."

"Yes you do! And you will answer me."

"No, I won't. He doesn't deserve this. You seem to think I do, but he doesn't. He has worked his entire life to earn even a shred of respect. I will not destroy that for him, even if I have to die for it. I have nothing left to lose, he has everything to lose."

The guy didn't seem to lighten up. The screen sank back into the table. The one on the right who was taking notes seemed to be feeling something, like he didn't want to destroy two lives.

“Maybe we should just let it go. He’s a Kushan. Why should we destroy another of our lives? We are so few as it is?”

The middle man glared at him. “We won’t kill him idiot, we will simply lock him up until we reach Hiigara.”

“But it will crush his spirit!”

“So what? All our spirits have been crushed at least once, he will get over it.”

“His entire life has been pain and neglect. He has been hated since he was born. Yet he does not blame any of you. He kept his respect for you even after you have destroyed his home and his life. He has called this people great and caring. I don’t see that here. All I see is torture. Where are your souls? Do you even believe in Sajuuk? I have only known of his existence for a short time, yet I believe.”

“Do you even know what the main goal is in Sajuuk’s eyes? It is to help us get our revenge on your kind.”

“That’s a lie. I have understood that Sajuuk is simply guiding his people home. He is not some war god causing destruction. It is up to you to fight for your home. I have families and friends on Hiigara. I know all about it. I have lived there with the cool breeze in my face and the warm tropical weather on the border of seas covering most of the planet. I have stared out of a lighthouse as the sun set. I know more about what you’re fighting for than you yourself do. I can help you too. I know where the major Taiidan fleets are. I am ready to spill all the secrets we agreed to keep from you. All you need to do is leave my friend alone.” This seemed to get his attention. He no longer seemed angry. He opened his eyes a little more.

“Go on,” he said in a calm voice/

*Great! He’s listening!* She thought.

“Well, I need you to agree first. Leave him out of this and I will tell you all I know. I want to return home as much as you do. I miss my family. You seem to think our entire people are evil barbaric imperialists living to do nothing but kill our enemies. Well you’re wrong. You have only met the mercenaries. We are an entire people. We live in peace when the emperor is at ease. I don’t want to know what is happening now that he knows of this crusade. I fear for my family and my people.”

“So you betrayed them?” he asked.

“You could say that, or you could say I’ve changed sides.”

“So what *information* do you have?” he asked.

“a list of imperial bases that were not in the broadcast you found, fleets that you would want to avoid for now, probes that can sense your approach, basically everything the Empire doesn’t want you to know about.”

“Okay then. I will leave your friend out of this. Just tell us.” That made her feel better, she had the upper hand here. And Eric won’t be harmed. She would live and help them return home. She broke a smile in relief.

## ARAZIS

Arazis was with Saiin in the crew quarters. There was nothing to say between the two.

They were alone now. They knew a few people onboard the *Amun*, but their best friends were abandoned.

“So what’s the captain’s plan?” he asked breaking an uncomfortable silence. He thought he could almost hear the screams of the ones left behind, but registered it as his mind playing tricks on him.

“We’re going to meet up with the *Suteh* and the *Ptah*. They’ll help us. Our remote sensors are telling us they are falling right into our trap.” She sounded almost happy about it just then.

“Ara, you sound different.”

“I’ve been told an unimaginable truth. We do not worship a god. We worship protection against a god.”

“What are you saying? Are you defying all of the order handed down for generations? Kadesh is our saviour!”

“That she is, but *she* is an *it*. Kadesh herself is the Garden. She does protect us. We worship a nebula, Saiin. There is no god involved. Jeremiah says that gods are simply selfish beings who feed off of excitement and war. I believe him.”

“But . . . but that makes no sense. We have the largest of festivals and events dedicated to worshipping Kadesh. You’re saying that Kadesh is nothing more than the nebula? Then why do you think we call it the *Garden* of Kadesh?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s got to be a reason, I just haven’t found it yet.” they stayed in quiet again.

“I don’t know who to trust. I don’t want to lose you, Ara.” He said.

“And you won’t! I’ve been told this is the truth. I’m not asking you to believe it. But I do. I just don’t know what else to talk about. There is nothing to say.”

“I just can’t wait for this day to end, for this all to end. I want to go home after this. I want to see my family. I didn’t get to see them at the ceremony. They were in another temple on the far side of First Colony. I miss them.”

“But we must not allow these outsiders to escape. If they do, the Evil Ones will come and destroy all we have built. They will target First Colony and destroy the temples of Kadesh, and then go to your home on Third Colony as well. I know you lived your whole life in space, but your family on Third Colony will be lost. It will only be a matter of time before they find the *Amun* and destroy us as well.”

“I understand that. I agree. They must be stopped. But I’m not sure who to trust anymore.”

“Trust *me* Saiin.”

“Ara, you are the *only* one I know I can trust.”

“Thank you Saiin. Trust the captain. He knows what he is doing. He has lived two lifetimes of wisdom. He knows his place.”

“I hope so. And I hope we defeat the outsiders. If not, Kadesh help us all.”

## JOHN

The captain lay in his chair half asleep. He was relieved by the outcome of the battle, and felt like sleeping right there. But Fiira wouldn’t allow it. She had tons of system reports to give.

“Ahem! Are you listening to me? She called out to him.

“Uh yeah! Yes! System reports! Right, well uh . . . why don’t you take a break, Fiira? The *Ifriit* seems to be holding up, so why don’t you get some rest. I know I need mine, so you are dismissed.” He said with little authority while yawning.

Fiira thought about the stress he had felt today and decided to give him a break. “C’m on captain. You sleep in your bed, you work in your chair.” She helped him to his feet and they headed to his room.

“Fiira?” he asked, “Why do you do it? You make it your job to record every painful moment of every horrifying battle we go in. doesn’t it bother you?” he said in a sleepy tone.

“Well it’s not as bad as your job; you put yourself on the spot all the time making fifty decisions at once. I’m more confused on how you do it. You must be having so much stress on your shoulders every moment of the day.”

“Well it’s my job because I’m strong enough to handle it. Not many captains are. They only last half as long as I have. I only know a handful as strong. One of them isn’t even a captain. He’s a pilot.”

“You mean Soban?”

“Yeah. That kid’s got the right stuff Fiira. He’s gonna make it far. I believe in him. He’s got his father’s guts. He doesn’t fear the enemy. He thinks like them to understand their next moves. He knows what he’s doing. That’s why I believe Mark will guide us all. We have troops, and ships, and the knowhow. There’s only one thing we don’t have.

“And what’s that?” she asked him.

“A leader.”

“You need some rest. I’ll wake you up if there’s any trouble.” She walked out the door. She thought through his words. She didn’t know what to make of them. Maybe he was too tired to think straight, maybe he wasn’t. But in the end, he was right. The people need a hero, a leader. It was his father, now he’s gone. He died defending his home. In the end, he failed. But it was a noble act to go against an entire Starfleet with only a few fighters and corvettes. There was something there. He had no fear. And now, Mark is the next. He has no fear either. She didn’t know what to make of it.

*I guess we’ll see.* She thought to herself.

## MARK

The day passed by. Or was it night? I honestly didn’t know anymore. Time is meaningless. It could be seven at night and it could feel like morning. I barely woke up. I don’t even remember my dream. That was probably good. It meant I had a great night’s sleep. Or great day’s sleep. Whatever.

I got out of bed, went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth and jumped in the shower. It would be the last piece of the puzzle to rejuvenate my body and mind. I got sleep, now I needed to shower it all away.

I turned on the water and set it hot. It poured out onto me and it was like I could feel all the pain washing away. The water in the bottom was black and grimy. It was probably all the grease

and oil from the *Ferin Sha*. It felt good to lose it all. The water was burning my back, but that was fine. It felt good, pain to wash away more pain. That was the one thing with these showers. You couldn't set the temperature. It was hot or cold. No warm. I was fine with it. It reminded me of the hot springs on the tropical islands in the Majiirian Sea. It reminded me of Kharak in general with the scorching hot weather.

I just finished washing my now long dark brown hair as it grew in the time I spent since the day of the *Mothership* launch. There was no dirt, just grease and oil. But I heard a far-off whining noise. It took my mind a few seconds to snap back into reality. It was the siren. We were being pulled out of hyperspace.

Sure enough, as soon as I got dressed in a new pair of clothes, fleet intelligence said, "Attention fleet, we're being dragged out of hyperspace."



# Chapter Eight

## Preparing for a New Day

ARAZIS

The siren sounded moments after she was scheduled to wake up from her sleep. She had barely gotten her clothes on. The door to the tube closed up and she got ready to start off the day. Her mind and body fully healed from the battle the day before, she was ready again for another painful meeting with the outsiders.

When in full uniform, she headed out to join the crowd amassed near the bow on the announcement platforms. There, the captain or other important figure would address a crowd with important news. Usually, the three large decks strapped to the very hull of the ship would be packed with Kadeshi awaiting news important enough for people to abandon their daily routines. There was only two platforms partially crowded but with lots of room to move around. There were also maybe a dozen on the third. Captain Jeremiah the Second was standing on a stage in the middle platform where everyone could see. She ran into Saiin and his two other friends on the third platform balcony. She decided it was less crowded there and she could get a better view at the stage below.

“This is it,” he said, “the battle’s back on. He just said how the *Suteh* and the *Ptah* have arrived with us and are sending defence groups. They have more than enough crew to balance the loss we suffered.”

“This is it? These few hundred people?” she said in anger and sadness.

“Yeah. There are fewer than twenty pilots along with the crew of one fuel pod docked in the frigate bay. The rest are the essentials who keep the *Amun* herself working.”

“How sad,” one of the others said. She was on the break of tears. Seeing these platforms so empty was a real awakening on just how serious a loss this has been. The *Amun* alone would not stand a chance against the outsiders. They need assistance.

Luckily for them, the two other Needleships were ships that returned from a previous mission on guarding the outer perimeters near the old *hot-spot* where ships of various models used to try and pass through the Garden. There hasn’t been a single sighting there in over a hundred years. The last was a small stray cruise ship. And the passengers decided they would rather live in the Garden than die. The two had a hangar full of fuel pods and multi-beam frigates along with an overfilled stock of Swarmers and advanced Swarmers.

“There are groups of frigates headed our way this second.”

“Are the generators set up?” she asked.

“Yeah. They’ll be entering our inhibitors in minutes.” Saiin said.

“Shhh, listen.” The other friend said. The captain was starting up again.

“It is ready! We have set our formations and troops are transferring over to the *Amun* as we speak. I will only say this once more. We *must* stop them.” He walked off the stage headed for his seat of command on the bridge.

“Well,” Saiin started, “let’s get to our ships shall we?” Ara and Saiin walked off the platform headed for the hangar.

“What do your friends do?” she asked.

“They both work on the main cannon.”

“Oh.” Her mind was concentrated on the day ahead. It would be gruesome and bloody.

“Let’s stick together this time.” He said.

They entered the hangar that was almost empty except for about a dozen other ships. They began the familiar procedure of entering their Swarmers and getting comfortable.

The signal was given, and they all blasted out the hangar headed to the soon-to-become battleground.

## ERIC

The pilot was getting ready to board his fighter when he heard a familiar voice call to him.

“Eric!” called the blond-haired Taiidan. They met halfway down the hangar in a hug.

“Trix? How did you—

“They let me leave! Can you believe it? I told them everything. Well not about how you helped me escape. That might have ended you up in a cell.”

“I’m so happy to hear that! They just let you leave with no catch?” he asked sceptical but excited.

“Well I’m under constant surveillance, but yeah. They probably know who you are now, but it’s okay because it’s no longer a problem.”

“That’s great!” he was feeling so good that he almost had tears of joy. Yesterday, he feared she would be killed and he hunted down. Now, she’s free to do whatever she wants. And they could be together now. Well not right now. He still had to win a huge impossible battle.

“I’ll see you when I get back, okay?” he said. He didn’t want to get too excited. Well it was too late for that, but he wanted to be able to stay focused in battle. If not, well . . . boom.

“Don’t leave just yet!” she said.

“I need to. It’s my job. You know,” as he pulled away, Triikor pulled him back and planted a kiss on him. It lasted what seemed like forever for the two, but then reality sunk in and they pulled away.

“I-I uh . . . I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay. I’ll get you back when I *get* back.” He gave her a wink and turned towards the *Saju-Ka*. He thought about that last moment with Trix. She never showed signs of *that* to him, maybe a hug or two, but not *that*. So much for his *great friends* plan he thought of earlier that day. He’s gonna have to accept that load of information overload from her. He honestly didn’t mind. He wanted it as much as she did. But he’s always been shy to *everyone*.

He closed the hatch of his interceptor and looked around. There were few fighters. There were lots of Tempest corvettes though. And that was good because they seemed to do most damage to the enemy fighters.

He shook all his thoughts out of his head and took off out the hangar. The dim red glow of the lights turned to dark blackness. He was headed over to his squadron, Red Squad. The one led

by Mark Soban, the source of inspiration to the fighter pilots and many others of the Mothership Fleet.

He arrived at the coordinates but he was not yet there. Three interceptors were in formation, but the leader seemed to be missing.

## MARK

I'm running down the halls like a crazed maniac trying to get to the *Ferin Sha* as fast as possible. I have no idea how long the siren has been sounding, I just know I'm late for a job that can't afford to have me missing. Red Squad was waiting. Isel and Eric were waiting. So were my newly assigned wingmen. I couldn't seem to have them stay alive. I thought about it, and the truth is, my other two wingmen never seem to make it out alive. Huh. Oh well. You want to work for the best you got to be the best.

I made it in the fighter hangar and sprinted to my ship, got in, and took off. I hadn't noticed it, but I forgot to wear socks. Oh well.

I joined my group using the boosters and got there as fast as I could.

"Took you long enough," was Isel's voice.

"Hey, I was taking a shower. What can I do about it? I didn't even hear the siren at first. I gotta get one of those in my room or at least in the hall outside of it."

"Well I see the commander is late for work!" Came another familiar voice on the intercom. This one was one I wanted to hear above all.

"Hey there Jay! Just stay alive for me will ya?"

"Can do, captain Bloody Hand," that was his new nickname for me on the job. He's revering to the funeral ceremony of course, when I had to cut open my hand for blood.

"Let's get together sometime after this, okay?" I asked.

"Sure thing, how about we do that right after this? Well, not right after. I'm thinking on taking a trip to the pool or maybe a physician." We both laughed at that. He must be feeling the same as I did before my shower. One word, *ouch*.

"Hey tell Rob I said hi. Oh wait he can hear me can't he. Well, you've been kind of invisible the past month, so just felt like saying something.

"Yeah whatever kid. Don't get killed." Were his comforting words, great choice, you know I haven't spoken to him in a couple months, why not tell me not to die above all else? How about a simple Hello? Or was that too impossible for him? It was probably too friendly of him.

"So Eric, how's *The Homeworld War* coming along?" I asked about his book.

"Great, it's all down up to where we are now. What about you and the *Khar-Halla*?" He asked.

"I'm almost done, another fifty pages to go. How have things been going down on the *Rancor*?" I can't believe this may be the last few minutes of our lives and we're all making small talk. Huh well what the hell are we supposed to do? Pray? I think Sajuuk knows how we feel.

"Great! It's been extremely busy but it's going great. I met a Taiidan."

"So there's interesting stuff going on down there?"

"You have no idea." I think I want to eventually. But not today. I have a mission to survive.

## JOHN

He sat in his chair nervously watching the battlefield. There was not much to see through the dense reddish fog of the nebula.

Fiira shot him a nervous glance and he nodded in agreement. They were all tense.

“It’s a trap.” Said Fleet Intelligence.

“Hello captain obvious!” Paul said toying with some controls. “Ahhh!” he yelled in anger.

“What is it?” John asked.

“I can’t get a good reading anywhere! There’s more interference than the last time.”

“Keep trying.” Fiira said.

“Got it,” he said.

“Got what?” John asked.

“I found the inhibitor readings and I’m sending the data over to intelligence.” He said.

“Sensors report hyperspace inhibitors in a triangular formation.” Screens flashed on showing just what he meant.

“Good job Paul.” John said and observed the report.

“Even one can keep us from entering hyperspace. All of them must be destroyed.” He concluded his message and they continued their jobs by joining the ion assault team as a repair supporter. “The nebula is still scrambling our sensors, but it appears that we have incoming enemy units.” Intelligence said.

Indeed there were small crafts incoming. They recognized the yellow engine trail as the Guardians. One of them was speaking.

“Again we offer you the chance to join us and live here in peace.”

# Chapter Nine

## The Cathedral of Kadesh

### ARAZIS

“We cannot stay.” The female voice said. The outsiders’ commander was being broadcast to every ship in the massive fleet.

She and Saiin had joined a squadron of eight Swarmers and they were escorting the Ambassador along with several multi-beam frigates.

“We’re on a journey. But let there be peace between us for we have something in common. The hyperdrive technology left to us by our ancestors is identical to yours. The Homeworld we seek may be yours as well.” That was a hard load of information for her to process. She had only heard stories. She thought of them as nothing more than legends. The other Exiles have returned.

“You will fail.” The Ambassador replied. “The evil that drove us here will find and destroy you. From you they will know of us and come here! This cannot come to pass.” He was losing it. She thought. His voice was cracking. But it no longer mattered. The battle had begun. The Swarmers were moving in for attack. It would be all over in a matter of minutes. And she could return to the *Amun* and her friends. Or the ones left.

“Saiin, stay by me.” Just as she was about to move in for attack, she saw the black and red fighter from the day before. The one she couldn’t get at. This time she would make sure she did.

### MARK

They attacked. “Engage and destroy hostiles.” Intelligence advised. I pulled my squad into an ‘X’ formation and we were on our way to deal with the threat. We all set to evasive to out manoeuvre them while attacking. It seemed to be the only way. If not, we would be shot down like many of the fighters surrounding us.

I looked at my sensors manager screen and saw that Jay’s ship was moving in towards one of the frigate-sized ships for a salvage run. “Okay squad, let’s go help the salvage team.” I said while pulling them over in that general direction. I had to make sure Jay would be safe.

“Uh . . . Mark, two of them had been following us this whole time and they don’t seem to be too happy.” Isel said. I looked on a rear-view screen and saw them coming in fast.

“I’ll handle them. You just make sure Jay gets that frigate to its destination.” I immediately pulled out of formation and set my boosters on full throttle towards these two followers. I noticed Isel immediately taking the lead. She’s definitely my favourite wingman.

### TRIIKOR

The Nebulans, or Kadeshans, or whatever they called themselves started to attack. From the *Rancor*, it looked to be far away. But that's when it hit. Literally. In seconds, a blue beam of ions blasted at the hull just below the viewport she had been standing behind to observe the battle. She had no idea what was going on until the ship surprisingly *rolled* its way into view. She blinked and widened her eyes to make sure she wasn't seeing things. The enemy ion ship was doing barrel rolls in space. It had four ion cannons and they were all firing at the same time. She dismissed it as a tactic to cause the most damage possible.

She had already gotten over the horror yesterday and was feeling slightly less horrified. Very slightly. She also observed as two salvage corvettes griped it and the beams turned off. It was captured and headed for the hangar.

She ran there to get a look at the Kadeshans herself. She had never seen them, so she wanted to.

What she saw when she entered was both comforting and disturbing. The Nebulans were pale-skinned, but not bleach-white like the Turanic. They looked Taiidan. Or Kushan. They were all pretty much the same. *Maybe the Taiidan and the Kushan are ancient relatives?* She thought. They were all shorter than her, and she wasn't the tallest on the pirate ship either. They looked more like the Taiidan than the Kushan. They had blue or green eyes and walked with their heads down in shame. They knew where they were going. What else she noticed that really surprised her, was that there seemed to be only two hair colours. It was blond or red and everything in between. One girl looking to be only about twelve had pink hair. She looked to them like they were every colour of the nebula.

They called the Taiidan the "evil that drove them here". And yet she was one of them, standing only a few feet away. They had no idea. And she didn't feel like telling them.

She saw one of them get knocked over in surprise. "T-T-Taiidan!" he yelled. The rest turned to face her. She didn't know what to do. She looked both ways, and the guards were struggling to get them to the elevator deck to the prison level. She felt sad for them. They had panicked looks on their faces. Some ran for the end of the hangar only to be zapped with a taser rod. She looked to them like some kind of demon or killer. They were all afraid. She took a step back and then another. They calmed down a little. Not calm, but not screaming or sprinting for the door. She turned and ran out the hangar. She didn't know what else to do. She didn't want to be seen as someone to be feared like that.

## ARAZIS

"He's coming towards us? Saiin, get behind me. I'll take the lead." The obedient little guy obeyed and fell behind but still continued forward.

The black ship screamed forward and opened fire. She noticed it had extra engines on the top and bottom sides. It made him fast, it made him a threat. "Fire!" she yelled. Her and Saiin opened fire on the outsider and hit, but he survived. He made a spiral and blasted past them. She turned and followed. He was already facing them opening fire. But his other engines were off now making him a slower target, but still a big threat. He was good. He was *really* good.

## ERIC

The battle was getting serious. Jay's team had just caught the second frigate and they were headed to help Mark. His mind raced from the fight, to Trix, to Mark, then to himself and the fight again. He had a hard time concentrating. He was feeling dizzy and light headed. "I think there's something wrong with my ship." He said to Isel. They became somewhat friends while he spent his time on the *Mothership*. He trusted her.

"What do you mean?" she asked. He heard the worry in her voice.

"I-I feel light head. It's c-cold in here." He started to shiver. "Hold on, I'm running a scan. *Cough.*"

"Eric!" she screamed.

"I-I can't breathe! H-hold on, oh no! Oxygen levels are at *cough* point five percent! I have no air!" he started to panic. He checked them after he came back from yesterday's battle. He must have been hit. There was no other explanation. "I-I'm fogging up!" he screamed.

"Go back! Get to the *Rancor*! You won't die on my watch! Get outa here!" she screamed. He did as she said. He turned the ship back towards the red hangar so far away now. He blasted the *Saju-Ka* forward with only the hope he could get air in the hangar. His hands became cold. He risked a look, and they were frosted. He was freezing to death. The set as much of the power he could into the engines. He stopped breathing as it would make his lungs hurt. He just had to make it to the *Rancor*.

## MARK

"You lost a wingman already? Isel, I expected more." I'm buzzing around these two Swarmers and didn't know if I was gonna make it out. But then, Isel showed up just in time.

"Yes and no. He's not dead. He was losing oxygen so he went back to the *Rancor*. He'll be fine as long as he makes it.

"Wait, Eric?" he didn't answer. I feared the worst for him. I just hoped he would make it. I didn't have many friends left. If I lost him, then . . . I can't even finish that sentence. "He'll be fine. Yeah he'll be fine." I tried convincing myself.

"Focus, Mark!" her voice said. She's right. I needed to focus on this battle.

The ships were easier targets now. They had to avoid all of Red Squad now. Minus Eric. We all came in from different directions making them not know where to go. They were done. We had them

But then, just as we were about to come in for the kill, twenty more ships were headed our way. We didn't stand a chance against that many.

"Fall back! Incoming swarm! Get outa here!" I screamed. They noticed. Because they were already leaving before I could finish. I followed. My fuel was low, so I wasn't going to risk using my boosters. I'm regretting not installing those super engines Jay found in his Porter. There was time for that later.

"There! Head for that Matriarch!" I said. We headed as fast as we could to the frigate that

could save our lives. We got there in one piece, but I was hit more times than I can count. Good thing I upgraded my ship. That's when it hit me. Maybe it didn't really matter how many times I get hit as long as I destroy the enemy. I would test that theory out later. I needed fuel badly. I was starting to doubt I had enough to get to the frigate. But I made it. The supporter was guarded by half a dozen Tempests, and their thirty-six guns took aim. The twenty had quickly become fifteen, then eight, then two, then none. We docked and got fuel.

"That was close." One of the unnamed wingmen said. He had no idea.

We were repaired and given a full tank of fuel and then it was out to battle again. We headed to the main battle. I was sure that Jay could handle himself. Besides, Rob was a smart guy, he would get one of these cool gun-covered corvettes to follow him around.

"Let's go." I said.

## ERIC

He held his breath as long as he could. He thought he felt his face turn red, then purple, then blue. He was almost there, only a dozen meters to go.

He wanted to scream, but had no breath to do it. He felt his mind go blank. He was passing out, or worse. He had to stay conscious.

Seconds past, and he passed through the red hangar screen. he opened the hatch and filled his lungs with oxygen. He screamed and slammed the ship on the ground. He heard the sharp screech of metal on metal. It was the last thing he remembered. He saw people running for cover and a line of confused Nebulans backing away. A few seconds later, he saw the lights go out, and felt he was falling away. He was not dead, but unconscious.

## TRIIKOR

She heard a scream and the sound of screeching metal in the hangar. She thought one of the alien prisoners escaped and caused some damage. She ran in only to find that beyond the bulky frigate, there was a Blade Interceptor crash landing in the hangar. It was too far away to make out who it was, but the event in whole was enough to make her come running.

She ran towards the Blade that was already slowing down. It was smoking, probably because of all the heat and friction.

She ran through the crowd of confused Nebulans that backed away fast when she got there, avoiding her like she was the Kaldaan Plague.

Past the frigates, and over to a team of repairmen with extinguishers that shot out white foam. She got there, to see that there was a pilot already on a medical bed. When she saw who it was, her heart sank.

Eric was headed to the hospital unconscious. She had no clue as to what happened, and neither would anyone else until he woke. His ship was decided that it be kept in the current state to see what caused him to crash. She stayed by him until he would wake. Though she had only known him for a short while, she felt things she never felt about anyone before. He was special.



So she couldn't let him leave her.

# Chapter Ten

## Suteh

### ARAZIS

She made her way to a fuel pod and was set to go for another run. But decided it was too risky to go only two. They joined a large squadron and headed to the mass of ships.

They were over near the swarm of fighters close to the *Suteh*. The Needleship was firing its main cannon on some of the frigates. The enemy had frigates that could repair damage, but it was no use. The ion beam was causing more damage than it could repair. All the repairers were doing was earning the ship another shot.

She almost pitied them. They were so desperate to chase a myth. They would be willing to die for it. What kind of crazed lunatics would do such a thing? She didn't have the answer. All she cared was that if they left, the Evil Ones would know they are here. They were so feared that they would not even bring themselves to say their true name.

The battle was a massacre. There were Swarms exploding everywhere. The large fighters with six guns were pounding them. The Kadeshi were losing by number of fighters, but the outsiders were losing by number of capital ships. It was an even match. She feared this would go on for longer than she planned.

### JOHN

The *Ifriit 2* was in direct line of fire from one of the ion frigates with four beams.

"Move the ship!" he yelled at some people and made them move the ship out of firing range behind the *Skaal Tel*.

The fleet was taking a serious beating. Sure, the enemy fighters were being blown apart like flies, but their ion assault was no better. They had lost a great number of frigates. The main gun of that mothership was just so powerful. But the ship was venting gas meaning they were causing some damage.

The Porters had captured several of their ion frigates. They were called multi-beam frigates. Great name. They helped at causing a great deal of damage to the enemy mothership. The beams could fire for ten seconds before needing to be recharged.

The battle had gotten ferocious. The mothership had launched more fighters and more of those fuelling ships. The *Mothership* had also launched a number of various corvettes along with three ion frigates. The capital hangar had just built the fourth destroyer of the fleet. They were headed to aid the ion force, but the enemy fighters were also headed to destroy the ion assault. And there were more multi-beam frigates headed to destroy them too.

"This is intense." He said falling back into his chair.

The swarms grew larger and started to envelope entire frigates. This was bad. It meant that

the Tempests had too much to handle. And it meant that this battle grew to a whole new level of fighting.

## MARK

I was horrified. I know what a swarm of bees looks like. But this was worse. There were huge amounts of fighters. There had to be well over a thousand. I'm not expecting to make it out of this alive. All around me I see explosions and sometimes I would be flying so close to one, I could see body parts flying around outside. Gross. But this was a war. I had to pull it together. It's just that knowing that arm or leg once belonged to someone you said hi to on the way to the hangar, or someone you ran into at the store that makes it so hard.

The only upside is that it was not one of my friends. That was a good thing. I kept risking glances at my sensors manager to see if they were all there. I found that feature in the hangar. It turns selected green friendly dots into purple with a name on top. I zoomed out to the whole battlefield while docked with the Matriarch. I saw Isel, Jay, John, Jeroll and Karu. The only one missing was Eric. I just hoped he made it to the *Rancor* and not the alternative.

Doing so was risky. I risked getting blown up or smashing into another ship. But I needed to know they were okay.

Navigating through the carnage was no easy task. Debris and body parts along with dust and gas were blocking the way. That's how much damage was happening. That's how many ships had exploded. Even around me still there had to be an explosion every half a second.

Red Squad slowly moved over to the main battle joining Jeroll and Green Squad. It was a massacre. We joined up to find they had lost two wingmen. Not bad, but still. They may have been *his* friends. It was all horrible. But I had to get over that. I was having trouble with thoughts like that back in the Great Wastelands, but here it was far worse. I wasn't even sure if the debris was our own or the enemy's. Probably a mix of both.

I looked to the ion assault and noticed they were almost done with one of the Nebulan motherships. There were three in total. Before, we only had to deal with the one—or two because it repaired itself in hyperspace. I was guessing it was here somewhere. But it didn't really matter, if they did the same as the first time; then we were doomed. There was no way we could beat them all. No way we could beat the enemy six times and still have an army of fighters and frigates after us.

Lucky for us, it didn't. A few seconds later, well we all had to leave, because in a few seconds, there would be a huge explosion that would incinerate everything in its way. We had never blown up a mothership-class vessel in our journey, but we are expecting it to be big. If a fighter gets stuck in the blast radius, well there won't be anything left. I didn't know what was going to happen, if it would just repair itself or not, but I had to take precautions.

"Red Squad, Green Squad, let's get the heck outa here!"

"I agree," came Jeroll's voice. I led us away from the destruction zone.

I stole a last peek at the enemy, and saw something I didn't get at first. It looked like it was shooting hundreds of projectiles out into space. I realized what they were after they ignited some sort of engine. "Escape pods." I said not caring if anyone heard.

“What?” Isel asked shocked.

Those little pods carrying an unknown amount of Nebulans, Kadeshans, Guardians, whatever they wanted to call themselves, were headed out into space. They were almost out of sight when I noticed they broke up into two paths, probably headed for the other two motherships. But that wasn't the important part. If they were abandoning ship, which meant that the thing I hoped for, and feared at the same time was about to happen.

I was right. I stared at the ship watching as random parts of the hull started to blow. I kept moving away, but I saw through the rear-view screen.

“Wow.” I heard someone say. They didn't sound surprised or scared. I think they were just in between like I was. I saw I made the right move, because the various ships were speeding away for their lives, Kushan or Nebulan. They all flew for safety.

What I saw in the next few seconds was something I'll never forget. A couple dozen smaller explosions erupted; honestly I wasn't sure if there was any hull left to blow up. It didn't matter. The final show was the big finale, the mother of all things “boom”. The big bang happened. I was now turned towards the explosion and could look out my front. It was bright, it was big, and it was devastating. *BOOM!* I know sound isn't heard in space, but this thing shook my fighter so hard I heard it from inside when the sound waves came in. don't ask me how, I just heard it. I saw the huge thing go, and had to shield my eyes from the surge of light. It lasted a number of seconds, longer than any other explosion I had ever seen. I had actually felt bad for the enemies for a second.

The aftermath was just as horrible as the event. It's not what I saw it's more what I didn't see. There was no debris at all. Nothing was left. And then looking over I saw that one of the ships were on fire and its engines were completely gone. I'm serious. A quarter of the ship was missing and venting out flames and debris. It's not until I saw my sensors screen that I broke out in tears.

They must have heard me because I was crying. “Mark, are you all right?” I heard Isel's voice. She sounded confused by me.

“John!” I yelled.

## JOHN

The explosion was bright and shook the entire ship. The captain was in his chair feeling weak.

“That was close!” A voice he hadn't heard in a while. Hariik walked in the command bridge.” I have a report I was supposed to bring to you, but seeing the circumstances I think that —” *Boom!* Another smaller explosion rocked the ship.

“Captain!” A voice yelled. “We're receiving damage! The engines are lost! The hull is cracking its way over here! We're losing atmosphere fast!”

“Seal the bridge! Cut off all connections with the rest of the ship! Seal the hatches, seal the cooling systems, cut off the ventilation!” he yelled in the shock of the moment not sure of what he was doing.

Whatever he ordered, it worked. “The venting has stopped. The air in here isn't going

anywhere.”

“That’s great!” he shouted as he turned to look back at his stunned first lieutenant. “What’s our status? How’s the ship doing?” he asked.

“It’s weird. The power is failing and the sensors are lost. It’s almost like the ship was cut off . . . captain? You may want to take a look at this!” he yelled in horror just as the lights and all power systems went out.

The captain turned towards the front and out the huge viewport covering the whole wall. What he saw made his jaw drop. Literally. But then the gravity turned off with the power. Outside the window was the *Ifriit 2*. Or what was left of it.

“Uh . . . what is going on? Am I delusional?” he asked half to himself.

“Sir, I think we lost the *Ifriit 2*.” Paul said.

“We’re running on backup power. We have limited reserves. They’re focusing only on the vital life support systems.” Fiira announced.

“Do we have the power to send a communication?” he asked.

“No. The tower is on the ship. We may be able to send out a small beacon but that would take everything in the ship’s power reserves. We would freeze in a matter of hours.” She replied.

He floated over to the front of the ship. “Send it to Mark Soban.” He said.

## ERIC

He thought he was out for good. The last thing he remembered is passing out seconds after he entered the hangar bay. He wasn’t sure if it was because of the lack of oxygen, the sudden burst of oxygen into his brain, or the impact of the crash, or all of the above. Then, the thought occurred to him. Why was he thinking about all this?

He realized that he was conscious. He tried to slowly open his eyes. They wouldn’t budge. He felt a presence in the room next to his bed. He was relieved to be in a bed.

“Eric?” he heard a voice call. He recognized it instantly.

“Why did you kiss me?” he asked barely able to speak. He noticed right away that his throat was dry like the Banded Desert. He would have coughed but held it in not to feel the pain.

Trix started laughing in relief. He didn’t know if she heard him or not, and didn’t really care. He was alive. That’s all that mattered to him. He tried again to open his eyes and was met with a blinding light.

“We’ll talk about that later. You should rest.”

He lay back and closed his eyes. He figured he was in a hospital because he could feel a needle inside his left arm. He didn’t care, as long as he was going to live to see another day.

## ARAZIS

“Saiin? Saiin!” she yelled as she cleared the blast zone. She didn’t hear his voice a first. She didn’t know what to do but wait for the light show to end.

When it did, she took a look around to find that none of the ships in the blast area existed

anymore. There were a couple frigates that were half destroyed or cut in half, but they would never survive. She looked around some more. “Saiin!” she yelled over the intercom. No answer came. She feared he had not cleared the area.

She was about to give up. “I-I’m here. I think. I feel dizzy. I think my head hit something but I’m fine now and almost out of fuel. My controls are almost fried. Half my engine is damaged.”

“Head back to the *Amun* and get your ship fixed. And find out what happened.”

“What do you mean?” he said half awake and totally confused.

“The ship didn’t do a hyperspace repair. It just evacuated. And I think we’ve gravely underestimated these outsiders.”

“Wait, you’re not coming?” he said surprised.

“No, my place is in battle. My ship is fine. My fuel is full, and my blood is boiling. I’m gonna show them just what I can do.”

## MARK

I received a distress beacon coming from . . . “The *Ifriit!*” Jon was in trouble. I needed to help. I may not have seen him in so long, but he was still my friend and letting him die was the last thing I would do. Even under the circumstances, no especially under the circumstances.

“Jay, you’re close to him. The *Ifriit 2* is down. I see it. But there was a distress signal coming from the severed command bridge section.”

“Do you think—?”

“Yeah. They may still be alive in there. Can you get to him?” I asked hoping he could.

“Uh . . . yeah, but Rob isn’t too happy about it.”

“Mark? This is war and I’m not doing something stupid that’ll get us killed. We’re a Porter. They’ll be aiming at us.” he said in his usual cranky overtired tone.

“I know the risks. I’m not gonna comfort you and say there’s a chance we won’t get hit, no, we will get hit. But we won’t die. I’ll make sure of that. You just head there.” I finished.

“Red Squad! New orders. Guard Jay.” three simple sentences with very little meaning. Yet all the meaning ever. I wouldn’t just be guarding Jay, but John too. And his entire command team. I hoped.

“Green squad! Guard Mark.”

“Jeroll, you don’t need to help.”

“I will because you’re my friend. You want to save your friend on the broken Matriarch, so I will help you. Besides, my squad is badly hurting. We wouldn’t stand much a chance out there alone.” He had a point. I didn’t argue. If he wanted to help me, then I wouldn’t argue.

I’m glad to say that we met up with Jay. We set into a sphere formation around him on alert in all directions. Some small groups of enemy fighters would come, but not for long. They would see they weren’t doing anything but blowing up, and then leave. I was in the front of the sphere. I was the first to spot danger if it would come.

I’m relieved to say it didn’t. Well nothing more serious than a few that just gave up or were too weak to hit the Porter.

I made it to the broken frigate first to see that indeed, as I got close enough, I could see people inside staring out of the viewports. They were alive too. Barely. Some were moving around waving their arms. There was one thing they all had in common. They were freezing. Why not? Space is cold.

I moved away to make room for the Porter. I actually saw some of them act happy. Some were hugging one another, just the basic happy actions. I couldn't make out any of their faces, though. They were too far away.

"You got 'em?" I asked.

"Yeah, we got them, activating magnetic binds now." Rob said.

"All right!" I cheered. We were headed back towards the *Mothership*. We saved John and what's left of his crew. I looked at the rear view screen and saw the rest of the wrecked ship my friend called the *Ifriit 2*. Maybe it was the name, maybe it was just bad luck. But this was the second ship he had lost. The second Matriarch he had lost. I just hoped he didn't lose any friends in the chaos.

We were almost back when a lone fighter was headed out way. We didn't even know it was there. Before we knew it, one of my wingmen's ships had exploded. Then it fired on the next. On the trip back we returned to Delta formation in the signature 'V' shape.

"Ahhh!" I heard him cry as his ship exploded. Once again, this is why we don't get to know our fellow pilots.

"Isel, watch out!" I yelled as I pulled back on my controls to slow my ship down to let the enemy pass me.

Bad move. The enemy stopped shooting at Isel and was taking aim on me. I got hit several times, but I came back to reality and blasted ahead, boosters on.

This enemy must have been expecting that, because he followed me, almost waiting for my fuel to be exhausted. That was bad, because it almost was. I had to make a move, and I pressed the button on the joystick to shut off the boosters. The enemy didn't slow down. It kept firing at . . . what? I wasn't sure.

Until I heard. "What? Fire on the target! No!" I blasted the boosters again and saw who it was. Jeroll was in a three-on-one battle with the lone ship. Make that two-on-one. It was Jeroll and Isel against this amazing pilot. I joined the fight, and noticed something. The fighter had its sunshield down. We could see the pilot.

"Isel, am I crazy?"

"I see it too. Or should I say *her*." That confirmed it. I was not crazy after all. In the ship battling us, was the blood-haired pilot Isel saw the day before. And she was staring right . . . at . . . me!

# Chapter Eleven

## Ptah

### ARAZIS

“Well, hello there outsider,” she said to herself. She gave the black ship a sinister grin and started up her attack run towards the ship to the left of the black ship.

She spun the ship up and around to get more of an attack run. The three enemy ships attacked. They didn’t quite hit her, but they came close. In fact, it seemed as only the one she was targeting as directly aiming for her. The other two were hesitant.

“This might be easier than I thought!” she said once again to herself.

She came up right beside the black ship going at the same speed. “Peekaboo I see you!” she said jokingly. She was making jokes and talking to herself not to go insane.

This battle was the most intense action she had ever been in. she had trained on Swarmers her whole life and knew everything about her ship. She built this one herself. She added in a couple of extra surprises, but decided to save them for a special occasion.

She slammed into the hull of the black ship and heard her own ship’s hull bang. That was good, it sent the black ship farther away. She now had a clear path to her target. She took aim, and fired the guns.

### MARK

“No!” I cried. The enemy had fired on Jeroll. I got a good look at her. I recognized the pilot as a ‘her’. Her hair was the most striking. It was really the colour of blood just as Isel described. I of all people would know. She had pale but not ‘Turanic white’ skin, blue eyes, a confident expression, and her sort-cut red hair.

At that moment, however, was not the time to think about all that. Jeroll was under fire. Isel and I tried to stop the pilot; I even slammed my own ship into hers as she had done to me. Nothing seemed to stop her. The guns kept firing, and slowly, but surely, Jeroll’s ship was gaining damage.

“Well, I guess I lose. I accept my fate now. I *really* wanted to see Hiigara. But I guess I cannot. It was not meant to be. Mark, I believe in you.” Those few words lifted a huge load off my back even if I knew he was about to die. “Become the leader! Mark! Guide us all to Hiigara!” as he screamed out that last line, his ship was destroyed. My friend was lost. He was dead. No, he was not lost. He had made his way to Balcora among the heroes. I knew he deserved it. He may not have been as great as my father, but he was a warrior who accepted his defeat and died his last moments fighting for what he believed in. that is how I will remember him.

Green Squad was destroyed. Isel and I were alone with this enemy, this one enemy that managed to take out the two most powerful squadrons in our strike force . . . almost entirely.



There were still the two of us. We had to hope that Jay would make it safely the rest of the way to the *Mothership* on his own. We had a huge small problem to deal with.

But just as we were about to attack, the ship took off! Just like that. it took off.

“Mark, should we pursue her?” she asked.

“No. Let her go. She may have just killed my friend, but she’ll be back. I know it.”

“How?”

“She’ll find us. What else does she do? And besides. I have barely enough fuel to make it to the *Mothership*.”

“Yeah I’m about half-tank, but I’m not rushing in there alone. Let’s go find John.” Was her logical answer. Yes. John. That’s right.

“Let’s go.” And we were off, headed for home, following the Porter carrying the remains of the command bridge of the *Ifriit 2*.

## ARAZIS

She felt like taking the other two ships on, but realized her fuel was critically low, and Saiin had gone back to the *Amun* without her to try and figure out why the *Suteh* didn’t hyper-repair. She wanted to know. She didn’t want the *Amun* to be next. Her whole life was on that Needleship. She couldn’t lose it to some dumb malfunction.

When she docked with barely enough fuel, she found where Saiin and her usually park, and there was a Swarmer under heavy repair.

She headed down there. She got out, and immediately, a fuelling crew was already getting to work.

As she walked off, one of them asked, “Where are you going?”

“To find out why the *Suteh* got destroyed. Keep her parked. I won’t be long.” At least she guessed she wouldn’t.

She ran up to the command bridge. No she sprinted up there. Her legs hurt, she had cramps, but she didn’t care. She had to know. When she got there, she saw Saiin and the captain in a long conversation.

“Saiin! What happened?” she yelled.

He knew exactly what she was saying.

“It’s the *Ptah*. Here, ask the captain. He can explain things better.”

“Jeremiah, why did the *Suteh* die?”

“Your friend is right. The *Ptah* had a malfunction.”

“But how does a malfunction on the *Ptah* affect the *Suteh*?”

“Please let me finish. The inhibitor field generator failed. No, it didn’t fail, it made it over powerful. The ship had a short circuit or someone was not doing his job, and the generator had an explosion but didn’t break. It trapped us here too. The inhibitor field no longer recognizes friendly signatures. We’re *all* trapped. Us, and them.”

The thought actually made her dizzy. Saiin had to help her regain balance.

“So that’s it then. It has become a fight to the death.”

“Yes. It has I’m afraid. We will win. We have to. Or this may be the last battle the *Amun*

ever sees again.

It was a grim thought for her. She had no idea this could happen. Just two days before, she was safely on the world she called First Colony unaware of the existence of these outsiders. Now, they may as well be the very death of her.

## JOHN

The crew as well as its captain felt a huge relief. They witnessed as the broken chunk of frigate was brought safely within the *Mothership*. The Porter set them down in the resupply hangar and they were met with a team of marines. They usually use that hangar for capturing enemy ships, but now it was going to be used to break into the remnants of the command bridge.

The marines cut into the glass of the viewport and into the ship.

“Are you all okay?” one of them asked.

The crew had been freezing in there. The heating systems had been turned off and they were freezing. Inside the hangar, they were defrosting. They had been saved.

“I-I think so.” Paul said standing up to the returned gravity. John tried as well. It was hard and he was cold. He only made it as far as getting into his chair.

“Command check.” He said.

“Sensors here.” Paul said.

“Communications here.”

“Engineering here.”

“Fighter repair here.”

“Corvette repair here.”

“Fiira here, I think that’s everyone. I have a list.”

“Okay then. I think command is all here. The crew is lost, but at least we’re safe.”

“The crew was helped out of the command bridge, and onto the hangar floor. John stayed in his chair until everyone was out. He walked around the room of central command; he found the piece of the *Ifriit Nabaal* and took it out of the glass casing. He also found a small piece of the ship on the ground next to his feet.

“I guess luck plays in weird ways.” He chuckled to himself. He picked up the piece and put the two objects in his pocket and headed for the hole cut in the window.

His legs were no longer cold and he felt like after he had a nap he would be as good as new. But where would he go? He had the answer quickly enough. Standing right outside on the hangar floor in front of him, were his two friends, Mark and Isel. And running towards them, was Jay who was the pilot for the Porter that saved them.

John jumped out onto a metal staircase that led down. He joined up with them.

“Well I haven’t seen you in a while,” Mark said.

## ERIC

“Glad you’re awake,” He heard a man’s voice. He slowly opened his eyes but it was still all

fuzzy.

“Your vision will return later. It’s the drugs they gave you to sleep.” He said as if knowing exactly what he was thinking.

“Brutus?” he asked.

“Yeah, we’ll talk about our little adventure to the prison area later. They say you’ve been asleep long enough. They need to know what happened in the hangar.”

He didn’t know how much good he would be, even *he* had no idea. “Okay.” was his tired answer.

He slowly and carefully got up and started walking. He was feeling better already, but still not good enough to make it all the way across to the hangar section. He collapsed in a chair just outside the room.

“I don’t think I’ll make it to the hangar.” Eric said sitting down relieved.

“Wait here until your vision returns. You should be able to move when the medication wears off.” So he did. He waited.

## MARK

“Hey!” John said after joining us in the hangar.

“Are you okay?” Jay asked.

“I am now.” He said and gave me a friendly hug.

“You lost your ship again,” there goes Isel ruining the moment.

“Yeah. Pretty inconvenient, don’t you think?” at least he wasn’t sad about it. “I still have some pieces though.” He said taking two pieces of machinery out of his pocket.

“I would love to stay and get caught up, but we have a battle to attend.”

“I understand. We’ll catch up later.” Seeing John again covered the loss of Jeroll. I felt a little better after that. “Good luck!” he shouted as we were getting into our ships.

“Don’t need it! Got all the luck I need.” I shouted back leaving him and Jay alone to talk.

I got in, closed the hatch, and turned to see Isel doing the same.

“You ready for this?” I asked over the intercom.

“When am I not?” And we were off.

Flying out the blue colour hangar was all too familiar to me. Once again, I’m fully expecting not to make it out alive. And this time I *really* mean it. I have no one to cover my back . . . or almost no one. I only have one partner left out there.

“So where to, Captain Soban?” Okay, she’s never called me *that* before, has a nice ring to it though, Captain Soban.

“Like the name. We should go join the fight near the second enemy mothership.”

Piloting there was easy. The whole fight seemed to be there. I think it’s because the enemy mothership was smoking. We had it. The second of the three was ours. In a few seconds, I know I’d see the escape pods launch. And a minute later, the ship would be doomed to a huge energetic blast.

That’s when I saw it. Or should I say her. It had to be. The rest of those fighters were in swarms around the Tempests. This one was headed straight for me. Again. but this time, she had

a friend.

“Looks like she found us after all.” Isel said.

## JOHN

Mark had to leave. He and Isel were pilots. Their place was in battle. Mine was onboard the *Ifriit 2*. Now, the ship is no more, and he, as well as the rest of the surviving crew, was out of a job.

“Well, I should get going too. My crew awaits me.” Jay said in an excited tone. He had grown to love being in a battle these past few months. He had probably the most dangerous job. He had to make sure his Porter got where it needed to be, and, if at all possible, dodge incoming fire. Then, transport the captured target safely within a hangar bay.

“I understand. Don’t die out there, okay?” John said as he was already headed away.

“You worry too much!” he yelled back.

He watched as the corvette moved out the hangar and headed for . . . somewhere.

“You have strange friends.” He turned to see Fiira standing next to him.

“Yeah, you don’t know the half of it.”

“I’m guessing the kid from earlier was Mark? I haven’t seen him yet, but I expected him to be a bit older.” She said with a slight smile.

“You get used to it. He’s only sixteen, you know. And Isel, she’s only fourteen!”

“You’re kidding. And they’re two of the best pilots out there? Unbelievable . . .”

## ARAZIS

“There he is Saiin. Let’s get him.” Her low and dark tone made Saiin question if she was feeling okay, but decided not to ask just in case. They headed for the black ship and another joining him.

“Well, well, well. Two-on-two is it? Saiin, you take the other one. The black ship’s mine.”

Saiin didn’t argue. He broke to the side, and fired on the other ship. The pilot was good. Better than he was. He was questioning if Arazis should take out this one being harder, but turned to see that the black ship was even better than this one he was fighting.

The black ship activated its boosters and was headed straight for her. She pulled up, turned around, and started firing. He didn’t take many of the hits she was delivering. And the ones he did take were as if nothing had happened. There was something different about that black hull, and she wanted to know why. But decided she may never know, so decided it was just a minor setback.

“Stronger are you? Well let’s just see how strong your ship really is!” With that, she sped full force, not holding back anything. She was on full attack mode. She noticed Saiin having trouble, but that as the only time she was not unfocused on this fighter.

A few spins and turns to follow him, a few manoeuvres to dodge his fire, it was a messy but elegant battle of pure piloting mastery. They may have been enemies, but their moves were like

they were synchronized.

She was about to mess up. Her ship was hit with more fire from the other ship, but Saiin was able to distract it. She continued on.

“Why can’t I get you!” she yelled to herself. She was getting angry. It was getting to her. She couldn’t last in this pursuit much longer, and she knew it.

The black ship was moving straight in one direction, and she sought it time to unleash her secret weapon. She followed, pressed a button, and fired a single missile hidden within the lower end of the ship.

“Come on, come on!” it was very stressful. If a single thing went wrong, then it was all over. She couldn’t fight anymore. She was getting tired from the stress and the heat of the battle. This one shot had to blow him to bits, or there was no way. Saiin was already out of sight. She didn’t know if he was alive or not.

The missile was seconds from hitting. *Come on! Come on!* The last moments of the battle. So she hoped.

The missile exploded. She saw debris fly out from everywhere. “Yes!” she had killed the black ship. So she thought.

## MARK

I was hit. I didn’t know with what. From the weapons I’ve seen these enemies fire, there was nothing like the impact. I was in a daze until I realized I wasn’t dead.

System scan showed me that the boosters were long gone. There was nothing left of them. The main engine was working, but not to its fullest. Whatever hit, it did some serious damage. Then, another thought occurred to me. The boosters were the only parts of the ship that I hadn’t covered with the reinforcement material. Then another one came to me. It was that extra armour that saved me. The system scan showed huge scars across the entire back end of the ship. It seemed that the upgrade I did had saved my life . . . but from what?

I had no idea. The one thing I did know, if it was a normal interceptor hit with this kind of weapon, it would have been blown to smithereens. Whatever that term actually means.

I saw the skip that shot it. It was definitely the same red-haired enemy from earlier. I caught a glimpse of that blood colour as she sped by.

I put all the power I had into the engines to see if I could catch up. It took a while, but it seemed like she was slowing down, but for what reason? I opened fire, and only a few shots came out. The weapons stopped. That wasn’t what I was most interested in.

Those few moments passed a while ago. The ship had exploded directly in front of me. For a second, I thought I was in the danger zone. But I wasn’t. I had to cover my eyes, but that was it. Like the first, though much louder, the shockwave slammed into my ship causing a huge *BANG* sound.

As the first, the explosion had lasted longer than I thought possible. But it ended, and once again, there was nothing left of the ship. No debris to trace.

That’s when I clued in. my other hand was still on the trigger. I was out of bullets! How inconvenient was that! I did what I had to, and sped at her. It was the only thing I could do.

I flew after her for several minutes, maybe even fifteen. We passed the main battleground, and were headed far away. There was nothing in our path but dense nebulosity and the marks of a few derelict ships. I saw only eight multi-beam frigates, but they didn't pay any attention to me. I feared there was more up ahead. There wasn't.

It lasted for a while longer, and then the enemy came to a stop. I couldn't understand what happened until the *Ferin Sha* did as well. It stopped, unwilling to move. I saw why. My fuel was empty. I imagined the same for the enemy.

Her ship turned to face mine. I saw her. It looked as if only a few meters away. I could make out her face like I could see her standing beside me. It was an odd feeling. We were enemies from different fleets, in battle, yet there was a moment of peace. The thing that struck me as the most surprise was that she was crying.

Not just a tear in her eye, she was crying. She looked both sad and frightened. She looked like I did when I saw Kharak burning into glass. It was the sense of my whole world and sense of reality crashing down on my shoulders, my mind, my heart, and my soul. I knew how she was reacting to the situation, and it made my own heart stop. Even if I had weapons, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I couldn't kill someone who I could relate to so well, even after only knowing her for a few minutes. I decided to do the one thing I could do.

I decided to let her see her nemesis. I found the knob that changed the tint of the windshield and set it to clear. The light shown in and I had to squint. I opened them wide after I got them adjusted. Now, she looked more confused than anything. Just great. I made her feel completely the way I did when I was dealing with the Genocide. I had to shake my head in irony.

She saw it. She actually tried to smile. But then, something odd caught my eye. Something impossible. Out to my far right, one of the derelicts looked ominously familiar . . . what I saw, floating maybe fifty meters from here, was the Khar-Toba!

# Chapter Twelve

## Relic of the Past

ERIC

The pain was gone and Eric was feeling much better than earlier. He could see and he didn't collapse when he was walking. He thought to go to the hangar where his ship crashed. It should be where he could find whoever wanted to see him.

Good call. There was a group of people inspecting his ship looking for . . . whatever.

"Found anything yet?" he asked. Immediately someone turned and shot him a cold look.

"We're doing the best we can pal, how about you tell *us* a thing or two." Eric rolled his eyes and started explaining what had happened to him outside.

"That's it. I was leaking air and I got in the hangar as fast as possible, and opened the hatch. Crashing it was just a fast way to slow down."

"Well, it'll be hard to tell what happened now, wont it. The hull is fused. If you were shot and it sprung a leak, however unlikely that may be, the oxygen tanks are only accessible through the bottom of the hull. We'd need to take the plating off just to find out."

"Then do it. I'm in no shape to go back out there anyway."

"Yeah, and neither is your ship. You were right, the oxygen tanks were empty. And records show you *did* fill them before we entered the Nebula. We could take the tank out and test for a hole, but not today. We have other business." Then team walked off down the hangar. He sat on the hull of the *Saju Ka* not knowing what to do. Brutus told him they wanted to see him badly. They didn't appear to be too happy to see him when he arrived.

He decided to do the only thing he could. Go watch the battle from a viewport. He didn't want to face Triikor just then. He wanted some time alone.

MARK

I'm not joking. There it was, the Khar-Toba, laying there, an ancient derelict afloat through space.

The sight was jaw-dropping. Literally. My jaw dropped in amazement. I actually almost jumped up in surprise, but remembered where I was. My eyes were wide with surprise. I had to blink and pinch myself to make sure this wasn't another one of those freaky dreams like the Hiigara ones.

It wasn't. I was *really* there, *really* seeing this. The Khar-Toba. Or at least a ship like the Khar-Toba, but that meant—

"No way, they *are* us!" I said to myself. This one sight made everything so clear. I turned to the Nebulan. She wasn't confused by the ship . . . she was confused by me. I looked at her with a puzzled gaze. Was she . . . how would I say this, Hiigaran? The same as us, the Kushan? They

sure looked like us, and then again, so did the Taiidan.

I placed my hand on the window, and saw she did the same. Five fingers. I would have fainted. But that would have been a pretty stupid thing to do just then.

I shifted my gaze from her, to the Khar-Toba, and back to her. Was it possible? Well actually it was very probable with all the evidence at hand. But how could I know for sure? I couldn't.

Who knew? Maybe she led me here.

## ARAZIS

She was a swirl of emotions going through her. The man in the black ship looked like any Kadeshi aside from the dark hair and tanned skin. She saw him look at one of the ancient derelict exile ships.

*Could it be?* She asked herself.

She could have just shot him down right there and then, but so could he. She felt some kind of bond between the two of them.

She also noticed that the last of the Needleships, the *Amun*, her flagship and home since she was very young, was getting ready for its attack run. It moved slowly behind her, towards the advancing outsider fleet. The ship was already badly damaged. She hoped not too badly. But in her heart, she knew the inevitable. The *Amun* would die.

But the malfunction was onboard the *Ptah!* Maybe hope was not lost after all. Maybe there was a chance. There wasn't. The brave Needleship, along with its brave captain rammed the front of the ship into two enemy frigates. It already started to vent. Its main cannon came online and fired, exploding another frigate. The enemies fired their ion cannons on the *Amun*.

"Captain Jeremiah, you are not going to sacrifice yourself are you?" she asked.

"I will do what must be done."

"If the *Amun* dies, I have nothing left to live for. If you blow up, I will initiate self-destruct procedures." She threatened.

"No! Arazis, you can't. You could live. Our hyper-repair is back, but I will not use it."

"But . . . why?" she asked. She saw that six multi-beam frigates launched from the *Amun* to help the battle. They grazed the corvettes and some frigates. The battle had become fair. Some enemies were retreating. It worked. Maybe they had hope after all.

"I have sent you the communications patch so you can speak to them. If I die, I want you to surrender."

"Out of the question!" she barked back.

"Please, I think of you as my daughter. I do not want you to die in such a horrible manner. Give yourself up and they may let you live."

"I can't believe this is happening!" she yelled. She started to cry again. "Did you know all along?" she asked. "Did you know they are the other half of the Exiles?" she said through cries and tears. Her whole life had been torn apart.

"After our second meeting I pieced it together. They are the convoy. They are the ones who can't stay with Kadesh. And yet they are still alive. I have stopped the main cannon. I believe if



there is any hope their endeavour succeeds, they need all the strength they can get. We are the Guardians. we cannot join them. We would be disgraced among the Seven Colonies. we will die here. We will die today. This is the last battle of the *Amun*. And I am proud to be her captain.”

“Why? What is the point? If you die trying to defile Sajuuk, will he not me more angered?”

“You are wise, Arazis, but not as wise as myself. I have lived for a total of a hundred and thirty one years. I am tired. I was going to pass all my knowledge onto you. But it looks as if that will not be possible now.”

“Call for backup!” she insisted.

“There is no use. They will not arrive in time. By the time they get here, the Hiigarans would have harvested what they need and moved on. There is no use stopping the inevitable. Fate has drawn us to this spot. This event. This time. All for a reason. I believe the reason is for you, my dear. You are a perfect example of all we stand for. Yet you know so little. We do not hate Sajuuk. There is so much to tell you. But not much more time. Please, my dear, go with them. Help them on their futile quest. See the world we had lost to the Taiidan.” That was a word she was not used to hearing. It was the name of the Evil Ones from the outside. “It was them who banished us, not Sajuuk. We have kept our culture, our true past hidden from the average citizen in order to avoid having troubles with people trying to escape. Fear is the path to power. But it never lasts. You are now the prophet. When you return, if you choose to, you will be welcomed by the council. I assure you that. They hide our past to ensure a future.”

“But what if the Taiidan are not as strong as you believe? What then? What if all this was for nothing? What if you die for nothing?”

“Then I know I died for what I believe in. that is the only path to Balcora. You understand that sentence.”

“Yes.”

“And besides, was it not you who dreamt of leaving the Garden since you were a small child? There is a reason for everything. Though sometimes they do not go as planned, everything works out for the best in the end.”

“I will miss you, Jeremiah.” She said with honest and true sadness.

The *Amun* was under attack from a new sort of fighter. It launched blue bombs. They broke through the hull causing damage.

“This how it will be, this is how it is. This is the final battle, this is the end. Every end is a new beginning, as every beginning has its end. No life is valued greater than another, but some must die for the good and the true to survive. Treat me as you wish to be treated, and always make it through to the end. This is the lesson taught at the Cathedral of Kadesh. And how true it is. For truth is as it is.”

He was preaching scripts from the *Book of Kadesh*, the collected knowledge and beliefs of an entire civilization. She had heard it hundreds of times before, but never had it all made as much sense as it did just then.

“To hate is to commit the ultimate sin. I do not hate the outsiders. I do not for they are my brothers. Love is a power beyond anything else. To say I love them is an overstatement, but I do not hate them for this. When someone finds love, they truly understand the lesson passed down for millennia. The lesson told to us by the ancients.” She did not want to disturb him in his preaching. The Needleship that has been her home for as long as she could remember was

starting to explode. There were dozens of small ones. Not a single escape pod launched.

“Stand by me as we shall enter the heavens shortly. There is nothing left we can do in this life. Our knowledge has been heard! It is up to the Messenger to deliver. Her name is Arazis and she is our future. The future of all of Kadesh rests on her shoulders now. When the Taiidan fall, the Hiigarans will once again rise from the ashes! Our way of life will continue! Not on Kadesh alone, but on the Homeworld of our ancestors. The name of Hiigara shall be heard, and the Taiidan will pay their price!” she stiffened and felt pride. Her tears stopped. She would cry later. This was a moment of peace, followed by destruction. “In the name of Sajuuk, let us be heard! And now, for us! It is off to Balcora!” he got to finish his speech. It was beautiful. But what followed was beauty of its own.

“Every end is a new beginning.” She told herself.

It was the end of the *Amun*, and the beginning of her life as an Exile. An exile returning to her homeworld. just like the rest of the outsiders.

She found the patch that was sent, and sent a single message hoping for a reply. *Who are you?* She sent.

The reply came. *Someone you can trust.*

She knew that Jeremiah was right. She knew she would be doing the right thing. She watched as the light erupted and the main reactor failed. The explosion rocked her ship. There was a second explosion as well. This one was even larger. It blew the nebosity away. The *Amun* had an advanced reactor. There was no real religious signification. But to her, it showed the crew and its captain rising to the heavens.

The *Amun* was dead. So was its crew. So was Jeremiah. She did not know of Saiin. She feared the worst for her best friend.

## MARK

The explosions ended leaving . . . you guessed it. Nothing. less than that. The nebula had been blown away by it. The area surrounding the explosion was cleared of all obscurities. I got to see the Nebula ad a whole. It was beautiful. That was the first thing I saw just then. Nothing else seemed to matter. But I had received a message from an unknown sender.

*Who are you?* It asked. I knew who it was.

*Someone you can trust.* I replied. I placed my hand on the windshield. She did the same. She now had more tears in her eyes than ever before.

The second thought running through my head just then was how I was going to get back to the *Mothership*. I found the answer quickly. I have friends.

“Jay, Karu, I need help over here. I’m out of fuel and I have one of the Nebulans unfueled and helpless.”

“I’ll be right on it.” I haven’t heard Karu’s voice in a while. I was glad he was still alive.

“We’re on it too.” Rob was agreeing with me? There was something wrong with that picture.

It took a while. I was debating on telling the Nebulan what was happening, but decided she could figure it out.

After what felt like twenty minutes, two yellow corvettes appeared in the distance. “Took you long enough,” I said as a joke. They got it.

“Uh . . . M-Mark, i-is that what I think it is?”

“Yeah, Karu, meat the Khar-Toba. A true relic of the past.

“Y-yeah, no kidding,” I never knew he had a nervous stutter, that was news.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Goal

ERIC

The final ship exploded. He watched the battle from a long window running along the entire front of the hall. He wished he could be out there supporting Mark.

It was hard to believe that they started out by hating each other. Or at least he hated Mark. Looking back now, he sees how childish it was. He could remember two months ago, they were arguing in the empty dark balcony on the *Mothership*.

Now, they were forced to grow up and face the reality. They were in a war. People died every second, and the chaos was everywhere. If they didn't focus, they would die. That was it.

Now, looking at the battle through the window, knowing he couldn't do anything about it, he just hoped that Mark and the others were okay.

"Found you." He turned to face the person he was avoiding.

"Trix, how did you know where I was?" he asked.

"I didn't. I just figured you'd be here. I got the feeling you were avoiding me."

"I . . . I don't know what to say."

"It's fine. I was acting stupid. I shouldn't have given you that kiss. I couldn't think straight."

"I don't blame you. I suspected it for a while."

"What do you mean? I've only felt this way for two days."

"Oh . . ."

"One more thing. I think this Sajuuk figure might be real. What else could it be? We haven't died yet, so I guess . . . I was wrong back then. In the storage room, I mean. I do trust you, hell I even admitted how much I like you. We're alive, right here, alone in this hall. Why? Was there someone planning this all? I can't answer it all."

"You don't need to. Eventually, everyone finds the answers."

MARK

I was docked with Karu's ship for half the trip back to the *Mothership*. "Some day huh?" I asked as casually as if talking about the weather . . . the weather of Kharak. Oh right. Now I feel depressed again.

"Really. I had lots of ships come dock with us. Most of 'em so bad you couldn't tell what ship class they were. I remembered to bring an extra barrel of that carbon fibre material to repair your ship. So it's almost as good as new. Still need to get those boosters back on though."

"Yeah, not right now though maybe in a week. I want to catch up on some stuff and relax this whole thing over."

“Well, when you feel like it, give me a shout. I’ll be glad to help. Got nothing better to do now do I?”

“Oh really? I thought that you and Isel were—

“Right! You heard about that . . . uh . . . sorry for stealing your ex so fast.”

“I heard the story.”

“And you were right about her, every bit as annoying as you said.”

“Ha-ha! She’s your problem now, my friend! A little advice about her, just agree on it. I learned the hard way and well, though it would be pretty funny, i don’t think you would want to.”

We both laughed. Isel was trouble. I managed to keep her as a friend, because she’s great at that. Anything more, she’s a completely different person.

“Hey, what’s that by the *Mothership*?” he asked.

I checked it out by using the camera-zoom tool and didn’t like what I was seeing. It was about five minutes away at the speed we were going. “I-I don’t believe it!” the remaining enemy ships were doing a kamikaze stunt into the hull of the *Mothership*. There were some getting blown up before impact, but many hit their target. There must have been four dozen in all. There were fighters everywhere. Though some were smashing into the ship, there were the few that were entering the hangar harmlessly as if in surrender for their defeat.

“Oh my,” he must have seen it too. There were explosions on the hull. The ships were causing a lot of damage. It was horrible. They used themselves as weapons.

I couldn’t take this. “Karu, release my ship. I’m going out there.” He did, and without question. I think he was in too much shock to speak.

I got there in time to join the battle. It was hard with my speed disadvantage, but my skill made up for that. I’m glad to say that they didn’t all kamikaze at the same time. They did it in groups of three or four. That’s when we would attack.

I then arrived there, and remembered something. I was out of ammo. Idiot. I was useless.

“Red Leader? Is that you? I heard a man’s voice call. What’s wrong?”

“I just remembered. I’m out of projectiles.” How stupid of a move was that? I just ran into a battle with people hoping I could beat them all without any help, and as it turns out, I can’t fire a single bullet.

“Oh . . . then I guess we *are* doomed.” He said disappointed.

“Hold on, I’ll just go get a refill. Hold them off ‘till I return.” I flew down into the hangar in the fighter platforms at the top, and got out quick.

“No gas, no repair, just bullets.” I yelled to the service guy. He took a piece of hull plating off, surprised by its extra weight, and dropped it with a *clank!* He scrambled to the floor and grabbed what looked like five rounded silver cylinders and dragged them over. Out of the hole, came what seemed like an infinite amount.

I’m not exactly sure what he did next, but he somehow connected the first few bullets to a part on the *Ferin Sha* and pressed a button activating something. I knew that it was a big spinning wheel that placed the projectiles evenly in a round continuous pattern that kept shooting with no delay. Soon enough, the thing stopped with the noise and I was full. Maximum capacity: one thousand shots.

And out I went, off the platform, down a few decks, and out of the blue glow and into the battle. They had managed to keep them off until I got there. Yellow Squad was hurting. I was

there to help. I opened fire, and . . . out came the bullets. I was back in business. I took aim, and stopped the fighters not being blocked by the two squads. Blue was on the other side of the ship, so I didn't see them. I just hoped they could handle things.

I would say I take pride in my skills, I would even say I'm too good. But the truth is, I am. It's not a joke, or self-centredness, or cockiness. It is the truth. I am good. Really good. Yellow Squad didn't even need to be there. I would come in from every angle and shoot down all the ships crossing my path. I freed up two wingmen and they covered me.

The numbers were slowly diminishing. Sure, a few got by, but not enough to be a threat. I knew by facts and calculations that if even half of these ships hit the *Mothership*, it would fall apart. We stopped that. Now, if all these ships hit, we would still survive. It was now a matter of picking them off.

We did. It was over. There were no more ships left. I went around to see that Blue Squad had made it too. We were done. We were headed for the docks. We were the last of the battle. In the distance, I saw the capital ships moving in on us, and to the very front of the *Mothership*, there was Jay and Karu. We were all out of this. Well not for certain. I didn't know what happened to Eric or Isel, I just hoped for the best. I had nothing left here, so I decided to head in to dock.

## ARAZIS

She was forced out of her ship into a blinding blue room. The room was full. It was full or people. She saw they all had darker hair and skin from her own, all like the pilot of the black ship. Wherever they came from, it was very hot and bright.

There was a loud cheer. She had been dropped out of the ship onto a metal floor. The gravity of the room was lower than what she was used to, so it was easy enough to get back up.

She looked through the crowd to see, "The black ship." She whispered to herself.

"What?" one of the three people surrounding her had heard? She then realized they were focused on her, not what was going on.

The crowd was loud, but they were all cheering one thing: *Mark! Mark! Mark! Mark! Mark!* Who was this Mark person, she didn't know.

What happened then was odd to her. The crowd parted way but didn't silence. They kept cheering, but out of the centre of the crowd came a face she had only seen once. It was the pilot of the black ship. The crowd was always staring at him, with joy in their eyes and enthusiastic smiles. She knew just then. The pilot was their leader. He was their inspiration. He was Mark.

She was falling from consciousness. She took a last look around to see that she had been gassed and was passing out. She kept her eyes on the pilot for as long as she could. She needed to remember his face. "You . . ." before she could finish, she was gone.

## MARK

The crowd wouldn't quit it. I stared as Jay and Rob rolled the unconscious Nebulan out of

the hangar. She wouldn't be waking for hours. I had time to finish up the welcoming party and take a shower, and still have loads of time.

I noticed something important just then. They were cheering my name. *My* name. I felt as if I had finally succeeded in making a name for myself. Like my people would stop calling me the son of Markus, and know me as Mark Soban. I felt relief as that huge goal was succeeded. It's what I've always wanted from day one on this journey, starting with pilot training. I surpassed my father, maybe not to the fullest of his greatness, but I was known now as Mark. Just Mark. Not through Markus. It felt wrong basking in the spotlight like this, but I decided after all the pain I've had to suffer, I deserved it.

This must be how my father felt every second of his life. It felt good. I felt important. I felt great. Most of all, I felt powerful. That was the best and worst. I had their attention and their spirits. Like the Great Wastelands, they would listen to me. But I didn't need a whole speech this time.

I wanted to stay, but I needed to do something I started before the alarm went off.

I wanted to finish my shower.

## ERIC

He and Trix had stood there for a while, but the battle ended and the only thing to do now was rest up. They had no idea when the next would come. In an hour? Tomorrow? Next week? Next month? Time meant nothing to anyone anymore. They had no idea what time was day and what was night. People slept whenever they wanted unless they had jobs and shifts. Eric quit being a janitor a while past and relied on only his job as a fighter pilot.

He got to his room, sat on his bed and thought about the day. He thought about the fight, the problem with his ship—though he can only remember parts of it—and about the kiss. Trix said it was no big deal. To him it was. Why had she done it? They had only known each other for a short time. She only liked him for two days.

*What happened?* He thought. All this was a lot to process just then. He agreed to let his head get in the right place first. So he passed out.

## MARK

The water felt even hotter this time than the last. It didn't really matter at the time. I was clearing every thought out of my head. It felt good. The last time I got to think for this long was . . . well can't even remember all too well. I think it was one of the times I went to the observation deck; or when I was down on the cryo-levels. Like I've said many times before, time no longer has meaning to anyone. Not just that, we've lost track of what month or what day of the week it is.

So much is different now. And to think back, knowing I wasn't even supposed to be here is very surprising. I've dealt with so much these past few months, or maybe it's been a year? I don't know anymore. I wish I could.

But I can't. Khar-Illum is no longer in sight. I used to be able to look back on the Kharak System, now, it's no more. I can't even see most of the stars that you could see from home.

I've been through genocide, war, destruction, lots of pain, the death of my father, the death of everyone else as well, I've met aliens whose sole purpose is to serve the Taiidan and destroy us, I've learnt of our horrible past through the *Khar-Halla*, I could go on down the list of negatives for hours. Though most has been bad, there has been some good out of it. I've made new friends that I know I can trust with my life, I've reconnected with old friends, I gained respect and a name for myself, I also found a new goal to bring us to Hiigara no matter the odds. I am willing to take on the empire by myself if I need to, which I know I won't because there are so many people on my side who would die for our continuity. I've seen it in my dreams. I'm not sure how that is possible, but I did. I saw our new home. It was beautiful. It was paradise even from space. That was something worth dying for.

I, who's only seen the desolate Kharak, though beautiful in its own right, now know of oceans spanning most of a planet and lush green continents with lights from civilization covering most of the night side.

Another goal I had just recently was to understand these Nebulans. Or at least talk to the one I saved. Or got captured. I saw her, it made me stop. She was Kushan. Or at least looked to be. They would talk about the evil Taiidan being the ultimate power in the galaxy. From what I've seen, it didn't seem likely. We only ran into one fleet. The one that destroyed my home. And we destroyed them as well.

I needed to talk to her. Not just for information, I wanted to know her. I'm not sure why, it usually wouldn't be the case knowing she killed Jeroll, and most of his squad. But I still wanted to see her and get to know her. I felt horrible about the loss of Jeroll, we had become great friends since John left on the *Ifriit Nabaal*. I knew he had family, I knew his sister, I met his friends as well, them all gone now too, I basically knew everything about the guy. And now he's gone.

But now, I feel like he red-haired enemy could one day become my friend. Don't ask me how stupid and unlikely that sounds because I know. I've heard it before about so many other mysteries I wanted to chase. The first time was when I discussed running away to the north to Jen. Of course she disagreed, I ran anyway. What I found was better than the life I had been living on that farm. I found my father, I found technology like none in the south, I found the life I had missed out on. My point being, though something sounds really stupid when first heard, it may turn out for the better. I'm not saying everyone should run across hot desert for almost a year, or that you might even find what you are looking for. What I mean is that if you truly believe in something, go for it. No matter the odds. But you need to be brave for that. I almost died in that desert, more than once. I dealt with poisonous venom, dehydration, sunstroke, swarms of deadly flies, desert predators, and most of all, myself. I was alone on a journey at twelve years old. I was going insane. I'm not gonna get into too much detail, but if you don't believe to have the strength, don't bother. Until you fully accept that you are going to lose everything, don't do it. That's just what I've been living by. That was the little bit of advice I learned on my own.

And I want to help this Nebulan also. They seem like confused and scared versions of us. Maybe they are.



I realized I must have spent well over an hour in the shower, so I got out. I was expecting to be instantly freezing. That didn't happen. It was almost as hot as in the shower. That was odd.

I got dressed, but it was boiling me. I walked out my room to see people wearing thin white muscle shirts or no shirts at all. They had shorts on. *What the hell?* What'd I miss?

I took off the thick sweater I had on and found a pair of shorts. I didn't have a muscle shirt, sorry I did but I was full of engine grease.

I walked out of the room shirtless wearing only sandals, boxers, and shorts. No one seemed to mind. Just the opposite. If I had on the clothes from earlier I would have been laughed at.

I asked around and apparently the kamikaze stunt damaged the cooling systems and it could be weeks before it gets fixed. However long a week is.

It was a long walk down to the prison level. A dozen elevators and two dozen floors later, I came across a large series of windows. There were people lined up all along the wall. None of them looked to be prisoners, but just observers. There were several bleach-white walled rooms with single prisoners being interrogated. They all had blond, red and even white hair. But they didn't look too old. Some did, but there were people in there that looked younger than me, with white hair.

The hall ran all along the length from bow to stern. Most people weren't wearing shirts just like I wasn't. It was hot. Worse than "Kharak hot". I walked for a minute then found Jay, Rob, and Bradley standing in front of a room looking sad. I got there and knew why.

The interrogator was whipping at her. He held the two foot-long whip in his right hand and was slashing at her. I couldn't hear what was going on. This was the first violent questioning I have seen in this hall.

"Oh Sajuuk!" I said a little too loud.

"I told them you wanted to be the first to see her, but they didn't care to hear it." Jay was always my friend. I knew he tried his best.

"After all I've seen us do; this is too barbaric for us. Even the Soban do not treat their enemies this way." Rob didn't sound too enthusiastic about it either.

"Is that even legal?" I asked

"They're not Kushan. Technically anything they do in there is legal. I don't like it any more than you three. But there's nothing we can do. If we speak out, *we* could get arrested." Brad made a point. But this was not right. They weren't Taiidan. They didn't destroy our planet, they were protecting themselves and who knows how many others like them. *We* were the invaders. We destroyed their lives. This should be *our* fate. This was not right.

"I can't watch this." I said and moved for the door. The two guards stood at the door blocking my way. They saw who I was and exchanged nervous glances. They were about the same height as me, so they weren't those impenetrable six-foot seven black-suit guards.

"C'mon guys, is this what we stand for? Is this what it means to be Kushan? Look at this! It's torture. I'm supposed to be a leader, or at least people think I will be, so how about I start?" they were really nervous now. People all around were staring at me. They gave me supporting smiles. That was . . . weird.

"Look, how about I put a word in so you can keep your jobs." After that, they gladly stepped aside letting me get to the door. It was a slide door, so I pressed the button after the two guards had their keys inserted. I walked right in.

The guy was a madman! He was yelling at her and even hit her across the face. The guards saw me and stiffened. These were those tall tough-guy guards. This plan suddenly seemed like a bad idea.

# Chapter Fourteen

## Kadeshi

MARK

“Who are you? Get out now! Guards!” the single interrogator was angry. I wondered what she could have done to deserve this kind of treatment. Oh wait, I already knew. Nothing.

It was time to make a move. If I was going to become a leader of some sort, it was now to make my move. I stood up straight and didn't back down from them. The guards stopped. That was good. It meant that I was respected even by the police.

“What *are* you waiting for?” now he seemed desperate to get me out of there.

“They don't want to touch me.” Was my simple reply to his impatient tone, the guy stood over me about two inches taller. He was taller, but then again, I was quite short.

“And just who do you think you are? You have no authority coming in here.” Oh, so he hadn't heard.

“Well, I *think* I'm Mark Soban, and, well, I could say I have authority to pretty much wherever I want.” I'm usually not cocky like that, but this guy was an exception.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Huh? He *hadn't* heard of me? Yet even the security force backed down to my presence, where was this guy this whole time?

I got my answer. He was wearing one of those blue rings around his wrist marking him as a sleeper. He must have been one of the backup crew.

“I see. So you're a sleeper. Well then, let's get you up to speed shall we, I am considered by lots of people as a sort of inspiration. A leader if you may call it. I'm not above the law here, but the law respects me just like everyone else does. So basically, I could just command them to take you outa here and they'll obey me.”

He started to laugh. He *laughed* at me. “You expect me to believe that? Yeah . . . and I'm an angel of Balcora. Give me a break kid.”

That was it. I lost my cool. He could call me whatever he wanted to and I wouldn't flinch. But there was that one word that I couldn't stand. I'm not a kid anymore. I have grown up a great deal in my life. I have been through more than most old people. It was hard on my childhood, but it benefited me as I am now mature enough to handle most situations while staying perfectly calm. Or appearing to be calm. I still felt the impact of mass deaths of large scale. But I think everyone would be feeling dizzy after seeing something like oh say seven hundred people dying in an explosion, or even three hundred million, the total population of Kharak by the way.

“Security!” I shouted as if talking to an annoying kid. See how I turn things around?

The guards quickly escorted him out. “What? But . . . how? This is my job! I demand an explanation!” and he was gone out the door. I saw Jay and his crew staring at me with excited smiles. Others looked happy too.

“The rest of you can leave too. Take a break. It's on me. You shouldn't be forced to watch this madness any more than them outside.” They looked at each other and shrugged as if saying

“why not?” I was alone in the room. I followed them to the door and jammed it shut so only I could open it. Just in case. I also gave the crowd one last smile and blinds came down the windows so they couldn’t see.

I then got my first good look at her. It was horrible. I would have cried if I hadn’t seen so much already. She had her head lowered, but I could see her air was red, I couldn’t tell if there was blood mixed, but there was sweat. She lifted her head and stared at me. I wouldn’t let myself cry. Her face was a mess. There was sweat mixed with fresh and dry blood, she was crying too. I saw fear in her eyes. I didn’t want to say anything to startle her even more, so I just took a seat at the table.

It felt weird being in that room with her. Really weird. I knew how she was feeling. Many of us did. I’m not the only one on this ship who lost everyone. Or maybe I was. The people of the *Mothership* left everything behind willingly. They had already sacrificed their loved ones. But on top of that, most had everyone they knew already in cryogenic sleep. I felt alone at times. Everyone knew everyone else, or they were happy with knowing their loved ones were in cryo-freeze. I knew maybe over a dozen. And Jeroll just died today. I’m attending his funeral later on today. A lot of them aren’t even usually on the *Mothership*.

And yet she knew no one. Not a single person on this ship besides maybe the prisoners. I started out with a handful of people I could call my friends.

Enough about that. I had to break the silence, so I took a look at the papers that were on the table. They were notes of questions she had answered. Only a few were. I could say about five. That was it. Out of the two hundred or so, only five were answered.

“Okay . . . how do I start? I have questions I need answered here,” I took a pause to look at the questions. I read some of them to myself: “*How does your hyperdrive work?*” and “*What were your people thinking trying to keep us here?*” and there was even “*If there was one significant thing you could say of your home and your people, what would it be?*”

“What? How does he expect *anyone* to answer these?” I threw the pages down and shook my head in a slightly “who the hell does he think he’s talking to” chuckle.

“Forget that crap.”

She gave me a confused look, still a little scared of what was going on.

“How does he expect you to answer these? I’m a pilot, so I know what pilots know. This is *way* out of context. Here’s an easy one? What’s your name?”

She stared at me blankly as if not sure how to respond. She then turned to stare at a corner of the room.

I turned to see a video camera.

“Oh . . . I see. Hold on.” I walked over to a wall and pressed a button.

“Hey! What the hell are you doing, Mark!” came a voice I didn’t know.

“Sorry. If I want her to trust me I need to be completely alone in here. I’m gonna cut out your ears in a minute too.” The button I pressed turned the video off in the room. The cameras were turned off.

“What? Hey! What are you doing in there?” after he said that, I turned him off. The camera observer was out of it.

I walked over to her, not sitting down. I stood right over her. I looked at her greased hair that looked actually kind of nice in space. She lifted her head and said something. More of a

silent mumble.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Someone you can trust.” I replied for the second time.

## JOHN

The crew were given homes. John and the crew made a promise. When the time comes for them to return on duty, they would do it together. On the *Ifriit 3*.

He was headed to meet up with his old friends. He met them all in the lobby area they used to hang out. There was Mark’s very young partner Isel, The Mercy-class repair corvette captain Karu, the pilot for the porter that saved him Jay, and someone else he had never met before.

“Hey! It’s been a while!” Karu gave him a big friendly hug. He didn’t resist it either.

“Yeah, a couple months on a frigate makes you a little claustrophobic. Who’s the new guy?”

“The name’s Bradley LirHra. I’m Jay’s co-pilot. He was introducing me to his friends.”

“So what exactly do you do?”

“Well, I pilot when he gets tired or stressed, I organize data from all the systems, and I’m also in charge of supplies. Most of all, I’m in charge of the magnetic binds and virus transmission to capture enemy ships.”

“So you helped a lot in saving us. I’m thankful for that. The name’s John Nabaal, captain of the *Ifriit Nabaal* and the *Ifriit 2*.”

Brad shook John’s hand and said, “So you captain the ship we saved. Sort of saved. Seems to me like it’s the second ship you lost.”

“Yeah. The first was hit with an ion cannon in the Great Wastelands. The fighter docks were ruined and it was going to be scrapped.”

“Nice story. Except for the whole ship being recycled part. Uh . . . never mind it’s not a good story but you know what I mean.”

John laughed. “So where is he?”

“Who?” Isel asked.

“Who do you think?” he replied.

“Oh Mark! I don’t actually know. He was met with a big welcoming party and I couldn’t get to him. I haven’t seen him for hours. You see, I was in a fight with a Swarmer as they call them, and I had it captured. In all, we got separated.”

“He’s interrogating the pilot he got us to capture. Not sure why, but he felt as if he had to. The interrogator was torturing the poor girl.” Jay had seen the whole thing. He was led to the room and waited outside the door. He brought her in there unconscious. Then the bloodbath began. He beat her. That would be a serious crime that would end a guy up in jail for three years if it was a Kushan.

“Ah . . . I see.”

“He won’t be out for an hour or two, so let’s go do something.” Jay suggested.

“Okay then, mister second in command, where to then?” Isel asked punching him in the shoulder.

“Ouch.” He said not really in pain. “Well, we could go ride up and down on the elevators, isn’t that what little kids do?” he said making fun of her age.

“You know, next time I could just *not* save you?”

“Ooh we’re so helpless. Please. Two Swarmers wouldn’t have hurt us that bad anyway. But seriously! You gotta be like thirteen!”

“Fourteen! And a half!” she gave the new guy a sinister glare.

“C’mon guys! Stop picking on the poor girl.”

“Oh yeah I almost forgot you two were dating. Well for Karu’s sake I’ll play nice.” Jay was really having fun with this.

John started to laugh. “This is why I hang out with you kids.”

“*Hey!*” they all shouted.

## MARK

Now first off, let’s dim those lights. They’re giving me a headache.” I found the knob and turned down the intense lighting to a normal setting that didn’t blind me. I saw she could see well. She wasn’t squinting anymore.

“Look. You don’t need to answer anything if you don’t want to. I’m just here to find out who you are and how you’re holding up. You must have tons of questions, and so do I.”

“You want to know how I’m holding up! You can’t possibly understand what I’m feeling!” she started crying again. That wasn’t good.

“Well that’s where you’re wrong. You’ve had many loved ones killed before your eyes, you’ve been forcefully taken from your home, and all you feel like doing is dying. Ya, I think that just about sums it up in one sentence.”

She looked me in the eyes. What I said brought back horrible memories. I felt a shiver even speaking that one sentence.

“Where *do* you come from?” she asked. Great. I got through to her. That’s good. Now all I need to do is answer her questions and hope she’ll answer some of mine.

“That’s a hard one.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I know, it’s just that it’s a horrible thing to think of. It’s a hostile desert world named Kharak. Okay, well from the beginning. We discovered an ancient starship buried beneath the sands of the Great Banded Desert, and it was excavated. The ship was an exact match to the ship found afloat where we were. It was called *Khar-Toba* or translated to First City. It was only a vague memory and passed down to myth until uncovered. The ship held a Guidestone that had a galactic map, and one word older than any memory we have. Hiigara. We were at a state of constant war before that was uncovered. The word was known by many who shared its meaning with the rest of their clan.

The legend is an ancient myth of a lush paradise we had lost for committing a horrible sin. The people were exiled to Kharak to pay the ultimate price. Life on Kharak . . . well put simply, it sucked. It was searing hot, not much water to go by, the water that was in great lakes or oceans were usually heavily guarded and sold at very high prices. We adapted and became tough and

tolerant to the hell that we lived in. my house was made of sandstone that I moulded myself. We would do anything to get out of the light. It was back breaking labour to survive, most only took care of themselves. Then the time came.”

“What time?” she asked.

“The time of reason . . . it was when we finally accepted globally that we were not from this world, that we were aliens to Kharak. Studies compared to natural animal life backed that up. We made plans for an interstellar colony ship, the one you’re inside right now. It took sixty years in total. When it was ready for launch, I was to be up there for fighter testing. I got there and the fighters worked great. We were doing the hyperspace test, and that’s where everything went sour. We came out of hyperspace to find that the ship we were supposed to meet up with was destroyed. Not only that, we were intercepted by a group of Turanic Raiders. We forced them to retreat without any real big trouble, but it’s when we got back that we all fell to our knees. Literally.” I had to stop for a second. But I continued.

“When we returned, I was to catch the transport back down to Kharak and visit some family and meet up with my friends. I was even going to propose to my girlfriend. At sixteen, that’s not very common in most relationships. We returned to see everything but the fleet that did the damage. We came back, and the entire planet was being consumed by a global firestorm. The air was burning up, and the heat was so great, that the sands of the great deserts had been turned to glass.” I was in tears at this point.

“I wouldn’t accept it at first. I fell to the floor and wouldn’t leave the hall. I didn’t want to see. The whole northern hemisphere was already charred and taken of all life. I lived in the north. My life was gone before we even got back. We saved the cryo-trays filled with our colonists and captured the remaining frigates that were assaulting the trays. None of the enemies survived interrogations, I’m glad to report. The Taiidan destroyed my home, and committed Genocide against the Kushan people. We then accepted that whatever horrible fate that we had been sent to Kharak for had been repaid. We had nothing left for us. Only a group of fuel-less and damaged fighters were left to tell the story. They said my father led the remaining forces left on all of Kharak into battle for a desperate attempt to save us all. The missile defence systems helped too. But it was a desperate battle, and one that ultimately failed. They were destroyed. I never got to see my father, my family, or my friends ever again. My home gone, we decided to do the only thing left. We chose to return to Hiigara. We are still on our crusade.”

“What of the fleet that destroyed your home? They did not come by here.”

“We found them in an asteroid belt in the Great Wastelands and wiped them out. We captured their ships, but none of the prisoners on the *Mothership* were allowed to live. The other ship, the *Rancor*, the prisoners were allowed to live only to help maintain the ship. It’s Turanic and they know the systems better than we do.”

“So . . . you *are* the other half of the convoy.”

What? Let me repeat that. What? “Huh?”

“Half of the exile convoy stopped and found security in the Garden of Kadash and became known as the Kadashi, and the other half continued on into the unknown never seen again. Until now. We started to prey on passing cargo ships for resources not to use up too much of the nebula. We built better ships, and eventually left the old prison ships to rust and eventually they became nothing more than relics. We found seven planets like what you describe Hiigara to be.

Not as beautiful, but habitable enough to be comfortable.”

“So there *are* more of you?”

“Well, yeah! Billions more, all living on the Seven Colonies. My father is the governor of Third Colony. I haven't seen him in years. I was going to return after this asteroid mining operation, but that never happened now did it.” She now looked angry.

“I'm sorry once again. But we're headed out of the nebula. There's no turning back now.”

She cried. She broke out in tears again. Her world was gone. I felt her pain before. It was the worst.

“It's Arazis.”

“What?”

“You asked me my name before, my name's Arazis Restion.”



# Chapter Fifteen

## Enemy of My Enemy

ARAZIS

His home was destroyed. She didn't know that at first. It changed things. She knew now that they were desperate and hopeful. There was no way they would have joined Kadesh.

She herself didn't know what to think of Kadesh. Jeremiah had unloaded a lot on her that seemed to be impossible. He told her in summary most of his wisdom throughout his century of living in a few seconds. She thought she would break out in a coma or something of the sort.

She didn't. Instead, she was focusing on him. The one they called Mark. He was to them a leader, but right there in her eyes, he was a kid. Maybe her age. He didn't take things too seriously, but he has been through a lot in his life, making him look years older than he probably was.

She decided not to think about the speech given by captain Jeremiah. She would understand it in time.

She had to make the most of the situation. But the restraints were so tight they were hurting. She was bleeding in several different places, even on her face. She couldn't wipe the blood off. She looked like a mess and felt like one too. She wondered when she would be going into a sleeping tube. If they had any. She then thought of the alternative and wondered how she would live without one.

"Don't you care about the ones that were lost out there today?" she asked. The thought was picking at the back of her mind. He seemed happy in front of her. Why was that? Many died in battle. Why did he not mourn them?

"Well of course I do!" he shot back surprised. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Then why do you seem so joyful?"

"I'm not." He then faded to a cold and sad person. "I fear that with this battle there won't be enough of us to fight off the Taiidan now."

"What about *them*! The pilots! Doesn't that bother you?"

"Yes! I lost a friend out there. I'm not even sure about some of them."

"Didn't you know any more than *one* that died out there?"

"Sure, I've seen faces and passed by them in the halls, but there are thousands of us. And we are told to not get to know other fighter pilots for that reason. So no I didn't mind losing that many on a personal level. And quite honestly, after all that have died to bring us this far, I couldn't care less. I care about two things now, my friends, and getting us to Hiigara."

"So you just don't care?" she was seeing a darker side to this kind and cheery guy named Mark. She didn't like it.

"How could I possibly care? I have lost nearly everything! Almost everyone I had ever known is dead! Now I concern myself on those few that remain and not about the many faceless pilots that died because of *your* stupidity and blindness." She felt cold now, as much as she

would have wanted it to be all a lie and for it not to have been her fault, he was right. He lost everything. How could he care deeply about people he was told not to get to know? It was a mess in her mind.

“I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so used to everyone knowing everyone else. Even if they didn't, they wouldn't pass up the opportunity to. I knew everyone on the *Amun*. They were my family. And now they're gone.”

“And that's why I feel your pain. I wasn't meant to be here. And if I wasn't, neither would you. If I wasn't here, the *Mothership* would have been destroyed. They say I am a natural leader. I am. My father was before me, as well as my grandmother before him. All the way down the Sobani line back to Soban the Red. He started the Soban clan. The warrior clan. We are the leaders of warfare because we are the best at what we do, and do not fear making mistakes. I know my heritage. I plan on using it. That's what I did in the Great Wastelands, that's what I plan on doing again.”

“What *did* you do?”

“I improvised a speech to the pilots. I made it up on the spot. I have seen Hiigara in my dreams as clearly as I am looking at you. It was breathtaking. It was inspiring. It was worth dying for. They agreed with me that if we die, it was meant to be. This is a war and many will pass on to Balcora. This is my battle now. It sounds a little much to say it's all on me, but it is. People look up to me. Because of me, we won the first battle and destroyed the Taiidan that committed Genocide on us. We survived. It was meant to be. And now, I'm guiding them by never showing fear or pain in any way. If I did, they would see through my disguise and know that I'm not fully faithful in us.”

“So you act as a god to make them believe?”

“Yes, in a way that's true. But only Sajuuk has the right as “god”. I'm more of a warrior. If they see weakness in me, they see weakness in us all. I show no fear, but that doesn't mean I wasn't terrified. I didn't expect to make it out of either of those two battles. So maybe Sajuuk is using *me* to lead us. I'm not full of myself on this. I don't expect to survive the next battle either. If I do, then I am one lucky kid.”

That said, she knew now that he was just a normal person. Not special in any way, yet she believed in him. She believed maybe in part what he was saying. Maybe he was chosen to lead, but not by Sajuuk. Gods are arrogant and selfish. This wouldn't be the work of a god.

She couldn't take the metallic squeeze anymore. She struggled, but couldn't get her hands free. She was stuck and wasn't going to get free any time soon.

Until Mark laid his hand on her head. He wiped the blood off her forehead and smiled. She smiled back. She wanted to do that from the moment she was brought in here.

“Let's get those restraints off. They must be killing you.” Amazingly, she couldn't answer that. It was as if he was reading her mind. Maybe he was with his hand on her forehead. She didn't know. And probably never would.

MARK

I let go of her and walked to my side of the table. I pressed another button that released the

restraints. She immediately rubbed her wrists. I saw that they were on a little too tight. They were red and looked like the circulation was cut off. It probably was.

“Thanks.” I didn’t answer. I just stood there across from her. She was wiping the blood off of herself. She then stood up.

She was short, definitely under five-foot-seven. I know this because that’s my height, and I was staring at her forehead.

“So . . . what happens to me now?” that was a question I didn’t know how to answer. I could make a very good guess, but it didn’t seem like she even knew what a prison was. And even worse was how I was going to break the news to her.

“I-I . . .” I couldn’t bring myself to say it. But I had to. “You’ll be taken as a prisoner. They might let you stay in the prison if you play weak or sick. That or they’ll kill you. But I think they’ll go easy since you aren’t Taiidan, and you didn’t really do anything wrong. You just kind of got in our way.”

“What does “go easy” mean?” she asked. She was now back to scared mode. Great job Mark, great negotiations.

“It means they won’t slaughter your people . . . what are you called?”

“Kadeshi.”

“Right, Kadeshi. I’ve been calling you the Nebulans.” I let out a little laughter, but then I realized this wasn’t the time. “It means they won’t slaughter the Kadeshi, they’ll just make you do the dangerous or menial labour that no one else wants to do.”

“So we become slaves?” she exclaimed.

“Pretty much—

“That’s horrible! My people become slaves on this interstellar journey? That’s horrible! Really, *really* terrible.”

“It’s not my choice. I have the respect and near-control of the security force. But I don’t have control of the prisoner block. I’ll bring your case up, and they may let you out. I’m good at twisting strings like that—

“What about the others?” there she goes cutting me off again.

“Don’t worry about them for now. At worst, a couple dozen engineers might be transferred to work with the Turanic Raiders on the *Mothership*’s engines.”

“But . . . I’m an engineer!”

“Fighter engineering isn’t the same. They won’t pick you. Trust me.”

“I do.”

“Then don’t worry about things. They’ll all be right. Things always go for the better with me. My luck seems to rub off on my friends.” She took that in mind.

“But am I your friend?” that was a tricky one to answer . . . a *very* tricky one. She personally killed Jeroll. But I couldn’t blame her. She was only doing her job.

“There’s an old saying that all warriors live by. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. So yes, Arazis, you are my friend.”

I let that hand there for a while. She held out her hand for a shake. I took it, and that’s exactly what she was doing. I guess a handshake is the universal peace offering. Or ancient Hiigaran anyway.

“I will wait for you to save me. But what should I be preparing for?” oh great, more bad

news to dump on her.

“The most uncomfortable sleep of your life.”

“Sleep? What’s—” before she could finish that thought, the door blew open and security flooded in with gas bombs. I fell asleep, and I think she did the same.

“Arazis” was all I could call out before going out. I hated whiting out because you could feel yourself falling away. Unlike when you sleep when you have no clue when you pass out.

I felt myself go. It was horrible like usual.

## ARAZIS

She woke up what felt like the next day to her. It was odd. She had only slept in sleeper tubes her whole life. Had they put her in one? The opening of her eyes made that thought seem a little too desperate. She could feel every part of her body aching. She forced herself to sit up on what was a bench made of metal.

“Ah!” she nearly fell over because of the pain. She looked around but had to wait a few minutes for her eyes to adjust, during which, she also noticed the incredible heat in the ship. It was like a hot sauna. A dry hot sauna. Her throat felt like sandpaper.

She had no idea how long she was out. The last thing she remembered was being in an interrogation with the friendly Mark Soban, and then the door busted down and gas filled the room. She felt herself falling away into an endless pit of darkness.

Her eyes started to make out details, and she saw Mark on the bench on the other side of the small room with metal bars. She had never seen such a place. She felt confined. Trapped. Imprisoned. That was it. She then realized that this was what Mark called a prison.

“Mark? Are you all right? Mark!” he was not moving. She didn’t know what to do. When people didn’t move, it either meant that they were dead or almost dead.

“Relax *blood head*, he’s asleep.” She looked out the bars to see a man wearing a uniform and on it was the word “officer”. She didn’t know what asleep meant. What was sleep, really? For her it was getting into the tube filled with the cleansing liquid. What was sleep for these Hiigarans?

“What does that mean?” she asked figuring she had no more dignity left to lose.

“What do you mean by that? It’s sleep! How can you not know? For Sajuuk’s sake, all of you Kadeshi are like zombies! Get some shut-eye why don’t ya? You got a lot of work tomorrow.”

The guard’s answer just raised more questions than it answered. What was “shut-eye”? What was “Sajuuk’s sake”? What was a “zombie”?

Her head was ready to explode. With all this new information on this ship, she still had the captain of the *Amun*’s lesson. What did anything mean anymore? She was a simple person from the small green moon that was Third Colony. The biggest wonders in her old life back when she was young were what the gigantic object floating in the sky was and what lay beyond the Garden?

Now, she was questioning everything she had ever known. All her teachings had been made a lie when Jeremiah said that Kadesh was the nebula and not a protector goddess. She had no

way of knowing her future now.

The irony was killing her. She was even blinder *outside* the haze of the nebula.

## JOHN

Isel, Karu and John woke up early that morning to go find Mark. He couldn't have been gone all that time. Where did he go?

"He's not in his room." Karu said meeting up with the gang.

"Not in the hangar either." She said.

"Where is he then? Surely he couldn't pass up hanging out with the amusing John Nabaal." That made the three of them laugh.

"Maybe in the observatory? He hangs out there when he wants to be alone. I've learnt to leave him be when things are gone wrong." Isel declared.

"Yeah . . . but he didn't even show up at Jeroll's funeral! That's not like him. He wouldn't have missed that unless something really bad happened to him." Karu had a point.

"Then I guess we know where to start looking then." John said.

"Where's that?" the two others said at the same time.

"Where he was last seen, of course! We need to go to the prison level."

"You don't think . . ." she didn't need to finish.

"He *did* barge in on an interrogation and take over, as well as close off all communications and surveillance from the inside."

The three were headed to make sure they were wrong and that Mark just couldn't make it for another *really* good reason. But the truth was, none of them believed it for a second. He would *never* miss a funeral for a friend unless he physically couldn't get there. If that were the case, they had to bust him out of prison.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Leaving the Garden

ARAZIS

All alone in that cell was torture for her. Mark was asleep and she didn't know if she should wake him. Suddenly she missed Third Colony even more. She was wondering what would have happened if she retired after the festival of Kadesh as her father had requested to learn to lead a colony. If that happened, she wouldn't be here. She would be at home with her family. Now, she was stuck in a rusty prison cell on an outsider's ship headed away from the Garden. She wondered if she'd ever see her home again.

She was going to cry, but there was a loud noise, like an explosion. She jumped up and saw that the guard was running over to the event.

"Hey! What's going on over there?" he yelled pulling out a metallic rod as he ran. He didn't get very far. There was a *clank!* And he found himself lying on the ground unconscious. It all happened so fast, she wondered if he knew what hit him.

"Mark!" there was someone over there. And they were calling for Mark. She thought about it quickly, but she had to believe if there was any hope of getting out helping Mark as much as possible.

"Mark! Where are you?" it was a girls voice.

"Over here!" Arazis called out.

They came running. There were three of them. The girl had to take a step back as if not believing what she was seeing.

"Y-You! B-But how?" she had trouble saying the words, and well, Arazis had trouble understanding why.

She then remembered that she had let two ships see their adversary. The black ship that held Mark, and another unnamed one.

"The Kadeshi!" she yelled again.

"What is it?" the younger of the two men said.

"I know her. Well her face. I saw it twice in battle. She looked . . . insane!"

"I was. Sorry. The battle got to my head and I barely knew what I was doing. I apologize if I killed someone close to you." She hoped that was good enough an apology. Now *really* wasn't the time for this. She could think of a better one later.

"I don't believe you."

"I'm helping mark as much as I can. That's what I want now. I have nothing else to live for."

"Help him do what?" she asked sceptical.

"Isn't he to become some form of leader? I want to help him. I know. It sounds dumb as I'm no good a leader myself, but what else can I do? He explained what they'd do to me in here. It's not a punishment, its enslavement! We are one and the same!"

"Don't say that! I won't believe it!" Arazis looked at her more closely. She was just a kid.

Not like she wasn't, but she must have been even younger.

"Why not? Look at us!" she held out her hand. The other two men weren't doing anything. They were completely focused on Mark.

"No! I don't trust you! Not after what happened out there. You just kept coming back! Why?"

"I saw the black ship as a challenge. An even match. I left my wingman to deal with you, and went in pursuit. I found out his ship was stronger than any fighter I'd ever known. I ran out of fuel, so did he. A lot happened out there you don't know about. He trusts me."

"Why would he do that?"

"How should I know? He just does! And I'm not sure what this whole "sleep" thing is, but is he even okay?" the Kushan stared at her not knowing what to say. She didn't know how to answer. Arazis was very confused, and people were too confused by her questions to answer.

"Wake him up!" she said.

"What? How! I've never seen sleep, I've only heard vague stories!"

"Got it." The older of the two men was holding up something that looked like an extinguisher. "I'd back up if I were you."

She did as he requested, and out of the extinguisher-thing came out a bright torch that sent sparks flying. Arazis felt terrified.

"All done. Get him out." The bars were cut right off. Or it looked more like they were melted off. The other one went to Mark and tried to wake him. She guessed.

He turned and woke. "W-What, where am I?" he sounded just as bad as she felt before.

"In the prison. We gotta get you outa here."

"Karu? Is that you?" he asked. The man named Karu nodded. "I dreamt of Hiigara again."

"Sure you did. C'mon buddy, wake up now! We have to get out of here." He wasn't rushing him, but she noticed impatience in his voice as he helped him out the cell.

"Arazis?" he was staring at her. He looked as if he was not aware of anything happening.

"Leave her. We need to be as few as possible to sneak away from this." the girl's voice was with authority, but Mark wouldn't have it.

"She comes or I stay." That declaration surprised the group.

"He's still tired. Leave her anyway. She's give us away with her hair." She just wouldn't give up. Arazis walked to the end of the cell to Mark. He no longer looked dazed.

"She comes. I need her for what I'm planning." They jumped. A half a millisecond ago, he was incoherent and tumbling to his feet. Now, he stood up straight and with complete focus. He was a warrior all right, and he was a leader.

"Fine. But I don't like this idea." She gave him an angry look, but Arazis jumped out the hole that had been cut, and ran after them. She was free.

ERIC

Waking up the next morning was different this time for the Gaalsien pilot. He knew what the day held for him.

He would find Triikor and see if she liked him as she said the first time, or if she was having

a rough time and her emotions were too mixed up to know what she was doing. Either way it goes, he would just be relieved to know for certain.

Then, he would see how the inspection on his ship was going. He also needed to know why and how his air failed him. Was it accidental? Was it battle damage? Was it sabotage?

He didn't want to believe the last option. It was very unlikely, but then again, the hangars aren't supervised. If it was, he would never know for certain. He had a suspect if that was the case, but he didn't want to believe he would go that far.

And lastly, he would complete recording the events of the past couple of days. His book is going well, already reaching a total of two hundred pages hand written.

After that, he didn't really care what he did. Writing would probably take up most of the day, but then again, he had months to handle the situation with his Taiidani friend.

He wanted to get it all down on paper while it was fresh in his memory. He doubted he would *ever* forget the battle, but who was to be sure? He wouldn't risk it. History must be recorded and preserved. The future generations must know and understand the pain that the Exiles had to deal with. They must understand how they returned to Hiigara.

All of the thoughts of his possible future in fame were getting to his head, so he decided just to stick with the plan and record only the facts.

He took a deep breath, and got out of bed, put on some clean clothes, and walked out the door.

He made it halfway down a hall, when he saw a television with news that ruined his plans for that day.

## MARK

We made it out of the prison level. I made a quick decision.

"Make your way to the observation decks." This plan relied solely on luck. If there were people there, we'd be seen for sure. I thought they were going to protest. They didn't. The five of us were quickly sprinting around always on alert for a passing guard just coming off-duty. That would be both stupid and inconvenient.

Isel was up front followed by John and Karu, then me. Arazis was always behind obediently following us wherever we were headed. I then realized she should be in sight. I slowed enough so she could catch up to me.

"Is this a good plan?" she asked. I thought for a second on it.

"Not if there are people in the observatory. There usually isn't. It's mostly empty. I go there to think. Stay in front of me. I need to see you." I felt like an overprotective parent right then, but I needed her safe. If I planned on doing what I hoped, then she needed to be with me.

With luck, we made it to the elevator. The one that barely fit five. We were all inside squished next to each other. Isel was still angry at me. John and Karu were just there looking confused as if not sure what to do. There was a moment of silence.

"So uh . . . how's it going?" Stupid question for a completely out of context situation, but I hadn't talked to John for what? Two months now? Not counting yesterday for a few short seconds.



At least he didn't look at me funny, he just smiled. "Actually, I'm doing quite well! I haven't seen you in a while. I wondered if I ever would again. For a man who's lost a second ship, I think I'm gonna be fine. What about you? I haven't heard of anything. I want to know it all once we get to the observatory place." I forgot. He had never been there.

"No. once we get there, I want to tell all of you my plan. Then we can catch up. But make it quick. If they find me, you three don't need to get busted too."

"Or you just want some alone time with the enemy." Isel was getting on my nerves.

"Enough already! Isel, she's not the enemy!"

"She killed Jeroll, and who knows how many others!"

"What's the code, Isel, code of a warrior, the number one rule? You should know. Manaani believe in it just as much as the Sobani."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"Exactly."

"I still don't trust her." So what? Deal with it. Didn't say that, but I sure felt like it.

"Hold on." John pressed the elevator to stop. The doors opened and he ran out. "I'll be right back!" where was he going? Oh-well. I'll wait for him. The more time we buy the better. They're probably looking at security footage on the main levels right now anyway. Best to wait a while. And the observatory is too dark for the cameras to make out details enough to know it's us.

## JOHN

He ran down the long hall and made it to a small clothing store. He bought two hoodies, one red the other black, and bought them.

*If they're going to be sneaking around with cameras, they better hide their faces, especially that red-haired one.* He thought.

Good plan. He left the shop and ran back to the elevator as fast he could. He wanted to be by Mark in whatever plan he had. Mark was his friend. He wanted to be there for him. He trusted his judgement that this Kadeshi was important to him in that plan.

He honestly didn't care if she was Kadeshi or Kushan. She just looked like a terrified kid. There was no threat there, so why should he not trust her? Mark did, so he did as well.

## MARK

John made it back in only a few minutes. He was holding something. As he got closer I knew what it was.

"You're a genius!" I shouted. He made it back with two sweaters. With hoods. We could hide who we were from the cameras.

Then, a thought occurred.

"What if we stand out in these? I mean look at yourselves, it's searing hot in here and you want us to wear sweaters?" duh! Great plan, but not so great under the circumstances. They were all wearing thin clothing. Isel was wearing what looked like what you would wear during a

desert expedition back on Kharak. He and Karu were in light colour thin shorts and white muscle shirts that you could tell they have been sweating in. I was wearing one just like it. I didn't even notice before. I remembered not wearing a shirt during the interrogation. The guards must have respected me enough to give me a shirt.

"Oh . . . oops."

"It's okay. *You* need to wear it though." I handed the black one to Arazis. I felt bad for her. She was definitely not dressed for the heat. She wore cargo pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt. She was wearing a jacket in the interrogation room. And when I first saw her, she was wearing a jumpsuit of some sort overtop of the whole thing.

"But I'm sweating like hell as it is!" she complained.

"It's only for a few seconds. The elevator comes out right near the room. You need to hide that hair of yours. Sorry." Her hair was short enough for a hat, but I wasn't making John run back out for a hat.

She agreed and put on the sweater. No sooner did the elevator stop. We made it to where we needed to be. The main levels had bright lights and newly white painted walls. They definitely spent some cash making this place stay "good as new", we found the big door into the observatory. It was closed. Good. That meant no one was inside.

I gently squeezed the door open with John and Karu. It was wide enough for us to barely fit inside. One after the other, we slid into the empty, dark, cold room.

That's the first thing I noticed. It was cold in here. Not freezer cold where you could see your breath, but cooler than outside. It was a good feeling. The thick walls must have kept the heat out.

"Ah . . . this feels good." Isel headed for the railing ahead of us all. We all eased up. After the door had been closed, we locked it with a big latch. No way was anyone getting in here. We all headed for the railing that looked out into space.

The entire wall was one big window. I noticed the room was messy. There were papers lying all over the floor. They must not have gotten to clean this place since we entered the nebula. When was that? Three days ago? It felt like a lifetime.

The five of us were staring out into space. There was a faint glow of red still surrounding us. We must just be exiting the nebula.

"There goes home." Arazis had taken off the sweater. She was frowning at the sight. I looked over to Isel and she was looking at Arazis without the slightest bit of sympathy. Then Karu came over to her and put his arm around her. It was good to see Isel found someone else in such a short time. It was also good to know that they were both my friends. I looked over to John. He was on the other side of Arazis. He felt bad for her at least. I knew my friend would help me out a little with her.

Well, I guess this journey will be different for us all. None of us knew what lie ahead. Would it be more Kadeshi? Doubtful as they never leave their "Garden". Would it be Taiidan? Or another raid by the Turanic? Or even the Bentusi? For all I knew we would run into another race altogether. Could there be more of the ancient convoy described in the *Khar-Halla* that survived? I doubted that too. I guess we'll soon find out.

## ERIC

On the screen was a news reporter. They had just finished a video of a Taiidani getting arrested for potential sabotage of a fighter. His fighter. He was so stunned; he didn't know what to do. He nearly forgot to breathe.

First thought was: *how?* This made no sense to him. Trix wouldn't do that, and she was in a prison! How could she? One answer. She didn't. Eric knew who it was. He had to go find him. But he feared he would get beaten nearly to death again.

As it turns out, he didn't have to go looking.

"Hello, Gaalsien," he turned coming face to face with the person he wanted to find. Or didn't *want* to find, but had to. He was less than a foot from his face.

"Hello, Will," he shot back not even flinching. He didn't want to show any sign of weakness. That could mean death.

"You don't look too surprised to see me. How come? Do I not frighten you even a little?" Eric didn't respond. He didn't even acknowledge the comment. He simply stared at the Siidim with a dead gaze.

"Hello? Anyone home?" Still, no reply came from the pilot of the sabotaged ship.

"I'll kill you!" William swung his fist toward, but it stopped and didn't hit.

"Wouldn't be doing that if I were you," They both shared confused looks. Eric shrugged. They took a look at the person who might have saved the Gaalsien's teeth. He was a young guy. He had blond hair and a tattoo on his right shoulder. It looked sort of like a deformed red "R" in a circle. He was sorter than Will, and didn't look at all that tough. He actually looked weaker than Eric, with blond hair like Trix.

Will sneered at him, making the unknown guy back off in fear.

"Well then, Eric, looks like we got another Taiidani to protect you now don't we? I thought with that last one out of the picture and with Brutus working on the prison levels, that I could finally finish you. But as it seems, you truly are an enemy hanging out, making alliances and friendships with the evil Taiidan."

"Taiidan?" the guy seemed actually genuinely terrified now. As if the words made him shrink down.

"What's-a-madder? Don't like who you are?" Will shot the helpless guy a punch nailing him right in the gut. He wasn't tough at all. He was weak. He got winded. He crawled on the floor gasping for air, but Will had kicked him to the floor. He was already in bad shape.

He actually had his dirty boot against the Taiidani's throat.

"I'll kill you here!" Eric made a bold move. One of those holes that lead to lower levels was right on the other side of William. Eric jumped at the bully and tackled him. They sailed through the air, and fell through the hole.

William shot Eric a scared look. Eric gave him a sinister grin.

"Time you know how it feels to be kicked into a deep hole of despair and stepped on." Eric kept Will under him for a safe landing. The hole went down a couple levels, and then came abruptly to an end on a hard metal floor. Eric fell on Will, and then sent bouncing off. He had minor cuts and bruises. That was it.

He then heard a blood-curdling cry of pain. He looked over to see Will squirming on the

ground.

“How does it feel? How does it feel Will?” I hope it hurts. That has been my life! My whole life!”

He looked around. The place had people in it. It was no hall. He just landed right in the prison level. There were some Taiidan, Turanic, and Kadeshi all in the same room chained in lines. They were prisoners getting breakfast. He saw five guards running over to the scene.

“What the hell?” the first one to arrive looked up through the long hole in the floor, or the ceiling now, and looked to William. “Get a stretcher! This one’s hurt.”

“What have you done?” the next to arrive asked Eric. His mind was in the right place despite all this.

“I made him understand me. He was going to kill me. He tried more times than I can count. Then a Taiidan interfered. He was going to snap his neck. Even if it was just a Taiidan, I couldn’t let him do it. I jumped him and we both fell into the hole.”

The guards didn’t know what to do. They knew he was dying, but they didn’t know if they should help someone who attempted murder that many times.

“We’re not the judges. If he dies, Sajuuk has wanted it. Get him to the hospital. You come with us.” two others grabbed Eric and dragged him off somewhere.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Back in Prison

MARK

“So what’s this plan you talk about?” Arazis broke the silence. I wasn’t even thinking about that.

“My plan is to become known to everyone in the fleet. I need to do something that will gain people’s attention. Like . . . for example, free the Kadeshi. That could tell them that the enemy is the Taiidan and no one else. I’m going to help them become part of our fleet.”

“What! What will that prove?” just like Isel to be sceptical.

“It’ll prove that I have power. I can assimilate people into our fleet and become a part of our cause. It’ll show everyone just how important returning to Hiigara is. It’s important beyond anything, yes. But people still think about themselves. That attitude isn’t going to help us win. So . . . Isel, meet your new roommate.”

The two looked at each other. And as if it had been rehearsed, they said, “You can’t be serious!”

“But I am.”

“You know I hate her! Why me? Why not you?”

“Because the attitude you have towards her is exactly what I’m trying to get rid of. Let’s just call it a test run. And Isel, what would people think if I was sharing a room with a Kadeshi girl? Think about that one.”

She rolled her eyes and said, “You’re lucky you’re my boss. Or I’d kick your ass.”

“Gee thanks.” And she probably would too. Oh-well Deal with it.

I also noticed Karu holding in a huge laugh behind her back. Funny guy. Glad to have him around. But it was my job to ruin his day. Sorry man, but I need you in on this too.

“Karu, you’re helping.” Isel turned, and he stopped laughing to himself.

“Why do I need to help?”

“Because she’s your girlfriend. Sucks to be you right now don’t it? Who gets to deal with her anger issues? Who’s gonna try and make her understand? Who am *I* going to go to for information on the situation? You guessed it buddy.”

John couldn’t hold it in. He blurted out laughing.

Isel and Karu gave him cold looks. He couldn’t stop.

“What’s so funny?” Isel asked trying to size up to him though she was at least three inches shorter.

“Nothing, it’s just that this is all like some huge comedy for me.”

“Yeah, well it’s not so great for us.” Karu shot back.

Arazis was backing away slowly cautiously avoiding the fight when Isel walked to her and grabbed her by the collar of her shirt.

“This is all your fault you know?”

“Wow, wow! Easy now! Break it up!” I tried to separate the two and Karu came over to control Isel.

“I'm leaving!” Isel left to the heavy door. John went to help her out.

“We'll catch up later.” He said and left the room. I hope he could calm Isel down.

It was just me, Karu and the Kadeshi now. Karu was looking at me as if asking what to do. Arazis was over by the railing looking at the slowly depleting red glow of the nebula.

“You know what you need to do?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I don't want to.” he came closer and lowered his voice. “I don't trust her to be honest with you.”

“Look, man, does she look like a crazy murderer? She's lost her whole life just like us.”

He seemed to lighten up after hearing that. “Alright, I'll do it. Only because you're my friend and I trust you. If things get too out of hand though,” he didn't need to finish. If things with Isel got too crazy, I wasn't going to force him.

“I understand. Just do your best for me.”

“I will.” And I knew he would. It might not seem important to do something like this on a normal occasion, but if I succeed in making Isel trust her, I could do the same for the rest of the Kadeshi prisoners. They didn't deserve the same treatment as the Turanic. They were not under the control of our enemy. They were on our side in this war. But they were confused and scared.

Karu left the room and I was left alone with Arazis.

“I'm sorry.”

“For what?” she turned to face me.

“For doing this to you.”

“It's fine. I'm not worried about it. I just hope it doesn't last too long.”

“It'll only last as long as you make it last. Isel doesn't like you. *You* need to change that. I can't do anything about it.” We both stared out into space. The red glow was almost all gone. We were out of the nebula.

“What is the point? I mean . . . even if you succeed in this with all the Kadeshi, what to do then? I doubt that every single person in the fleet will accept us walking around freely.”

“That's because most won't. I'm thinking on having the Kadeshi, at least some of them, take control of their ships later on.”

“What?” she exclaimed. “Now that is way out of the question!”

“At this time yes, but this is in the long-run. The Kadeshi know their ships better than anyone here. I'm sure by the time we reach Hiigara, or another Taiidan fleet, there will be a desperate need to have all the strength we have. Command and Intelligence would agree that the best people to use Kadeshi ships, would be the Kadeshi themselves.”

“But they won't accept it!” she argued.

“They'll have to. They don't have any other choice. And by then, my plan would succeed and the Kadeshi would already have some of the rights we Kushan have. And with people prejudice against them, they will *want* the Kadeshi off of the *Mothership*.”

“So . . . this is all some big scheme to make the fleet as strong as they can be?”

“That's exactly it. And it all starts with this test run with you and Isel. She could be one of the ones that hate your kind the most on this ship. I'm pretty sure if I can change her thinking, I can change the rest of the *Mothership* fleet.”

“Oh. I guess . . . um . . . I don’t know what to say.”

Obviously I made a good enough point.

“Once again, little advice, don’t *try* and get her angry.”

“So . . . leave this Jeroll guy out of the picture?” Jeroll. I wasn’t even thinking about him. But yeah, she definitely needed to leave him out of the picture.”

“Yes.” That was all I needed to say. She nodded in understanding. She didn’t say anything. She must have known that I too was feeling a little . . . bitter about the whole thing.

Which also reminded me. I missed his funeral. I guess I was going back to the graveyard later.

“Well, I guess that’s it. I’m not sure where to hide you yet. I’m gonna have to talk with the police force later and make a deal.”

“I hope so. If I get arrested it kind of ruins the whole plan.”

## TRIIKOR

She found herself in the jail again. She was just brought there accused of a crime she didn’t commit, and it was time for breakfast. She was taken in with her hands cuffed and then tied to a chained row of other prisoners. There was a Turanic behind her. The tall white aggressive beast was angry. She was just hoping that the Turanic wouldn’t fight their Taiidan masters. She hoped for her life they would stay loyal to the Empire even in prison.

She looked over to see a Raider beating one of the white-haired Kadeshi. The guy didn’t stand a chance. The guards were trying to calm him but were unsuccessful. The Turanic had to be shot with a tranquilizer.

She then looked to some of the Taiidan. As if in response, they turned away or stared at her with disgrace. She deserved that. She betrayed them. Her own people. She didn’t care. They were evil.

Lastly, she looked at a few of the Kadeshi. They looked absolutely horrible. Like they hadn’t slept in days. They looked frail and ready to collapse at any moment. They didn’t even do as much as acknowledge each other. They were beaten. The ominous mystery of the Great Nebula had been revealed. As much as she was glad to get away, she felt bad. They had no idea of anything that was happening. Their entire world was flipped inside out. She doubted they had ever left that nebula.

Then it was her turn at the counter. She was given a cup full of pills. She knew what they were already. Every ship on the Taiidan Imperial fleets comes with a large supply of them. They give you all the nutrients to start your day. She took it, her chains were undone enough to move around on her own, and she headed for the fountain to get some water.

She gulped the energy pills in one shot. Another thing she remembered is that if they stay in the mouth too long, they start to taste disgusting.

Then, she had to decide where to go. She couldn’t be near the Taiidan for obvious reasons, and she didn’t want to be near the Turanic, so she decided the only other choice was the Kadeshi. As she walked over, some ran away as if in fear.

She just remembered seeing the same reaction with the Kadeshi in the hangar. They feared

the Taiidan. Yet here they were, in the same prison as them.

Some ran, some stayed. They were probably the tougher ones. Or the curious. Or they just didn't care anymore and were too tired to move. At the table were three Kadeshi, two with white hair and one with blond.

She sat across from the blond one. He looked a little more emotionally stable than the rest.

She couldn't think of a word to say to him.

*What was I thinking?* She thought.

Luckily, the Kadeshi broke the silence. "So this is it huh? The great evil ones." He spoke low not to let the guards hear them.

She was confused, but guessed that it was what they called the Taiidan in the nebula. She let out a weak smile to let him know she wouldn't bite his head off or something.

"We're not *all* evil." She reassured him.

"From what I've seen you are. Look around. You are the only one so far that I've seen who can act civilized." She looked to the other two who were getting up to leave.

"That's because I no longer serve the empire." That was a little too loud. A couple of guards heard, but didn't acknowledge them. Her Taiidan brethren on the other hand had. Then they sneered at her like she was lower than scum. "They're mercenaries. Fighter pilots, corvette jockeys, you know. The basic veteran."

"Then what of you?" he asked.

"I *was* an interceptor pilot. But then the attack came. We destroyed their home. Well they did anyway. I was put in prison for trying to speak out. I was charged with potential rebellion. They let me back out in the Great Wastelands where I was captured. I didn't fight it. I changed sides."

He looked confused, but understood most of it.

"Then why are you here?" good question.

"I was framed. I had been given freedom. Then someone blamed me for sabotaging my friend's ship. I would never hurt Eric."

"Eric. Now why does that name ring a bell . . ." he had to think about it. "Ah yes! Eric. He was the one I tried to save on the upper decks."

"My turn. What? Eric? Eric Gaalsien?"

"I don't know his last name, but I know he had been "hanging out" together. Not sure what that means, but I think I know who framed you."

"That's my Eric. So who is it?" she asked.

"I don't know his name either. I just stopped by. The guy was about to nail him in the face. I didn't want to see that, so I stopped him. But then he tried to kill me for it."

"William."

"He said something about the "other Taiidan" being out of the picture." She got angry. She knew who framed her. William Siidim. The bastard. She knew it to be him. No one else was as aggressive as him. Well besides the Turanic Raiders.

"What happened then?"

"I'm not sure exactly, he sort of jumped him. He saved me. He tackled him, but they fell inside one of those holes in the floor. I think he meant to do that. I looked down to see they landed a few levels away. Eric survived fine. But this William character was hurt up pretty bad."



“Good. He deserves it. He almost killed Eric in a fistfight then blamed it on me.”

“One more thing. William said something about a “Brutus” person on the prison level. Do you know him?” did she ever. He was her second best friend.

“Yes. He has helped get me my freedom. I thank him with my life for that. If anyone can help me out it’s him.”

She heard guards approaching. It was time for her to return to her cell.

They grabbed her and pulled her off.

“Wait! What’s your name?” she yelled out to him.

“Saiin.” He shouted back. With that, he let out a smile. He was no longer afraid of *all* the Taiidani.

She was dragged back to her cell. By the two guards. She didn’t fight. She knew this wouldn’t last forever. A day at most.

“Hey,” she called to the guard.

He turned and said, “What do you want?” he seemed pissed and annoyed.

“When do I get my one phone call?” she asked. The guard looked confused.

“What’s a phone?” duh! Dopes. They hadn’t made phones for the public yet or what?

“Never mind that. Don’t I get to see someone? A witness? A lawyer?”

“No.”

“What do you mean no? I’m not even responsible for the sabotage! Eric’s my best friend! Why would I do that?”

“So? You’re a Taiidan. Your opinion doesn’t matter.”

“Why not? I was given freedom!”

“And you messed it up!”

“No I didn’t! And I know who framed me too!”

“Oh yeah? Who?” it was finally time. William’s tyranny was coming to an end.

“William Siidim.”

# Chapter Eighteen

## Sleep Disorder

ERIC

He was brought to a holding area for those who wait for the security to decide where they go next.

“Well, because you are part of Red Squadron, you don’t go to jail. But you will need to pay for William’s recovery. He had been sitting in that cell for what felt like three hours.

“I have no money.”

“Then you will need to work for it.”

“You don’t understand. He deserved it! He was going to kill me! It was all in self-defence!”

“Um . . . Will is awake. He told us you tackled him out of nowhere. And you said yourself that he was attacking a Taiidan up a couple levels. He denied all of it.”

“And you believe him? Look at my medical records! I've been in that hospital because of him more times than I can count!”

“Yes, but—

“It’s because I'm a Gaalsien isn’t it? Isn't it!”

“N-no, that’s not what I meant—

“Yes it is!” he cut him off. “My life has been nothing but trying to fit in and gain some respect for myself and for the Kiith Gaalsien. You have no idea what my life has been.” The guard felt defeated. He indeed was still prejudice against the Gaalsien, like many others.

Eric thought for a few seconds to calm himself down, and continued. “I thought by coming here to the *Rancor* that I would be able to start fresh. I thought that the people here would not be as bad as the crew on the *Mothership*. I was wrong. I met Will. And he’s a Siidim.”

“Well it’s not my place to say anything. You can go to court tomorrow. Lawyers are provided.

“Good enough. But I need a witness. She’s a Taiidan.” He told the guard about the one person who would back his story up.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

MARK

The rest of that day passed fine and pretty much uneventful. I was glad to see that things were returning to some form of normal. There were celebrations going on and parties rocking the floors of the *Mothership*. It was the second victory of the Exiles. We celebrated.

I take that back. It was eventful, but compared to the things that happened the past few days, it was nothing.

I attended a few celebrations, but got tired of the noise. I went to what seemed to be the quietest place on this old rusted colony barge.

With the observation decks packed, I seek solitude in the *Mothership's* cemetery. I paid Jeroll a visit. I missed his funeral, but he would know why.

His average white granite tombstone was one of many that have lost their lives to the war. And it's only at its very beginning. How many more would die? Hundreds? Thousands? I wouldn't know. But I couldn't concern myself with numbers. We are the last of the Kushan. We must survive if that means giving the lives of all of us. The colonists are the highest priority.

Weird, because there are never news updates on the status of the cryo levels.

Back to Jeroll. I said a couple of last thoughts and things I wanted to tell him earlier such as how much I appreciated his help in battle as well as off-duty. He helped me prepare the pilots for the battle against the Taiidan in the Great Wastelands. He helped me with countless other stuff afterwards. All I could do is pay him some respect and remember his last words. There was "I believe in you." That alone let a huge thousand-pound weight off my back. It meant I had another person who thought I would be able to save us all. Somehow. Then he said, "Become the leader." That's what I'm trying to do. I have this planned out. Will it work? Will I be able to convince us to trust our fellow Hiigaran? I hoped so. "Guide us all to Hiigara." that was the last one.

I thought forever that Sajuuk was the one meant to guide. I guess not. Or is he speaking through me? Am I some kind of messiah?

I didn't believe that. I'm just . . . well I'm just Mark! I'm just me! How could *I* be a messiah? It wasn't possible.

After around a guesstimate of an hour, my gaze was brought to a larger stone near the middle of the huge cemetery. The crimson symbol of Soban the Red was still there.

I could barely get my feet to move. I hadn't visited this grave since that night I fell asleep in here. Creepy. Falling asleep in a graveyard.

I finally got the courage to move my feet. Not much, but I was moving. I made my way to the centre alley and headed to visit my father's grave.

The white marble towered over me by a foot at least. The odd thing was that the small garden surrounding it was still fresh and alive.

That was odd; the grave keeper doesn't do that, so someone must be visiting. It wouldn't surprise me. He was a hero after all.

"Hi, uh . . . sorry for not visiting I guess." I didn't exactly know what to say to him. If he could even hear me, that is. "A lot has happened so far on this trip. I just wish you could be here to see it."

Just then, I remembered the last time I saw him. It was four days before I left on *Transport 7*. I would have had him come with me, but he said his place was here on Kharak. I didn't know why he said that at the time, it wasn't like we were going with the Colonists.

Now, I knew why he said those last few words. Did he know about the attack? As cosmic as it sounds, it was probable. Many of the Sobani have had moments of foresight. The end of the Hersey Wars was predicted, so was the discovery of the Khar-Toba. And even I have had that gift. At least I think that it was what it was. The more I think about it, the more I believe the Agriisak had nothing to do with me seeing Hiigara in my dreams. Maybe it helped the power I think I have.

I had the dream without the Agriisak. I remembered it clearly like all the others. I was knocked out and thrown in a jail cell last night. I dreamt of Hiigara then just like the other times.

“Now I *really* wish you were here.” This has all been so hard on me. I never let it show before, but I was near the breaking point. I've always had someone there before to help me get through the tough parts of life. Not here. Not on the *Mothership*. And in these past months, it's been harder on me than most of my life. The only time that I could say was harder on me was when I needed to cross the Great Desert to reach Tiir.

I was twelve then, now I'm sixteen. It's been years. I knew that at the end of the line I would have someone to let it all out with. What now? What happens to me when we reach Hiigara? I don't have that person anymore. Who am I going to trust with this huge load on my back?

I've almost died many times now. What about the future? Do I really need to make all these sacrifices? I don't want to become the leader of the Mothership Fleet. But if not me, who?

The fleet needs a leader. And I just so happen to fit the profile. I have the blood of many leaders and heroes in me, I can keep my cool even moments away from death, I don't seem to be able to hate anyone, people look up to me, and I make amazing speeches right off the bat.

They think I'm the perfect leader. I don't want to be. As much as it would be nice, it's just more hard work. And I don't want to do it alone.

I was supposed to try and show off my “skills” to the crew by changing their minds about the Kadeshi. If Isel's mind was changed, maybe there was a shot. But still. That's fifty thousand people I need to convince. I knew at least some of them trusted me. Even the police force is on my side. I think. But could I pull it off?

I fell to my knees in the half-lit room. I looked at the blood seal on the front of the tombstone—my blood—and placed my hand on it as if desperately reaching out for the last piece of my dead father.

It was of course hopeless. He wouldn't be coming back. But I wished he could. Just for a second. Just for me to say a few words. Just to see his face one more time. One last bit of his golden advice was all I wanted.

I wished he would come back from beyond the grave like in those old ghost stories just to help me. I didn't care if people would believe me or not. I just wanted him back.

It didn't happen. I knew it wouldn't. I started to cry. I actually broke out in tears. I hadn't done that since my first glimpse at the Genocide.

In that moment, it was as if I felt him reaching out. Then I realized it wasn't my mind. Someone had been holding my shoulder.

“Dad?” I got up and remembered that it wasn't real. I didn't get to see my dead hero of a father one last time. I came face-to-face with . . . Arazis.

“John said you'd be here to see Jeroll.” She didn't sound too happy. The place probably made her feel horrible. There had to be at least a thousand graves in here.

I wiped my tears and stood up. I didn't know what to say to her. It seemed I never did.

“Sorry to disturb you. I'll just leave.”

“No.” I didn't know why I said that. Alone time was just what I needed right now. But I thought for a split second. “Meet one of the greatest heroes of all time.” I said barely holding back tears. They wanted out but I wouldn't let them.

“Who is he?”

“Markus Soban.” I let that trail. “My father.”

“The dead don't come back, Mark.” As if I didn't know that.

“I wish they did right now. I *really* need his help in all this.” I couldn’t hold them any longer. The tears came out. I turned away to face my father again.

“The blood on the stone binds the Sobani together. Anyone can join our clan. But we are all connected spiritually. So they say. I just thought I could see him again.”

“How? He’s dead. He’s in Balcora.”

“That’s my blood on his grave. He died trying to save his whole world. He died in peace. He fulfilled his destiny and remains a legend even after his death. Now I’m the one who pays the price.”

“Don’t get angry at him.” She was trying to comfort me. It wasn’t helping.

“I just thought that he’d make an exception. I didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye. He’s always been there for me when I really needed him. Well, right now I need him more than I ever did before.”

“He sounds like a great guy. I would have been an honour to meet him.” She stared at the Soban Blood imprint as if in a daze.

“And now he’s gone. My mind and my heart are both splitting in a dozen of different directions right now. I don’t know how much longer I can stay sane.” Truth was I was at a crossroads. I didn’t know where to go.

This doesn’t only have to do with changing the minds of everyone and becoming a leader to our entire fleet. That’s part of it. There’s also my father’s death to deal with and knowing I can never even see him again, there’s this newly out bursting memory of the Genocide I still couldn’t picture without getting nauseous, there’s my self-doubt, and I think most of all, it was this Kadeshi. She’s constantly in my mind. I only saw her face yesterday. But it’s been a rough couple of days.

Why did I want to help her so bad? I didn’t know. But here she was, standing not even a foot away, inside a lonely dark graveyard.

“Why did you really come here? I don’t think it was to pay a visit to someone you killed in combat.” Oh yeah. There was also the recent loss of a friend to deal with.

“I came to find you. You’re going through more than I am, and I lost my whole world. It seems you’re the only one on this ship I can relate to. I need help. And so do you.”

“How could you possibly help me?”

“How should I know? I don’t even know where to start. Maybe we could . . .”

“Work together? Yeah. Right. I just need to get to sleep right now. I feel like dying.” Horrible thing to say, but it’s true. I felt *that* bad.

As we walked away from Marcus’ grave, I felt like I was betraying him somehow. I don’t know why. It just felt like I should have kept him company a while longer.

“Speaking of sleep, I don’t know how to.” okay, fire alarms going off.

“What? How can you not know how to sleep?” I can honestly say I never had to ask that before.

“Well, the Kadeshi never slept. We have these tubes that we go inside. They fill up with some blue liquid and we just get pulled into unconsciousness. They also clean us and give us nutrients.”

“So you never had to eat? Or sleep? Or . . . or . . . take a shower?”

“What’s a shower?” Holy Sajuuk’s Throne! She really didn’t know!

“Uh . . . ask Isel.” Okay, not the best move to make, but sleep isn’t really something I can explain either.

I headed for my room and Arazis went her own way. It was still scorching hot in here, and I didn’t think I would be sleeping with any covers tonight.

## ARAZIS

The confused Kadeshi stepped into the room where she’d be staying for . . . who knew how long.

“You’re staying on the couch I borrowed from Mark.” The one person in the room besides herself was Isel. She didn’t look too happy about this.

“Um . . . okay, here’s the thing. I don’t know how to sleep.” Like two people before, she looked more confused than possible.

Isel looked at the Kadeshi and realized she was being serious. “I don’t want to know the story.”

She pulled out a large thick sheet from a drawer. “It’s called a blanket. Sleep isn’t really something anyone can explain. It sort of just . . . happens.”

“Oh great! That helps.” She stared at Isel returning her cocky attitude. She wanted her to know that she was no pushover. Now that she had her mind back in place, she thought of taking some little bit of control.

“Hey, you could always die from insomnia,” that got her attention.

“You *die* from not sleeping?”

“Duh,” Isel looked at her as if it was the most obvious thing ever. “you can’t live on an empty battery,”

“Still not getting it.”

“Look. You don’t think about sleep and it happens, you just lay there and not think of anything. Eventually, sometime, you just . . . pass out.”

“You’re no help at all.”

“I’m the only help you have right now.” She threw back.

The two stood there for a minute or two. Neither said anything. Neither was giving up control. Then finally, Isel broke the tension.

“Now it’s *way* past the normal time I go to sleep. I need to be ready for anything. It’s my job.”

“It was my job to remember?” She copied Isel and got onto the couch. Minutes passed. Still nothing. she was awake.

Then time didn’t seem to matter. It could have been seconds or hours. She didn’t even know if she was awake when she asked. “Isel, how much pain has Mark suffered?” it came without an answer at first.

“More than any of us can understand. But I know someone who does.” The Kushan was awake after all.

“Who?”

“His mother.” After that, she didn’t even know when it was. She just stopped being

conscious. She was asleep.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Siidim and Gaalsien

ERIC

He spent the night in that holding cell. The guards were getting him a lawyer and preparing a court date to decide the outcome of this whole event. He had total confidence that he'd make it out fine and that William will be forced to leave him alone.

The guard walked in just after he woke up.

"We have everything set up for you."

"Good." He was then taken to a court room only filled with a small amount of people. In the very front, he saw William with his lawyer. On his side, he saw his own, and Trix was also there. He had his witness.

He sat down in his seat and his day started.

"This court has been assembled today by Eric Gaalsien, who is pressing harassment and attempted murder charges against William Siidim."

"Outrageous! Look at the defendant!" the Siidim's lawyer was going to be trouble.

"Order!" that silenced everyone. This judge was powerful. "These accusations are serious. If this is true, then the defendant will be sentenced to life in prison, even when we reach Hiigara."

"Look at my client! He has been seriously injured by that Gaalsien. I think William should sue him!"

"Order! Now then, Eric, can you explain this?"

"Yes, I can. The reason he looks like that is because he was going to murder a Taiidan just because he stopped William from killing me." He felt a nudge coming from Trix.

"He was a Kadeshi." She corrected.

"Oh, sorry my mistake. He was a Kadeshi. He might have saved me, but it would cost him his own life if I didn't do anything. So I jumped him."

"You are saying he looks that way because you were protecting a prisoner?"

"Yes. But even they have the right to a life. I wouldn't let him die because of me. So I jumped Will, and we flew over the side into the tube-like hole in the floor."

"So you agree on making him look this way?" the judge asked.

"Yes." The crowd gasped. "I did this to him. But he has hated me since the day I came onto the *Rancor*. He hated me for the simple reason of being a Gaalsien. The first day, actually, I met him, and he beat me. Lucky for me, I had a friend just then, Brutus Gaalsien; an officer now, was there to stop William and his friends."

"Does the subject agree on this?"

"Yes," came a loud voice from the jury box. Brutus was wearing the blue uniform of an officer.

"And then, he found me again, and tried to beat me to death. I was close. My prime witness



was the one who saved me. She was the Taiidan you were worried about running around the ship causing trouble.”

“Now why would a Taiidan save one of its captors?”

“Because we deserved it.” Triikor stood up to face the judge. “My people destroyed your planet. Your home. I wasn’t part of it. But I saw what happened there in the Kharak System. I was forced to watch. It was horrible. I don’t expect any of you to believe me. But when I was running around, I wasn’t causing trouble. I was actually helping you. This ship is very old. There are gas leaks everywhere. One slight mishap and you could blow a hole right through the hull.”

“Now why would the Turanic let an inconvenience like that happen?” Now Will’s lawyer was testing her story.

“Um . . . because they’re pirates! The ship is built to be filled with liquid oxygen. So if there was an explosion, the shock would be absorbed as quickly as it happened. It wasn’t a threat when it was full, now that the ship is empty; it’s a very big deal. But back to my point. I saw William killing Eric. I couldn’t watch it. So I attacked him. Will was sent running, but at least Eric was safe.”

“Almost safe.” Eric corrected. “I needed lots of surgery. I have the medical records if you need ‘em.”

The judge looked to William as if expecting him to defend himself. Which he did. “I thought this case was about yesterday’s incident.”

That one comment made Eric’s hopes rise. The Siidim had fallen.

“This case is about attempted murder and harassment.” He corrected. The judge was definitely on Eric’s side.

“Eric, Will is the one who sabotaged your ship,” the Taiidani whispered. That set off an internal alarm.

“I would also like to bring up my sabotaged fighter. My witness was charged for the crime, but I know that it was impossible for her to have done the crime.”

“How can you be so sure?” Will’s lawyer said.

“Because she was in prison at the time. She had been there for days. And then she was interrogated. The only time she was free before my launch was when she arrived to wish me luck in the hangar.”

“And why would she do that?”

“This is not a personal debate. All you need to know is she couldn’t have sabotaged my ship while in prison.”

“What about before she was?”

“She was arrested before he came back in the hangar.” Brutus wasn’t supposed to interrupt, but Eric was glad that he did.

“How would you know?” Now the defendant’s lawyer was just buying time.

“Because I was the one who arrested her.” That made William wince.

“Think about it. Will had opportunity and motive. He tried to murder me out in battle. And if he succeeded, he thought no one would know the difference if I was killed by an enemy or a sabotaged oxygen tank. I have friends in very high places, William. They knew I hadn’t been hit. If you succeeded, you would have been sentenced to death by asphyxiation. Lucky for you, you get to live. But you will *never* get to see Hiigara. I can assure you that.” William was finally

done. He started to cry. That was it. The line was broken. He had nothing to counter that. He was finished.

“Since the defendant has no comment or witnesses, the jury can go vote.” That was great. This meant that it only took about a half hour for Eric to put William away for good.

Around ten minutes passed. The jury hadn’t decided. Then ten became twenty. And twenty five.

“What is taking so long?” Eric said to himself.

After a half-hour in the decision room, the jury came out.

A note was given to the judge. “The jury finds the defendant . . .” there it was, the most stressful moment of the month. “Guilty.”

“That’s it!” William yelled then pulled out a gun. I’ve had it! Die! Die! Die! All the Gaalsien must die!” he started shooting. Everyone ducked under the boards, but his weapon was powerful. It blasted right through the boards. Some people got hit and fell to the ground in pain. Some guards got nailed in the chest and fell over dead with their stomachs ripped open. Wherever he got this weapon, it wasn’t legal. A shot came close. It hit his lawyer and blood splattered on his face.

“Why, Eric? Why did you have to live?” That threw him over the edge.

Eric jumped over and ran for William.

“No!” he heard Triikor scream.

Everything was a blur. A gun fired, but it was William who came falling down.

He turned quickly to find Trix holding up some kind of shoulder cannon. It looked Taiidan by its yellow and red design.

William fell over. “I set it to stun.” She said.

Eric leaned over and checked for a pulse. “He’s dead.”

“What? No! I only gave him a small zap!” she dropped her gun and came running.

“Well, in his condition, even a small jolt would have stopped his heart.” The doctor was standing in the aisle. “It’s not your fault. He’s dead. It’s over.”

“He would have gotten the death sentence because of this anyway.” That was comforting words for a judge. “You’re off the hook.”

They both fall over relieved. But the Taiidan was still in shock for doing what she did.

“Well, I guess justice was served.” Brutus was there with them.

“What the hell took so long in there?” Eric yelled.

“It was . . . well . . .”

“Just say it.” He already knew the answer.

“They were still prejudice against us. The Gaalsien have yet to see respect and equality.” He meant that they took so long because the Gaalsien were easier to blame than the Siidim. “I didn’t let them.”

“Thank you.” Those last words were all Brutus needed to hear. He walked off and left them in the quickly emptying court room.

“This isn’t the best time, but . . .” Eric gave her a kiss. “I told you I’d get you back.”

“Get up if you want to know.” She didn’t recognize the voice at first.

“I almost forgot.” She wished she could just return home. She didn’t care where, just somewhere in the Garden. On the *Amun*, back home on Third Colony, on a trade freighter, on a pirate craft, anywhere but this ship. Anywhere within the protection of Kadesh.

“Well we gotta go. I let you sleep in. now we need to get up to the farming levels.”

“Why?”

“To find out about Marks past, of course, isn’t that what you asked me last night?” there was another reminder.

In a timeframe of ten minutes, the two were on the elevator headed up.

“So do you come from the same part of your home as Mark?”

“No. He grew up on a Paktu farm in the south, but ran away to find his blood relatives in the northern capital city of Tiir. I come from a southern clan of nomads and thieves. In an escape from a city that was victim of a Gaalsien extremist bombing. I didn’t make it. I was found by the Kiith Nabaal and taken to Tiir. I then grew up to be a pilot.”

“So when did the two of you meet?”

“Less than a day before the Genocide. Since then we’ve been best friends.”

“Never anything more?”

“Stop!”

Arazis decided to shut her mouth. It was obvious she didn’t want to talk to a Kadeshi. Or was it something else? The young Isel looked angry and sad. Something must have happened between the two.

It didn’t matter, because just then, the elevator stopped. And the door opened to reveal something that made her jaw drop. Literally.

The impossibly huge room was filled with farmland. Plants . . . dirt . . . everything you wouldn’t expect to see. On a starship, that is.

“W-What the hell?” Arazis jumped to the ground and picked up a handful of dirt. She felt it and stared at it for the longest time.

“Are you done?” Isel said impatiently already a few feet away down the road.

She let go of the dirt and ran to meet up with her.

“Please explain this?”

“Explain what?”

“Well . . . you know, *this!* Land inside a spaceship! How?”

“Oh! Well, I’ve been here many times before. I’ve just gotten used to the idea and it never occurred to me. Well, scientists that specialize in agronomy found a new soil mixture that was even better than the samples from Kharak. They basically took out most of the sand and dust. It was fairly easy to make from the resources harvested in the Great Wastelands.”

“Its . . . just . . . amazing!”

“Maybe, but it’s my normal everyday life.”

She kept walking along the brown dirt road. There were sprinklers every so many meters and even some odd yellow circle moving across the sky.

“What’s that?” she said pointing at the object moving across the sky . . . the roof . . . the whatever.

“It’s a mimic of a star. It gives off light and radiation good for plant growth but not harmful to us.”

“Strange, but I’ll believe it.”

They walked even farther down the road, and Arazis was getting irritated by the jacket covering her hair.

“Can I take this jacket off? It’s too warm and damp!”

“Well, this place isn’t guarded, so yeah, I guess you can.”

They finally came upon a farm that Isel turned and walked towards. She followed.

“This is the home of his foster parents. If there’s anyone alive who can tell us about Mark, it’s them. There’s another, but he might tell Mark we’re spying on his past.”

“And you don’t trust him?”

“It’s not that, it’s just he’s Mark’s best friend. He has to tell him.”

Isel knocked on the door and a woman answered.

“Hello Lisa.”

“Hi Isel, what brings you here to our farm?” she seemed like a friendly person to Arazis.

“Well, it’s Mark. I wanted to find out some things about his past.” Lisa then almost shut the door on them, but then reopened it with a frown.

“I suppose I knew this would come up. Why not ask Jay? He knows Mark better than I do these days.”

“We’d prefer it if he didn’t know.”

“We?” she looked around. She must not have seen Arazis. When she came eye to eye with her, she backed inside.

“Why did you bring one of *them* here?” she asked.

“C’mon Lisa, she won’t bite!”

“Fine, but I don’t like lying to Mark this way. And I don’t like your kind either.” She said pointing to Arazis.

“Don’t worry. I don’t either. But your son does.”

They were led into a small room with a table and a few other objects Arazis didn’t recognize. She had never seen a kitchen before.

They sat down in the kitchen. It was Isel to talk first.

“Where’s Janet?”

“In back helping Dane with the harvest. We had to bring Ellen to the Sleeper holds. It’s just too dangerous now. We didn’t want her to know of this at such a young age.” She was obviously troubled by saying the words.

“I understand. You did the right thing.”

She heard earlier from Mark that the sleepers were people put to sleep and frozen until they reach Hiigara.

“Excuse me for asking, but what is the purpose of this whole facility? Couldn’t you just freeze the plant life until you reach Hiigara just like the people?” the two looked at her as if it was the dumbest question ever asked.”

“Yes, but then what would feed the crew?” Lisa said.

“Still not understanding.”

“Arazis here isn’t used to the whole *eating* thing. She used to sleep in these tubes that take

care of the body. Like clean it, put it to sleep, feed it, and whatever else you can think of. Brushing teeth even. She's never done a thing like it." Isel thankfully explained. Arazis understood just about less than half of it, but she just sat down as if unable to say anything. What could she say? "Sorry, but I'm just as confused as you are." That wouldn't work too well.

"I knew they couldn't be trusted. They're like demons. They don't sleep, they don't eat, and they feel nothing." This Lisa character was turning out to be very hateful after all.

"Why do you all have to be like that? it's like Mark is the only one who treats us as living beings! We're not robots, were not drones, we're not demons, and we're not Zombies! Whatever those are! I just don't understand any of this! I just want to go home!" Then she stormed out the room in tears.

## MARK

"Have you seen your girlfriend today?" Karu, Jay and John and I were all in the hangar making repairs to the *Ferin Sha*.

"No, can't say I have. I stopped by this morning and they were both gone. I guess they went somewhere."

"Probably trying to get along is all." John said.

"This is a real nice ship, you know that?"

"Yes, Jay, we know."

"Don't snap, man, just saying."

"Sorry, I'm just worried."

"Don't be." Said John. "They'll be fine."

# Chapter Twenty

## A Truly Painful Past

ARAZIS

She ran to the middle of a yellow field of wheat. Of course, she did not know the name of the plant or understand the reason for its growing.

She felt comfort in the field. She had never seen plants like it, but there were similar red ones back on Third Colony. The soil on the ground only added to the illusion. She felt back at home. She felt safe. She then lifted her head to face the metal walls to realize she wasn't back home, but still on this dreaded ship headed for oblivion.

She began to cry. There was nothing left to do. She couldn't run from it. She was stuck here. She had already forgotten most of Captain Jeremiah's last words. She didn't know what else to do but cry.

There was the sound of movement. Had Isel come to tell her they were leaving? Did a guard see her and come to take her back to a cell? She turned to see neither. She turned back not to face her.

"You must be Janet."

"How did—"

"Don't ask. I guess you've come here too to tell me how much you hate me, how I am emotionless, how I'm a demon? Is that it? I can't stand any of you!" she screamed.

"Calm down, I didn't say anything,"

"Now, but your mother did, and so has everyone else I've met here on this ship, why?"

"Why are you here on this farm? You're trespassing you know that?"

"Great! Another thing that I don't know the meaning! Throw me a dictionary or an encyclopedia and maybe I'll look it up!"

"It means you can't be standin' here! So don't get snippy with me!"

"Why not, no one can own land. But this isn't land, this is an illusion. Or can you own a piece of land with your flawed laws."

"It isn't flawed to own land. That's the way I grew up, that's the way I'm livin' and no one will change that."

"Just stop talking! The more I hear from you Kushan, the more questions I get. Just stop with the nonsense! I can't take it!" then she ran farther into the field. But Janet just followed.

"Why're you here?" she asked.

"Well, I came to find out about someone's past, but instead I was called a demon with no emotions. I just feel like throwing myself out an airlock right now."

"Don't be talkin' like that now, who you been trying to find out about?"

"Mark. I wanted to know just how painful his past it. So I can relate to him. So I can understand him. But so far, this whole trip has proven to be useless. Maybe I should just go ask Jay. I don't care if Mark finds out."

“Mark? What about Mark? I don’t want to hear that name again. Now go away. I got work to do.”

Now she was getting somewhere. “What happened?”

“He left us. That’s all I know, and it’s all I care to. He brought his pain on himself.”

Arazis decided she was getting nowhere with this one. And she couldn’t go back in there with Lisa. There were two options left. The man named Dane, or Mark’s friend Jay. She would like to talk to Jay, but she was already here, and the other was probably with Mark at the time.

She walked right past Janet, and out the field.

Unsure where to go, she decided to head to the elevator. She couldn’t do anything else here.

“Wait!” the voice came from behind. It was Isel calling to her.

“What do you want? Just leave me alone.”

“Well, while you were gone, I found out something . . . well . . . something just horrible.”

“Mark?”

She nodded. “We should go somewhere to talk.”

## ERIC

He couldn’t believe what he did. Everything around him was just turning out for the better. William wasn’t going to bug him, and that was certain, the whole record about his ship’s sabotage was solved, and Triikor was free to walk around the ship, with the occasional surveillance of course. But there was one thing that pretty much topped them all.

He kissed a girl. He never did anything close to that his whole life.

After that happened, it was clear that Trix was lying before just to cover for her emotions.

“So . . . what now?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I guess we can take a break now.” He never thought about that part. With Will gone and the war on hold, there was nothing left to do but relax and take it slow.

“I’ll be continuing my book tonight, tomorrow . . . I don’t really know.”

“There’s not much to do in this fleet, is there.” She commented.

“Well, there’s plenty to do on the *Mothership*, I should bring you over some time.”

“Besides, it’s a pirate ship. I’m sure we can find something fun to do.” It seemed as pirate humour is the same Kushan and Taiidan.

“So how *did* you know he was a Kadeshi anyway?” referring to the incident from the day before.

“Well, you could say that I met a friend in prison.” She winked.

## MARK

“That should do it!” We just finished the main repairs on my fighter. Gotta say, there was a lot of damage. And working in this constant heat was near impossible. They *really* need to get that fixed.

Sure, Karu and his team repaired it before the end of the battle, but it’s only temporary. I’m

not exactly sure how to explain it, but the alloy used on the corvettes' repair beam only lasts so long before dissolving.

That's why the Matriarch-class frigs were such an improvement. They fix the damage permanently. They're still working on the technology for the same technology to fit in a corvette-size hull. It's just too big.

"So what about the boosters?" John asked.

"Not sure about that one. I think I'm gonna see what I can do about a more fuel efficient one this time." I was getting pretty tired with burning my whole tank in less than ten minutes.

"Maybe you can see about those boosters we found in storage on my Porter?" I almost forgot about those. They might actually work. There's been some major research done on them. I wonder if they're almost ready for a test run.

"We can see about it, but it might still need some work."

"What are we talking about here?" Well, John *has* been out of the loop for a while. Karu knew about it, so why not him too?

Jay was the first to explain. Good. It was a mouthful. "I found it one day while looking through storage compartments. The designs said it was the start of a fighter technology that would run almost entirely without fuel and propel at double the speed of conventional drives. In other words, a fighter that doesn't need to refuel until the battle's over."

"You're joking right? That's just . . . impossible!"

"For now," I corrected, "but it's in *Hub 3* right now. You've been goon a while, man."

"No kidding! That would be so much of an improvement." Oh. Now I see why I didn't tell him earlier over the videophone.

"But . . . that means . . ."

"Sorry, but yeah."

"Huh?" there's Jay the clueless again,

"It means there won't be much of a use for support frigates." Well, at least Karu was the one to tell him and not me.

"Well, I'm off-duty anyway. That just means I won't be able to help much."

"You'll still be able to help, you still repair the large ships, and the fighters will still need to dock somewhere for repairs." Anything to make him feel a little more useful.

"Well, we're done here, so . . . Karu, you should go check up on the girls. Make sure they don't get in a catfight." Jay, always the comedian. We did laugh though.

"Yeah, I probably should."

"And John, well,"

"I'll go check up on my crew."

"All righty then, Jay and I will head on over to the research division and see what's up." And the group parted.

"So what do you think?" I asked staring at my—now half painted—ship.

"Think it needs to be repainted."

"Thanks, captain obvious, but really."

"Like the upgrades. And with those new engines, it'll be even better."

"I hope so."

We arrived at the elevator. We didn't need to get far to reach the parking for the research



ships. It was all the way towards the bow-section of the hangar.

“So what do *you* think of the Kadeshi. Personally.” I asked.

“I think it’s wrong what they’re doing to them. They look like us don’t they? And the research from the Khar-Toba ship in the Nebula seems to add up. I’m not so much for the ‘let them join the fleet’ part of it, but they shouldn’t be imprisoned.” At least he was partly on my side with this.

I have to agree with my friend though. Letting them into the fleet isn’t going to be welcomed freely. And it won’t be easy. I’ll need to disguise it as forcing them into their own ships and making them work for us. But I’m sure if they want to survive, it would be in familiar surroundings and not in a prison cell. I felt confident they wouldn’t attack us again. They would be seriously outnumbered.

Which brings up another problem, what if they don’t want to go along with the plan? What if they don’t want to fight? I can’t force them, but like with my own people, I may be able to give them inspiration of some sort.

I’m sure I’ll figure it out when the time comes.

## ARAZIS

“Where are we going?” the Kadeshi and the Kushan pilot were moving through what looked like random halls and staircases. She was sweating from the heat of the area. It was near the engine room, so the heat was worse than the public areas. And it didn’t help that Isel didn’t have much that fit her, and what did was usually not meant for this heat.

“Somewhere that no one will find us. Not even Mark.” Isel knew exactly where she was headed. Some five minutes later, they came upon, that at a first glance, looked like an abandoned storage facility. In fact, that’s exactly what it was.

“This is where they keep the parts used for the ships being built.”

“Built where? Not all the way on the other side of the ship I hope, that would be a real big inconvenience having them here.”

Isel flicked a switch, and there was a groaning sound, then a three-foot tall opening appeared that ran the length of the whole wall.

Arazis looked down over the piece of wall still left and saw that there was an absolutely immense, light blue, brightly lit room with half a carcass of a ship still inside.

“It’s a Revelation-class destroyer. You might have seen them.”

“I sure did.” The memory of the *Amun* being blown to bits just after Jeremiah read a script from the *Book of Kadesh*.

“Well, you don’t even know the half of it. These babies can really pack a punch through any fleet when they’re in groups. They’re the strongest members of our fleet. Even better than the Taiidani Skaal Tel-class. The big yellow ones.”

She stared in awe at the sheer size of it. From afar it didn’t look all that big, but from this close, it was huge.

“Getting to business, you should know you won’t like everything you find.” Two metal blocks raised from the ground, and they both sat down to talk.

“So what is it?”

“A lot. Well, where to start . . . I guess the beginning.” She took a deep breath, and started. “He was abandoned by his parents as a baby on the doorstep of the farmers you met earlier; they raised him to the age of twelve. Then, he ran away from home. No warning, no announcements of any kind. He wrote a note saying that he was going to take the Desert Train to the north and meet up with his father. Well, as Mark told them, he missed the first train, and the next wouldn’t be coming for another month and a half. He didn’t want to wait that long, so he started off by stealing a Dunesailor.

It was fast, and moved with the wind and sailed across the desert sand using special tracks to move across sand when there’s no wind.

He traveled that way for days with nothing but a big keg of water, what little food he managed to grab from the farm and whatever preserved meat he could steal from the small markets. He sailed alongside the industrial tracks that went from the south Polar Regions to the northern hemisphere.

The next place he stopped was a small village of Somtaaw Miners. He got water there, and told his story to some traders and was given a quad ATV, a vehicle that traveled through most surfaces, but not sand, in exchange for his Dunesailor. He was on top of a huge expanse of rock, and there was no more sand to sail on. Once again, he gathered what he could carry, some fuel, and left for the desert. Always following the tracks, hoping to catch a train ride.”

“So what happened next?” she was very interested in this story.

“Well, he left on the Sepaah Mesa following the tracks. He traveled a whole seven hundred and fifty kilometres before he ran out of fuel. He hit the end of the mesa a day later on foot. The Great Banded Desert lie before him, an endless expanse of light sandy terrain covering most of the side of the planet, as well as stretching something like fifteen thousand kilometres from north to south. Within that wasteland, temperatures soar to over a hundred and eighty degrees. No one can live there without artificial habitats.

His water was low, and he had no more food over his month-long journey on a quad. But he reached where he wanted to go. He found the small research outpost on the line of the desert and the mesa. He was given water and food, again, and sold his quad for money. He didn’t need it anyway.

The train arrived the next day after he got some well-needed rest. He boarded the luxury liner in the cargo section. He was never for traveling in style. The area was still cooled to a survivable temperature, and he had a window to see what was happening. The journey would last two weeks.”

“Two weeks! On a train!”

“He just spent a month on a quad. I don’t think he minded.”

“Right. Go on,”

“In the middle of the second week, while still well inside the Desert, the train was attacked by raiders.”

“Turanic?”

“No, why would they . . . never mind. Just pirates. But they took control of the barge. The temperature soared to the same as the outside, around one hundred. People died of thirst, and heat stroke. They were not used to the heat. Mark, being in the cargo area was not detected and

formed an escape plan. He found a small Dunesailor inside and attached an engine to it to propel it some of the way. He stole whatever he would need, and pressed the emergency release button and opened the door to the bright, hot outside. Then, the terrorists found him and started shooting. But he started up the engine and was off. He was safe from the pirates, but then there was the desert. Even putting your foot on the ground in that heat would give you first degree burns.”

“Did he make it?”

“He’s here right now isn’t he?” she then shut up and stopped asking stupid questions.

“The engine died and he made it maybe a day going a lot faster than the train would have. It was still searing hot, and he only travelled at night. He dug himself under the sand for day to keep cool. He ran out of food a week later, and then was running very low on water. Every time he found a desert creature, no matter if it was a snake or a spider, he ate when he could, and didn’t regret it despite the taste. He made it months like that, and then had no water left. He found smaller pockets of rocks, meaning he was closer north now. He dug down, and found water. It was not distilled, but he didn’t care what disease he got. He needed to drink.

That lasted another few months. He thought he saw a train go by in the south direction, but wasn’t sure if he was dreaming. He didn’t have any money and wasn’t going back south anyway. He then found an oasis maybe half a kilometre from the tracks. He didn’t want to leave them, but he needed to find some food. He did, and he ate even the leaves off the palm trees. He filled his water, and his mouth. He even decided to take a bath, but I won’t get into details about that.

The end of it was, when he was ready to head back to the tracks, he was not hallucinating, and saw the train go by. He wasn’t getting to Tiir that way, so he decided to stay close to the tracks mainly for direction. The days turned into months. He then ran out of water again. But not until a month later. He found food the same way, and almost died from several bad stings and even desert fever. But in the end, he saw the glimmer of white in the distance that to him, meant civilization. He couldn’t tell how far, but at least another two days walk.

He made it to a research station, and was found unconscious at the doorstep. Funny thing, he didn’t even have the strength to knock on the door. From there, well, he found his dad, life went on.”

“Wow. And this is no exaggeration?”

“No.”

“That must have been worse than hell!”

“No kidding. I was speechless. There are more incidents, but I think that tops them all, and at twelve years old!”

“Okay, I think I understand his pain a little. Maybe it was a little too much. How many times did he almost die?”

“He lost track after week two.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

## A Confusing Past

MARK

“Well, the research is near completion, captain, but I don’t see why you’re requesting what you’re requesting. Do you need the extra speed in combat? It looks to me as if you’re cheating.” Jay and I are in *Hub 3*. I didn’t know how to answer him, really, so I just stood my ground

“Are you saying I’m a coward? This is only a test for a technology that could save our very fleet! If I get to use two of the prototypes on *my* fighter, something that’s never been tested before, it looks like I’m taking a huge risk.”

“How so?”

“Well, we don’t know if it’s stable or not, there’s a first, and my ship is already fitted for boosters anyway. I can test them for you, and in return, I keep the prototypes.”

The ship was very high-tech. there were new developments in progress wherever you look. The walls were bleach-white, and the light was blinding.

The chief scientist had to sit down and think it through. He couldn’t decide if he was going to give me the boosters that *I* provided for him.

“I . . . uh . . . hmm . . . I guess it would make research here a lot easier knowing how our progress has paid off, agreed. I’ll give you the prototypes we finished only if we can have a remote access to analyze and transmit data back to the station.”

“I’m fine with that, I’m not sure how to install something like that, so I guess your team will have to get over there and install it yourselves.”

“We can do it here and now. It’s just a tiny microchip.”

Oh. Well I feel stupid now. Well I guess that *is* their job. They *are* the nerds who can do the job right for me.

“Have it in the hangar by . . . what time is it?”

“One seventeen,”

“Have it done and in the hangar for me by two-o-clock sharp.”

“I can have it by one thirty.”

“Slow down, take your time and do it right. I don’t want some sleepy idiot spilling coffee on it or something.”

Of course, like all nerds I’ve ever met, he has no sense of humour at all.

Actually, his reaction was to sneer at me and try to be tough. It wasn’t working for him. I’m not that tough, and this guy was half my size. Really. If he had blonde hair, he could probably pass for an average-height Kadeshi.

“Don’t tell me how to do my job, captain.” Captain. There’s that word again. I’m not technically a captain, so why do they keep calling me that? Well, at least it has a nice ring to it. Captain Soban. I like it.

“Fine, but I’m not in the hangar until two.”

“Wait, where are you going until two?” wow, hold on a minute, I almost forgot Jay was there with me. And for Jay, that’s almost impossible.

“I’m going to figure out my legal position right now.” He knew what I meant. Most of the crew still had no idea I was arrested. Including the research division. So that was good. For me.

We left *Hub 3* after twenty five minutes. Jay went to meet up with the others while I headed over to the bridge section. You know, the grey area sticking out of the hull with all the colourful lights and windows.

Well this is gonna be fun, I wonder how I’m gonna do this. I can’t just walk onto the security control level and just say “Hey guys! So am I still arrested?” or can I?

## TRIIKOR

She left Eric to finish writing his book. Free to walk around anywhere, just after being in prison only hours before was a weird feeling. People looked at her oddly.

She got some ‘normal’ clothing to get out of her pilot uniform. Other than her hair, she looked almost like a Kushan.

She had a great day so far, except for this one guy who was standing in front of her. He didn’t like that there was a Taiidan walking around like one of them.

“What are you planning now? Trying to blow up the ship?”

“What? Me? I’m just innocent little Trix! I’m not planning anything.”

“Right. You Taiidan are all alike. I don’t care what you say. You’re all evil.”

“Does this face look evil to you?” he was obviously not convinced by her huge smile.

“You’re not fooling anyone. None of us trust you.”

“Wow, you’re a real lady charmer aren’t you? Well, I’m just gonna go about my business.” Her smile fell, and she headed out the door of the small shop.

“Hey! Get back here, scum.” He spun her around and was going to punch her square in the jaw.

She acted fast, and dodged an obviously tough bullet, as it bent the metal wall beside where she was. He was thrown off balance, and she took advantage of this and threw him to the hard metal ground.

“Don’t you know it’s not right to hit a woman?”

He let out a cry of pain while covering his hand. “You’re not a woman, you’re a monster.”

She looked around, and people were watching the whole thing. “Really? Is that what I am? Honestly?”

“Yes!” a random person yelled from the massing crowd.

“A monster? Look at me! We look just the same! There are Taiidan with brown hair too you know! It has nothing to do with where you come from!”

“But you come from *our* home!” a woman cried out.

“It’s my home too! I was born on Hiigara from generations of people born on Hiigara. You come from Kharak. Not Hiigara.” no one liked that comment. They all started to sneer at her as if she was the one most despicable thing ever.

“You’re pushing it.”

She couldn't recognize anyone saying the random phrases.

"Sorry. But I had no part in that Genocide. I was locked up in prison and forced to watch. Do you really think we *all* enjoy the choices of the Emperor? We have no say in the matter! He controls everything. There are a lot of us who hate it. But it'll never end. Even if he dies, he has clones to take his place. He's a clone of the fourth Emperor of Hiigara. He's the unnatural demon. I was just in the navy at the time you activated the hyperdrive. Not my fault. And besides, you act like Kharak was like some lost paradise."

"It was our home for thousands of years, and our entire population was there that's what we're angry about. We don't care about your people. We don't care if some of you are civilized or not. We are going to purge our ancestral home of the Taiidan because of what your ancestors have done to us."

She started laughing. "You're such a hypocrite! We did what was fair. Your ancestors used the power of your hyperspace core in the *Mothership* to destroy our homeworld of Taiidan. We were generous to spare the lives of your ancestors." The crowd died down. They didn't know. "Sorry for the shitty news, but I'm not lying. The difference is, we forgave you. Hell we even forgot about you. And then, with the new and corrupt leader of the Empire, he decided you were a threat and redirected my training fleet to destroy your home. Hate him not me." She then walked out of the crowd. None of them tried to stop her, or say anything.

She went to the front of the ship to a window, all alone. She couldn't do anything else without having people verbally attack her.

"Damn this." she said to herself.

"Damn what?" she heard that voice before, once. But she didn't believe it. She turned to see . . . "Saiin? How'd you get out *again*?"

## ARAZIS

"What now?"

"I don't know? You got what you wanted, so now we go back to our lives."

"And do what? I don't know what to do, remember?"

"Well, I'm not your babysitter, go do something."

"Isel, I am older than you, you know that right?"

"I'm fourteen and a half."

"Well, I don't know my actual age in Kushan years, but I do look older."

"Fine." She still looked annoyed, but gave up fighting. They decided to just go back to Isel's room to figure out what to do for the rest of the day.

## MARK

I made it to the security control level. I was surprised to see that there weren't many guards. For security central you'd expect it to be packed with blue uniformed guards. I think I only saw three so far.

I'm making this up as I go, so I have no plan. I'm not even sure how I'm gonna find out, I can't ask anyone in case I *am* still arrested. But if there's anywhere I'll find out, it's here.

I kept to the empty halls with no surveillance. There was no hiding besides the occasional corner. The entire level, like all others on the bridge section, is lit up with really bright light and white painted walls.

This whole place *really* makes the public domain look . . . well, like crap. Down on the main levels, the walls are a dull grey fading to a rusty brown the farther inward you went, and most of the dim lights were off to save power. It was always cluttered with junk due to the low amounts of janitorial jobs, it has an awful smell of old, and a real depressing feel to it.

Not up here. This was like going from . . . well not even coach. This was like going from the luggage compartment to First Class. The walls were a constant glossy white, almost like plastic, very well lit—which is kind of making my eyes hurt, the halls were spotless, it smelled fresh and new, and just being there made me feel like something good might come out of this day.

I'd soon find out.

And most of all, it wasn't all that hot either. They must have some backup cooling system or something of the sort.

"So what about prisoner HG-443?" as soon as I heard the footsteps of two people echoing in the hall, I ran for cover.

"Mark? Ah who cares! He's a freakin' hero for cryin' out loud! I say he should be let off the hook. What'll it look like if the public finds out their one source of inspiration and hope is in a jail cell?"

"It would be a disaster!"

I snuck a peak to see two green and blue uniformed people walking by in conversation. They looked important by the fancy hats and their stripes. They were important all right, the real *First Class* passengers on this maiden voyage across the cosmos.

"Captain," The shorter one asked. He was also much younger. "What do you suggest we do about this matter?"

"I don't know. I just wish we had someone who did. Someone like . . . well someone like Markus." There it was. His name is still everywhere on this ship. With our people. I acted half on instinct, but I only realized after I did it what a good idea it was right at that moment.

"Don't we all?" I said walking out from the corner.

The two went wide-eyed in surprise and confusion.

"M-Mark? Wha—

"Don't ask. So captain, you say you need a leader of the people." The other guy, the younger one, dropped his jaw in disbelief. I don't blame him. I probably would've done the same.

"You do know that I am not permitted to let you by. In fact, it would go against my teachings not to arrest you . . . that is, if you weren't so damned important." His sly smile told me I had a new friend.

"Well, don't ask me how it happened, a couple of speeches here and there, about a dozen stunts to save my friends, and here I am. Odd luck, don't you think?" he knew I was joking. Sobani don't believe in luck.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Last time I saw you, I think was before you went off to that damned military schooling. Don’t get me wrong, our clan is the best in that matter, but I find security to be a bit less . . . oh in don’t know . . . bloody. Hell, I even remember that day you broke into your father’s house half covered in sand and the other in blood and I don’t want to know what else.”

“Yeah. What a fun day that was.” He was in the meeting I broke into when I arrived in Tiir. After a parade, I snuck on the property and broke in a window. I don’t think ringing the doorbell saying: “Hey! I’m your twelve year old son from the South Pole! Can I come in?” would’ve sat well with anyone.

“I-I’m sorry, I think I’m at a loss here.” The other guy was just totally confused.

“Sorry, but we have a little bit of background together. Not much, but just a little. So captain, I think we need to talk.” I thought it was time to bring up my Kadeshi dilemma.

“What are you asking me?” we made it to a small conference area a few minutes later. The other guy decided to leave us, so it was just us two.

“I’m saying I don’t want any of the Kadeshi doing work on the *Mothership*’s engines. It’s too dangerous. And they aren’t Raiders. They’re us and we’re them. We are all Hiigaran. I understand your concern by keeping them in prison, but to make them do slave work? What have we become? If we continue this way, we’re no better than the Taiidan we’re setting out to destroy!” I emphasized that last part. It was needed. And it hit him hard.

“You really are your father’s son.”

“So I’ve been told,”

“You have his skills in leadership. You’re a true natural. But I don’t know how much I can do. The decision runs on majority vote. My vote is worth twenty percent.”

“Make it happen. I’m counting on you. The way of the Sobani is counting on you. If we treat each other with such cruelty, we have lost the path of Sajuuk. Please, I ask you not just for me, but for all our race stands for. Be you Kushan, Kadeshi, or Hiigaran, we’re all equals.”

“Then what of the Taiidani? They are the same as us as well,”

“They have lost the path long ago. They deliberately defied him. They *are* a lost cause. These Kadeshi aren’t. I see potential in them.”

“How?”

“They can still fight. They would be a valuable asset if the time comes.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that over time, they may even be allowed to be part of the fleet.”

“No! This I cannot stand!”

“Calm yourself! There is no reason to get angry. I was suggesting disguising it as a forced boarding onto their own territory in their own ships.”

“I have to give you credit. You *are* thinking it through. Give me some feedback on that one. I will summon a meeting to vote for Kadeshi rights.”

“Thank you.”

“Anything to serve the Bloodline.”

I gave him a slight wink and headed for the door.



“Oh and Mark, be careful.”

“I always am.”

“No, I mean from yourself. Don’t let your pride get the best of you. Focus on your one true goal. If you lose track, it might be impossible to get back.”

“Thanks, but Markus already taught me that one.” I gave him a reassuring smile. I wasn’t going to get cocky.

“Take care.”

“You too. And make sure the other prisoner that was with me, the Kadeshi, make sure she’s free to do whatever she wants just like the rest of us.”

“Why would I do that?”

“A small test I’m doing.” He smiled and I left. I didn’t know if he’d keep his end of the deal. I mean, it’s a lot of a burden to place on him. All I could do is trust him.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Ferin Sha 3.0

MARK

Well, the parts I ordered came in, and only Jay decided to come back to help. Well he's the only one I asked.

"It's been a while since we had no worries in the world, hasn't it?" I haven't heard him bring it up before, but yeah. It has.

"Yeah, and now we have all the worries in the Galaxy." Truth hurts sometimes when you say it. This is definitely one of those times.

"Well, once these things are installed, you'll have a bit less to worry about." He smiled.

"I'll still have to worry about not blowing up," I said jokingly.

We pretty much just did that for the next hour. Talking while fixing my ship. I missed the days when we didn't have a care in the world. When the only thing we worried about was not passing a test. Hard to believe that was but three years ago.

Well, I'm stuck here now, with a job as a fighter pilot, a source of inspiration, and I placed it on myself to get an entire race out of prison. Hurray for me. It's going to be an interesting trip, I'll tell you that.

There was so much work to get done on the ship. Everyone helped fix the majority yesterday, and we had to put together these booster engines. They fit perfectly is all I can say. They looked even better on the ship than the previous ones. They were thinner but longer, so they didn't look all that bad.

"Just needs paint now," my friend said. We stared at the grey mess of a hull. It looked great, but the paint was missing in some places and worn out or even charred.

"Maybe tomorrow. I'm done here today."

"What now?"

"Not sure, I was going to go check up on the girls. Want to come?"

"No thanks, just in case."

"Oh come on, they're not that bad. I haven't heard from Karu yet, and that's probably where he headed."

"Well, I gotta report to Rob anyway."

"Tell him I said hi, would ya?" haven't seen *him* in a while.

ERIC

"Wait, Wait. So you're telling me that he's the one who saved me?" Eric asked.

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you." Triikor had brought Saiin back to Eric's apartment to sort things out.

“Well . . . I don’t really know what to say. Thanks, I guess.”

“Just keep him away from me.” He answered with a weak smile. He hadn’t slept in days. He didn’t even know what sleep was, just like all the Kadeshi.

“I don’t think you’ll need to worry about him anymore.” Eric’s smile fell to a sober frown.

“Why’s that?”

“He’s dead.” She shot back.

“W-well . . . I can’t say I feel sorry for him.” He said dryly. His entire life just got flipped upside down. Saiin . . . the innocent, weak, but very kind. Now, he has wished death on his enemies. The lives of all the Kadeshi in his fleet at the time had changed. Leaving the Garden was like poison. They felt robbed. Punished for the Kushan’s trespass on their home.

“It’s just not fair.” After a few minutes of silence, Saiin broke the silence. He turned away from the others and faced the single viewport of the room.

“What *is* fairness anyway?” Eric replied with the equal amount of bitterness as Saiin had before.

“You wouldn’t understand—”

“I understand more than you could ever know, I’ve suffered more than you could imagine.”

“I have no home, family or friends. No life. I’m a prisoner. Both literally and figuratively.” He turned to face them, and he was in tears.

“Your home still exists! Ours was destroyed! Hundreds of millions of people died! For what? Because we seek truth? Because we want knowledge of our rightful homeworld? We come from the same place, my friend. We’re both Hiigarans.”

“I am Kadeshi and that is all I’ll ever be. I don’t care of my ancestral origin. That’s the difference. Your population is small, which is the reason you seek some form of home. The Kadeshi are strong. We have a population of tens of billions scattered throughout seven lush worlds of green and blue.”

“Then why do you fear us so bad?” she asked.

“Because . . . well that’s just it, I don’t even know anymore. You don’t seem to be complete evil and like the legends say, I’m just real confused right now.”

“Well, I’m not sure how we’re gonna hide you. And you look like you’ll collapse any second.”

“I might,”

“Why don’t you sleep at all?”

“I keep hearing that word. I don’t know what sleep is! Please explain!”

“Well . . . it’s sleep. I’m not exactly sure how to describe it.”

“Let me handle this one.” She said. “He probably used a system the Empire’s been testing. It’s sort of a tube of liquid that can heal the mind and body.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I’ve got work to do.”

MARK

“Hey, Isel!” I said entering the room. “Didn’t kill her yet did you?” I said as a joke.

“No, not yet. We were just going to the store to buy her some clothes.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll pass. I remember the last time we were in a store together. Never again, thank you very much.”

“Judging by your horrible-looking greased up shirt, you’ve been in the hangar, haven’t you?”

“Good guess. She just needs a new paint job, and she’s as good as new.”

“Stick to the black and red. It looks nice.”

“Thanks for the useless advice but I’m not changing the colour anyway. It just has a certain feel to it.”

“And from the other side of the battle, it looks menacingly deadly.”

“So how *were* my skills anyway?” I just wanted the opinion of the adversary to be sure.

“Well, you were better than any of the others that I . . .”

“I know, killed. I get it. I forgive you, remember?”

“Right. Well, you were the fastest, most skilled pilot out there, I’ll give you that.”

“Hey! What about me!” Isel wined.

“Nah, he was better.” She said with a grin. “That’s why I sent Saiin to . . . Saiin.” She stopped herself. I wonder why.

“I guess we all suffered our losses.” I said remembering everyone that died to get us this far. Including Jeroll . . . remembering my father . . .

“Cheer up, you’re gonna get *me* depressed!” Isel? Depressed? Yeah right.

“Easy for you to say,” I replied.

“Hey! I lost just as much as any of you. I just know how to stay happy.” I’m not even going to argue with that.

“Well, I’ll tell you that I’m getting Arazis out of prison legally.”

“How?”

“I have friends in high places, and I’m off the hook because of who I am.”

“Who you’re related to or because you’re a leader of some sort.” Isel said.

“I think both. Well, I just came to check on you two, so I’m gonna leave now.”

“No you’re not!” she pulled me by the ear into the room and closed the door.”

“Isel! What the hell!”

“If she gets caught, I can’t help her on my own.”

I gave her an annoyed look, but I guess she was right.

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About twenty minutes later, I found myself carrying all the bags from their shopping trip. It’s about as much fun as watching grass grow. I’m starting to think that Isel’s comment from earlier was just to get me to carry everything.

I’m just glad nothing’s breakable.

“H-how much more?” I squeaked under the weight of the thirty-or-so bags.”

“Only three more to go.” Isel said smacking my back. I had to catch myself or I would have fallen over.

Arazis was staring at me as if about to laugh. Fun for them, not me.

A few minutes passed. The last stores were on the other side of the level. We were in the food section.

That's when I felt it. A cold shill ran up my spine. So cold, almost unbearable. Then it started to burn. I caught a glimpse of the sign In front of the shop. I've seen it before. I couldn't remember until it hit me.

I fell to my knees dropping everything.

"Mark!" Isel ran back for me.

"This is where it happened, isn't it?" I didn't need an answer. I almost joined my father in this very spot. I hadn't even thought about it for a while. But it's not something easily forgotten.

I got shot standing right here.

"What happened?" the Kadeshi said.

"He almost died right here." With those words, the memories of the riot and the bleeding officer came back. And the worst of all, me starring down the barrel of a gun. And then . . . nothing. I fell away into darkness. The next thing was waking up in the hospital.

"Are you gonna be all right?" she asked. She saw the whole thing, too. I can imagine what *she* was thinking about the whole thing.

I had to think about the question for a moment. "I think so. I just need to rest—" before I could get up, all the screens turned on and showed a news reporter dressed in red.

"This is an emergency alert! We have disturbing news to bring you about our newly captured prisoners. The *Kadeshi* as they call themselves are in danger. In the past two hours alone, there have been reports of forty three deaths from what medical experts call insomnia. Not to be alarmed, it is not contagious. It comes from sleep deprivation. We asked some of the individuals how much sleep they've been getting, and the results may stun you." Oh I see where this is going.

"It didn't matter which one we asked, their answer was the same: "What's sleep?". We have reason to believe the death toll may double by tomorrow morning." I looked over, and Arazis was in tears. She remained calm, but still. That's almost a hundred of her friends.

"We have people on the *Mothership* trying their best to help them sleep. It may shock you, but they have never slept in their entire lives. We will return when there is more insight on the situation." And the screens turned black.

"I-I can't believe it. At first I didn't believe you. But people really *can* die without sleep, can they?" For some reason, hearing her made me think of Eric. Why? I'm not sure. But I figured it out. Eric, *Rancor*, people getting help on the *Mothership*. No Kadeshi is getting help on the *Rancor*. There must be half a thousand there.

"I-I have to go."

"Mark!"

"Sorry, it's important!"

"The bags!" and then I was in the elevator, headed up.

The plan was to get to a phone and call for Eric Gaalsien. If I could get a hold of him, I can tell him the news. And hopefully someone on the ship will care enough to help the suffering insomniacs.

I got one. Only the command section of the ship has access to phones like these. I called, got an operator, and in minutes, I heard the voice of my friend.

ERIC

“Mark?” he asked surprised. He hadn’t expected to hear his voice in a while.

“Okay. This is gonna be fast. You know how the Kadeshi look like zombies?”

He looked over to Saiin standing next to him in his apartment. “Yeah?”

“It’s because they can’t sleep.”

“I know I'm helping one of them now.” Mark looked at the blond haired guy behind him.

“All right so you know the problem then?”

“What problem?” he asked confused.

“Over forty Kadeshi died within the last two hours on the *Mothership*.”

“What!”

“Oh this is bad. Okay I don’t think the crew know yet. The sooner the better. I'm asking you to do something for me.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“I need you to tell the captain of the prison level what I told you. And ask him to count the death toll. Then tell him they don’t know how to sleep.”

“Shouldn’t they know that stuff?”

“I don’t think so. The reporter looked like she had no idea.”

“I can do that. I have a friend who’s an officer. I’ll call you when I’m back.”

Then the two hung up the line. “I have to go. Can you handle things?” he asked.

“Of course I can.” She said.

“This is going to be a rather fun week, don’t you think?” he said sarcastically before running out the door.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Second Colony

### ARAZIS

The two were back in Isel's apartment. "So . . . if you don't mind me asking . . . what exactly happened back there?" Isel told her part of the story earlier, but she still felt in the dark.

"Oh. Sure. Well . . . you see months ago before we defeated the Taiidan, people were in constant fear creating riots, and even attempting to sabotage the hyperdrive."

"But . . . your people look so proud and faithful."

"That was before Mark rose to the challenge. Sure, he had some respect, but not enough to encourage everyone. He was shot in the chest by a man who didn't see things the same way he did. If the bullet hit even a half an inch higher, it would have hit his heart. And he wouldn't be here today. And . . ." She stopped to get the words out. "Neither would we."

"He gained the respect and the spirit of this many people in that short time? How?" she exclaimed.

"Lots of reasons, for one, greatness runs in his family, another would probably be that he's stronger mentally than anyone else on this damned ship. There are also his leadership skills, just the fact that he was right that we would defeat the Taiidan, he's a high-ranking pilot, and there are so many other things that make him who he is. There's no question about it. He's the leader this crew so desperately needs."

"If you think like that, then why do you not like his plans for *my* people?" she froze realizing her mistake. She shouldn't have said that. She avoided the whole topic so far, but it just slipped out unwillingly.

Isel tensed up. "Because maybe your people deserve the same treatment as the Taiidan." Arazis caught a cold look from her she hadn't seen since the prison cell the other day. She decided since the topic was up, there was no avoiding it.

"Why would you even say that? We were doing our jobs! Do you know what happens when a Kadeshi disobeys protocol? Especially when there's trespassers?"

"No,"

"We can get put in jail or even executed!"

Isel stopped to listen to what she had to say.

"It depends on the crew of the protecting fleet to ensure the peaceful continuity of the Seven Colonies. If as much as one vessel escapes, we lose everything. It has happened before. A single Raider frigate escaped a siege. A damaged frigate. The entire eight hundred of the crew were executed for failure to ensure peace."

Isel now had a clear-view of the other side of the battle.

"That is why the captain of my flagship, Jeremiah, one of *my* best friends, chose death over retreat. Until the moment the hull lit up in the blast, he preached readings from the Book of Kadesh to ensure safe passage for the crew into Balcora. Do you get me now? I'm not messing

around, and I'm not taking any of your grief. I've lost too many friends. I lost the people I called my family. And the only ones left are the prisoners you think should die like the Taiidan. We're not murderers, Isel."

She was speechless. She had nothing to counter what was just thrown at her.

"I thought so." She replied to the sudden silence.

"Why bother arguing anymore?"

"That's what I've been trying to say!"

The two were finally coming to an agreement with each other.

## MARK

I met up with my captain friend on the security control level. I found him ending a walk-and-talk with three others whom I didn't know.

"Well captain, we'll agree on your first two statements, but as for the other two . . ." one guy started,

"We will take them into consideration." Another finished.

"We'll think about it." The third corrected taking the second by the shoulder walking in another direction.

"Well," the first guy said, "I will see what we can do."

"Goodbye, Haiirsh."

"Goodbye, captain Cromell." he said following the others down the hall.

I waited until they turned another corner until I jumped out.

They did, and I might have wanted to think it through just a little more.

"Ah!" the captain yelled kicking my side. It hurt, by the way. "We're really going to need a better system." He said in utter surprise.

"It's only been a week, captain." I said trying not to sound in as much pain as I was. This guy was trained to take down spies. Even in his fifties, he's no pushover old person.

"Yeah, but I'm always on alert. There have been reports of escaped convicts." He said giving me a wink.

"So any luck?" I asked referring to the conversation we had the week before.

"Walk with me." He said taking a glance backwards. Good. The others didn't hear us. "First thing's first. You're off the hook."

"Yes!"

"Hold on, let me finish. The others from before were members of the voting council in security . . . some of the high-rankings. My vote's only worth twenty percent. I need to convince others to stand by me. So far, I have another twenty three percent. If majority vote's in, the Kadeshi will no longer be prisoners"

"And Kim?" I asked.

"Who?"

"The *project* I've been working on?"

"Ah-yes, I was just getting there. We have decided that since you are trying it, it's allowed. Whatever you're planning, I hope it works."



"I think it will."

"As for your plans with the Kadeshi after their freeing, I haven't even mentioned it yet. I cannot afford to lose the votes I already have."

"I understand. You're doing the right thing. As long as they don't need to live with the same treatment as the Turanic, I'm satisfied for the time being. When's the vote?" I asked,

"In seventy two hours."

"Three days . . . it's not a lot of time."

"I'm aware of that. I just need seven percent more of the votes. I'm sure I can get them."

"I hope you do. One other thing . . . how is the sleep teaching going for them?" I asked. They started the moment the deaths reached a hundred and fifty. I'm not even sure how many died on the *Rancor*. I just trust Eric did what I asked.

"That's not my division. But I *do* know. Intel and I share information about the proceedings of things. I can tell you we're making progress. So far, we haven't had any deaths in over four days."

"That's good."

"It is. I do agree with you. They are a strong people. After three days of being outside their nebula, they started regaining hope. They became conscious again. It's like watching all the news reports about Hiigara and everything else going on is giving them something to live for."

"I know. It did for us, didn't it? The question is, will they be strong enough to fight when called upon?"

"Holy messenger . . . I'm not even sure how we're going to manage that part." We reached a bench and sat down.

"I have friends in strike command. In fact, I know the commander.

"I may be able to get him in a meeting."

"Done. I know the guy."

"But even so, it will be hard."

"Do your best." I said.

"I'll try." He replied letting out a pained breath.

Then, a thought occurred. No, more of a memory. Well, I guess I can put someone's logic other than my father's to use, "Don't try. Do."

"I'm sorry?" he asked confused.

"Just some advice from an old friend, if you try, there is opportunity for failure. There's no trying. There is doing and there is not doing."

"It doesn't sound like your father."

"It's not. It's Commander Lenny."

## TRIIKOR

"Good morning!" Saiin slowly opened his eyes to be met with a blinding light.

"Hello, Trix. A little early, don't you think?" he got adjusted to the light and saw that the two were alone. "Where's Eric?" he asked.

"Gone doing some work."

“Oh. Why did you get me up?” he asked.

“I was bored.” Was her simple answer. He gave her a confused look and rolled his eyes.

“Now that I'm up,” he started, “what do we do?”

“I'm not sure. I'd like to know more about where you come from, but if you don't feel comfortable . . .”

“It's all right. I'll talk.”

Saiin rubbed his eyes to wake himself up, and then took a caffeine pill.

“So what first?” he asked,

“How about your home.”

“My home . . . well, I was born on Sixth Colony and lived there for a few years. It fills the oldest of my memories. Then me and my parents left to Second Colony as my father got a job offer there that helped us out a lot. I've travelled throughout all seven of the colonies, and the majority of my time spent in space with my father, but my home remains Second Colony. Or at least it did.” He sighed. “The most part was cold deserts to the north and south. But just near the equator, where the Serpent's Sea stretches the whole planet there is calamity. The Sea opens up near several volcano chains that heat the water. My home was on a city originally built on a small island. But over time the water level rose and flooded the shores. I remember the process. It took years to recover.” He stopped to catch his breath. Triikor was listening intently.

“Dozens of the volcanoes erupted because of a meteorite impact somewhere far north. The water flooded some parts of the city and there would be little assistance from those on other cities with the same problems. But we were an island. The cities on the shores had room to go. We had water in all directions. Rising. The city decided to move up. So we did. Everyone evacuated to higher levels and rooftops of huge skyscrapers. It was a whole bunch of chaos.”

“So what happened next?” she asked impatiently.

“Well, since most of the surface area was sand and the sand now swept away, we started building above the water. The city first moved skywards, and then it moved above the Sea. Power was easy to retrieve. In some places, artificial landmasses were created near the shores to give a *natural* feeling to the whole thing.”

“Wow!” she said stunned. “I come from a world of total warmth and paradise. That's your homeworld. Well your ancestors'. Eric, he comes from a complete hot desert world. It's unbearable for me to be in the poles where they find “habitable”. You can continue.”

“It was a marvel how fast we were able to adapt. Visiting the other colonies, I realized just how advanced of a city I lived in. there were places I've been where people died from not being able to get enough power. Some had small huts instead of buildings. I've been places where they ate nothing but bugs and never changed their clothes. But it's not all that bad. I've also been to entire cities in the clouds of a giant gas world. I've been to cities on the bottom of an ocean. I've been to a place where you could live your entire life without setting foot on the planet's surface.”

“But how is that possible?”

“Small amounts of the surface are entire cities with towers reaching as big as this ship. They have floating cars that can go from city to city. Most of the towers have been connected by walkways or even bridges.”

“It sounds so . . . futuristic.”

“I know. But my home remains on Second Colony. On Serpent's Eye island. I loved

walking on the metal shores of the outskirts, looking out from windows of huge towers and trying to see the shore on the other side. I never could.” He laughed as if remembering something.

“What?” she asked.

“I remember one time when my four year old sister and I were in the lower levels beneath the water level. She asked me why they would build towers under water. She saw the old parts that were flooded. Towers on the sea floor. There were still roads and houses. Signs that life was once there. She never knew of what happened, you see, I told her it was because sea people live in them. So she spent the next two years looking for sea people through the windows.” The two were now in a laughing phase together.

“Then schooling told her of the true history of our city. I told her I’d bring her there one day, and I did. That was just the week before that battle we had, when people were already headed to First Colony to celebrate the two-thousandth anniversary of Kadesh. She got her license and I took her for a dive. It was not new to me, but t her it was. I told her we had three hours of air. We headed over to the buildings with motorized tugs. The concrete was collapsing. It was old, and algae were growing everywhere. I remember one building covered more in coral than cement. Our homes became the homes of the sea creatures. We visited the old plaza where arcades and theatres were. The water was crystal clear. Looking up at the city was like seeing a gargantuan metal monster ready to fall on us. I also showed her my old home. Or what was left of it. A small house. The flooding wrecked everything but the cement walls and some other stuff. I even found old pictures and toys. I brought some stuff back to give to my parents and to have as keepsakes.”

He reached into his pocket and took out a disk-like object along with a small coin.

“What are those?” she asked.

“The disk is the recording of the entire trip. The coin, it was something my sister found for me. It was my most prized possession. I’m not even sure why I was trusted with it. My dad gave it to me I can’t remember when. He said it comes from when our entire people lived in starships afloat in space. From before Kadesh. You see, it’s illegal to own stuff that old.”

“So it goes on display?”

“No! It is destroyed. To hide the past. The elders are hiding something from us. I never knew what. Until a friend of mine told me something that brought up archives of thoughts.” He lowered his head in sadness. “I’m not even sure if she’s still alive.” He almost cried, but didn’t. He promised himself he’d be stronger than he normally is.

“Who is she?”

“Her name’s Arazis. We knew each other for nearly two years. I was on Third Colony for a while and we met. I then joined the crew of her ship, the *Amun*. We’ve been together ever since. She’s my best friend. Now I can’t even know if she made it out alive. She went chasing that black ship and I never seen her again.”

“Were you two . . . I don’t know, dating?”

“Oh no, it wasn’t like that. Though I’d be lying if I said I haven’t thought about it.”

“What’s she like?”

“Why do you want to know?” he asked.

“Just curious,” she said with a grin.

“Well, she’s the most beautiful girl I know. She’s usually calm unless . . . well unless something like that battle happened. She enjoyed living in space like I do, and she was always thinking about the outside. Beyond the nebula. I kept telling her to forget about the outside. But she wouldn’t have it. We shared most everything in common, and she was just the kind of person to be there for you.” He stopped and sat back down. “I just wish she was here now. Fate runs in odd ways, don’t you think? She’s there all the time except for when I need her the most.”

“She sounds great.”

“She was. No one was like her. You could say I was in love. But she’s gone now. I’m just glad she found what she had been looking for her whole life.”

“And what’s that?”

“She found the answers. She discovered the truth before any of us did. And she didn’t even need to leave the Garden. There is no Kadesh god. We have been worshiping a lie given to us by the elders. At first I didn’t believe her. But she said Kadesh was just the name of the nebula and not the protector of our people. I had to leave the Garden to see for myself. But she was right.”

“In a way, Kadesh is your protector as you are the protectors of the garden.” She said.

“How?”

“Well, the way I see it, the Kadeshi and the nebula form a sort of symbiotic relationship. The nebula hides your people from intruders, and you protect the nebula from being harvested. I know more than you. For millennia, the Great Nebula as we call it has been feared by the Bentusi themselves. They are the oldest known civilization and have established a massive trading guild across the Galaxy. They know all. And they fear the nebula. There have been myths of many types from giant space monsters to inter-dimensional traps. No ship that has entered has ever returned.”

“So . . . Kadesh *is* our protector. Then the elders were simply masking the whole truth.”

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Another Anomaly

MARK

“You are asking for a lot, Mark.” Making arrangements and meetings aren't my specialty. I kinda just drop in.

“I know. But it's a long ways away. You have to see it the way I do.”

“I do, kid. The Kadeshi were only protecting their home, and now they're slaves. I keep thinking that maybe some of our people survived. You know, in prisons?”

“I doubt it.”

“But if so . . . it's sort of like that.” his words rang true. It's not the first time I thought of it, maybe the Taiidan took prisoners. But it wouldn't make any sense. Or would it . . .

“Then . . . that means . . .”

“Yeah. if that's true, we may have killed them by destroying he Taiidan carrier. Sad thought, isn't it?”

“And the worst part is . . . I led our people into that fight.” The strike commander put his hand on my shoulder.

“It's not your fault. There is no way we can know for sure. And besides, we're straying away from the point we're here. They remind me. The Kadeshi. It's what we would look like if imprisoned by the Empire.”

“Now you're getting it.” I said.

“We are becoming like them, aren't we? The Taiidan?”

“My thoughts exactly. And the reason I want to free them.”

“You remind me too much of him. Markus was just like that. He didn't want to kill the Gaalsien. But there was nothing he could do to stop it. But out here, laws have become corrupt. There is no order. Just hope.”

“I know. But are we going to start our new civilization by killing off our ancient brethren?”

“I hope not. I'm on your side with this. I know many who are. But it's up to the higher-ups to decide. I can't do anything about helping them out of prison, but I might be able to pass a forced boarding onto their own territory.”

Those words alone let off a huge load of relief.

ERIC

He was walking alone down the light brown halls of the *Rancor* like he does every day. Staring out into the window, there was nothing to see but black with some feint stars in the distance passing by rapidly.

*This is going to kill me, I know it.* He thought. Too many people have become depressed

and bored. Eric was struggling to not be one of them. They wouldn't be exiting hyperspace for a while. Or so he thought . . .

Sirens blared loud and the lights went out only leaving the red emergency backups. The sudden shudder threw him to the ground almost into one of the holes between levels.

"They really need to fix those!" he yelled to himself rolling away.

He got to his feet and ran to find his friends. It's just then he realized what was happening . . .

"Anomaly detected. Override engaged." Came Karan's voice through the halls of the pirate ship.

## ARAZIS

The ship rattled and the ominous hum stopped. They heard the waveform collapse and knew they were coming out of hyperspace.

"Wait . . . we're at least another two weeks from the checkpoint." Isel was right. This stop was not scheduled, though Karan's words confirmed that already.

The door flew open and in came Mark running. "I came as fast as I could." He said.

"I talked with Commander Leonard about the Kadeshi, but it looks like we have other problems."

"What is it?" Arazis asked.

"Some kind of anomaly. I'm not sure. It's like the Nebula, except I don't think this is Kadeshi."

"How can you know?" she said.

"Because you said it yourself . . . they wouldn't leave the Nebula. And we should be ahead of them if we were being followed." It made sense, but no sense at all.

"So what is it?" she asked again.

"No one knows. But Isel and I need to go. Now." He grabbed Isel by the arm and started walking.

"Hey! Watch it!" the two left the confused Kadeshi alone in the room.

"What the hell?" she asked herself.

## MARK

"Where are we going?" she asked impatiently.

"To the hangar for briefing, where else?" I replied.

We made it in time to hear the end of the meeting.

"Sensors detect a vessel here." I've never actually seen fleet intelligence face to face before, but the screen said enough. He looked to be maybe in his early thirties. Not too old.

The picture faded into a sensors plane with a red dot on the far port side of the Mothership Fleet.

"It doesn't match any of the profiles we have encountered." He continued, "Send in a team

to investigate. We are detecting various ships surrounding the alien vessel. They appear to be inactive.” Then the screen went blank.

A captain of some sort took the microphone. I think he’s Lenny’s boss. “We will take this mission slow as there is no immediate threat. It will give us time to regroup and build up our forces as scheduled at the stop planned prior to this anomaly.” That meant it was time to take it easy. Time to regroup. “You are dismissed until needed.”

“Well that’s a relief,” well it was. Until the man speaking came to us.

“Listen. You look like kids, but I hear from strike command that Red Group is the most skilled of the fleet.”

“Thanks,” like I didn’t know already.

“I know you eventually end up losing two of your wingmen each time you go out.” Not exactly something I like to think about, but he’s right again. “But this time I have two other rank eights going out with you.”

“Wait . . . I thought Commander Leonard chooses who gets assigned to us.”

“But who tells him who to assign?” right again.

“So who is it this time?” Isel asked impatiently. She really needs to get more of that. Patience.

As if on cue, two guys came walking over. All taller than me. Great . . . and they look like those guys who’re all show and no game. If you know what I mean.

“So we’re serving the honourable Captain Soban.” The first said. He was obviously annoyed by this. They were both in their twenties. A lot older than I am.

“Cut to the chase, captain.” I said. The two newcomers looked nervous. As if maybe . . . no one talks to him that way. Uh-oh. Its pilot school all over again.

“Your team will be the first to investigate the anomaly.” Or maybe not.

“Why not just send a probe?” Isel asked. I too was confused.

“Probes cost money we need for other things.” Ah. So it’s about the resources now.

“I’ll accept this challenge. But if these two get killed, no more. Next time I choose.”

“Noted.” He said giving the two newbies a sinister grin. Then he walked away.

If he was trying to psyche them out, it definitely worked. They were scared alright.

“At ease, boys.”

“We take orders from the Captain and no one else.” The second was quiet up until now.

“Well, if I’m not available, which will happen often due to my newest upgrade, she’s the boss.” I gave her a wink. They were now really annoyed. These guys need to pick an emotion.

“Alright then, we’re out in five. Get ready.” I commanded. Did I mention how much I love this job?

When outside, standard procedure, grouping up with Eric, setting to Delta Formation, just basic stuff here.

“How’s it been? I asked my friend. I don’t see him too often.

“Alright, I like the new paint.”

“So do I.” I’m a real casual guy.

“Who’re the stiff?” he said referring to the others. I’ll name them Bob and Joe for now. I

never got their names.

“Newbies.”

“Listen.” He said. I realized it was on a private channel now. “We need to talk later. Follow me to the *Rancor* later.”

“Why?”

“I have some people I need to introduce. And I have some things I need to confess.”

“Sure.” I switched to open group channel. “Let’s go!” and we were headed off towards the *anomaly*.

## ERIC

He had decided. He would tell Mark of everything that has been going on. With Triikor, Saiin, William’s death, all of it. He needed someone to trust this with. He couldn’t hold all this on his own shoulders. It was too much.

“Closing in,” Mark said. Eric could just barely make out the ships. The largest one looked like nothing he ever saw. But he hasn’t been everywhere yet.

The team sped forward. Slowly, the other vessels came into view.

The group got closer and closer . . . until they became under fire.

## MARK

“Fire! Fire! I repeat, we are under fire! Evasive manoeuvres!” I yelled.

“Attention! Those ships are operational! We believe the control centre is the alien vessel. It should be neutralized.” Thanks tips. Like I hadn’t figured that one out.

“Okay there’s too much fire. Fall back guys. Let the big guns come in.”

“What? Mark that’s not like you.”

“These weapons are new.” I said dodging what appeared to be missiles that can seek me out.

One of them hit the new guy. Bob. His ship blew up instantly. One hit. That’s serious firepower.

“I agree. This situation needs more thinking.” Thanks Joe.

“This is Red Leader coming home. Even with our skills. I don’t think we can survive out here very long.”

“Agreed! You get out of there now, Mark!”

“Relax, Lenny. I’m coming.”

I was the last to leave the fight. I distracted the enemy ship so the others could get away. I noticed the ships that were there. There was this odd-looking Taiidan destroyer firing missiles, two Taiidan assault frigs, two Kadeshi multi-beamers, and a Raider ion frig.

“Mark!”

“I’m coming!” I yelled. I pointed towards the right direction and decided to give these boosters a test run.



I braced myself waiting for some sort of explosion. The only explosion was in speed. Two seconds and I was out there.

“Yahoo!” and my fuel barely moved. “There’s that test for Geek Squat in Hub 3. This is how things are done!” I let the excitement out and we went back. I saw that they were sending only corvettes to fight. No frigs. Intel said they’ll get caught in some kind of trap field or something. It makes sense for the odd mix of ships.

“Mark, were are you going?”

“I’m gonna go with Eric. We’ll meet up later.”

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Sea of Lost Souls

MARK

I followed Eric back to the *Rancor*. It looked different than the hangars I'm used to. When we entered the rear of the ship, it was dark and red and there was artificial gravity on every wall and the ceiling. As I looked down at the pilots getting ready, they were preparing the Attack Bombers for launch. My guess was they were taking out the frigates. When they saw my ship, some waved and others were just happy to see me.

I followed him to the very back of the hangar. When we both got out, the air smelled stale but I didn't mind.

"Where exactly are we going?"

"To my room." I'm not too sure why, but its fine by me.

"Listen. Whatever you see, don't get mad."

Something's up. I haven't ever seen him this tense over something other than space fights.

TRIIKOR

She and Saiin were watching as the fleet gathered in different formations through the small viewport in Eric's room.

"So this is what it is outside Kadesh." He said.

"I just can't wait to get home."

"Do you have a family?" the question surprised her a little. She had asked so much about his personal life, she forgot she didn't tell him anything about her.

"Yeah. My parents support a group of Taiidan who call themselves the Taiidan Rebellion. I didn't . . . until the Kharak Genocide. There's not much to tell, really, I was born and raised on Hiigara, I applied to the Imperial Military Academy and was assigned to a Saarkin Cho class carrier. I had friends back home, but I haven't set foot on Hiigara in four years."

"So you haven't seen your family in a long time then."

"No. I haven't. I do miss them, but now I don't know what is to happen to them . . . or to me for that matter. I have betrayed the Empire and I honestly do not think this fleet has the power to siege Hiigara."

ARAZIS

"Where's Mark?" she asked to Isel. She had only been in the main hangar once before, but she was disoriented and didn't know what she was seeing.

“He’s fine. Eric wanted him to go to the *Rancor* for some reason.”

“What’s going on out there?”

“I’m not sure. It’s like this ship . . . it’s as if it’s alive. But . . . there’s no life. And it’s controlling other smaller ships near it. We’re not sending anything larger than a corvette just in case.”

“So I’m guessing Eric is a friend of his?” she had never met him before.

“Something like that. He started out hating him. After the battle with the Taiidan though, he came to his senses. He was just angry that Mark became Red Leader instead of him. He was just a little jealous.”

“So why again is Mark some sort of leader?”

“How should I know? Maybe the people like his guts, maybe it’s because his father was a hero to most of Kharak, maybe he’s just good with people. Maybe it’s a lot of things. But he is.”

Arazis was satisfied with that answer. But she wasn’t sure Isel was.

## MARK

Eric led me to his room. It wasn’t that long of a walk. But that wasn’t what was concerning me. The ship had holes in the floor! Big ones too! Someone could easily fall through one.

“Hey just a question, have you ever fallen through the floor?” an odd question to ask, but really. It fit the situation. And he just laughed it off as if he’s used to this.

“Yes actually, but I brought someone evil down with me.”

“Okay, just what in the name of Sajuuk is going on here?”

“A lot. For one, there was this guy William Siidim. He was . . . well he was basically trying to kill me. Then he turned on a guy who was just trying to save me. He had him by the throat against the wall. I couldn’t let him do that.”

“So . . .”

“So I grabbed him and the both of us ended up going down a few floors.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. I landed on him. Big lawsuit thing, and then he gets crazy because the guy I saved was Kadeshi and basically he hated everyone Gaalsien or non-Kushan.”

“What kind of crazy?”

“I was getting to that. as it turns out, he had a gun hidden in his cast. He shot the place up. I’m not sure the exact damage, but it was a mess. He got taken out.”

“So someone shot him?”

“Yeah.”

Wow. This guy had a hard life over here. But there was no more time to talk. We were at his room. He opened the door on two people by the window.

“You’ve been helping the Kadeshi? Why not just tell me?” That’s when I realized something. I saw a pile of yellow and red clothing in the corner.

## TRIIKOR

She and Saiin were interrupted by Eric and someone else walking through the door. The other one looked around and then his fists clenched.

"I wanted to tell you." Eric said.

"You're very lucky you're my friend or I would've really hit you hard." The other shot back in an angered tone.

"I can explain all of this. It's why I wanted you to know."

"Shut up! You know how I feel about the Taiidan! There are only a few things that really anger me. There's my father's death, when my friends betray me, and the Taiidan. You've just hit two of them."

"Mark! Just listen to me!" Eric said trying to calm him down.

"Sorry but I have to leave now."

She didn't want to get involved, but if not, Eric would lose a friend.

She walked over to him and got right in his face. "So you're their *leader*? You can't even control yourself!"

"Trix stay out of this."

"No. You didn't even let him explain the situation."

"He doesn't need to. He's helping you, a Taiidan. Now I have a meeting to attend that'll make or break my plans on setting the Kadeshi free from prison." She looked at Saiin. The guy looked really confused. He decided what he was doing. He ran out the door after Mark.

"Saiin!" she shouted.

"Let him go." Eric said. He was almost in tears.

"Fine. Can you explain to me what that was all about?"

"I couldn't take it. I can't lie to him anymore. He should know."

"I wanted to meet him. Just not like that."

"It's okay. I'll explain to him when he's calmed."

## MARK

I can't believe Eric would do that. He's my friend. But now I'm not so sure.

"Wait!" I turned to see someone else running after me.

"Now who is it?"

"A friend of Eric's. He saved me."

"You're the Kadeshi then."

"Yeah, and I have things to say. You don't know the story. You don't know hers and you don't know ours."

"I do know yours. I know what the Kadeshi have been through. I know the whole deal with the Seven Colonies and with the reason for your attack."

"But do you know why I do not fear the Taiidan as you do?"

"I don't fear them. I hate them! And no, I don't know why you have one as a friend."

"Because she'd not an Imperial. She left the Empire the moment she was told their mission."

Now I was listening.

“They are not all complete evil and living to destroy their enemies. She refused to go ahead with the orders and therefore forced to watch as your Kharak burned. She has been given citizenship here on this vessel. She saved Eric from being killed by William and his friends. She is not a bad person. She has lived on Hiigara with her family. She became part of the military and went on several missions to destroy rebels. The more she saw, the worse she felt. She found out her family supported the rebellion and then she did as well. Their Empire is corrupt. They are going to fall. You are going to lead this fleet.”

“And your people may be able to help. But I still don’t want to see that Taiidani for a long time.” Now I don’t know what to think. If she’s what this guy says she is, then I made a mistake. But I can’t be sure. Either way, I need to go back to the *Mothership*.

As I was headed home, I saw that a lot of the ghost ships were being captured. They got both Kadeshi multi-beamers, the destroyer, the Turanic ship and one of the Taiidan frigs. They were all still moving in to be captured.

This mission was over before it started.

## JOHN

The shipless pilot was waiting in the hangar with Isel and Arazis for Mark to return. He had nothing to do at the time.

He was getting into a relationship with Fiira but no one knew. He kept it secret just in case he does get a new ship.

“Mark must have docked in another hangar.” he said.

Just then, both Mark and Jay came out of the elevator.

“So what was that all about?” Isel asked him.

“I’ll tell you later.” Mark replied. “I’m not going to be here long. I have a meeting to attend that’ll free all the Kadeshi.”

“Really?” Arazis said happily.

“Yeah. The catch is that they’ll need to board their own ships.”

“What about the pilots?” John asked.

“I’m not sure. We haven’t figured that out yet.”

Before anything else could be asked, the screen flashed on again. It showed the Bentusi ship.

“We have known of this ship but could never approach it. We are particularly vulnerable to its influence. The Bentusi would like the information you have acquired. It will be transferred automatically if you choose to trade.”

“We are accepting to trade the information for super heavy chassis technology.” Said fleet intelligence over the loudspeaker.

“The information was successfully transferred. Thank you.”

“The Taiidan are determined to destroy us.” Fleet Command said. “Will you help us defeat them?”

“Conflict is not our way. We will bring your cause to the Galactic Council. The Taiidan rule

the Empire but even they must answer to the council.” And then the image on the screen showed them entering hyperspace.

“The technology given has allowed for construction of a carrier. Construction has already started.” Then the screen went blank.

“Damn. This whole thing is getting more complicated by the minute.” Isel said.

“Can Captain John Nabaal please report to command deck?” came a voice from over the speakers.

“What’d you do?” Mark asked.

“I-I’m not sure!” he replied.

“Well, I’m headed that way anyway.” He said. “I’ll see you guys later.” He said. They both travelled to the elevator not saying a word.

## MARK

All I can focus on now is this. Then . . . what? What next? I can only hope it’s for the better.

The elevator stopped. We had to take a long walk down one of those rusty corridors.

“So . . . how was it on your ship?”

“Lonely, but that’s not important. I was a captain. Now I’m no one. I’m a man without a job.”

“Don’t say that, I’m sure they won’t be that harsh on you.”

“I lost two frigates.”

“Neither was your fault. Don’t blame yourself so much.”

“You’re one to talk,”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“What happens if we fail? Who is going to be blamed?”

“We won’t fail. I’m sure of it.”

“Why? Because of some vision you had?”

“Well . . .” I had nothing to add. He was right. What if I kill us all?

“I’m sorry.” He apologized, “I’m just really stressed. This isn’t exactly my best day.”

“No, I understand. I’m feeling the same way.” Except towards Eric. And that . . . that . . . Taiidan.

We arrived at the rusted elevator I remember taking so long ago. I’m not sure how long ago that was. I stopped going to the observation deck a long time ago.

“I’ll catch you later. Hope it goes well, whatever it is they want you for.”

“Good luck in your meeting.” He replied.

“I don’t believe in luck, remember?” and I entered the room. I hadn’t even got the chance to shower. How appropriate. I look like a janitor in a business conference.

“Mark! There you are! We were about to reschedule!” Captain Cromell said.

“Sorry I’m late. I was over on the *Rancor* for other business. And then the Bentusi showed up.”

“It’s fine. Sajuuk, you look like a wreck!”

“I’m a pilot. What did you expect? It’s a greasy job, you know?”

“Back to the issue,” someone I had never seen in my life said. He looked at me with disgust. But that was expected. I didn’t care.

“Yes. The Kadeshi. We are here to vote on this issue.”

We can make it look to the general public as a forcing onto their own territory, if we can get their ships.” Real subtle Lenny.

“I think that’s a bit of a stretch.” Someone else said. “And besides, was this Mark Soban not a prisoner a short time ago?”

“I was, but that shouldn’t matter now, should it?” I replied.

“I say that the Kadeshi are being mistreated.” Another face I didn’t know. She was on my side at least.

“As do I.”

“Why is this?” someone asked.

“Because they are being forced to do the deadly work on the *Mothership*’s engine systems like the Turanic Raiders. They are the same as we are in every way. Their stories for the Khar-Toba ships are very close to ancient Kushan scripture. Their hyperspace technology is identical in every way to our own. I am convinced we have the same ancestral origins.” I made my statement.

“So what?” someone said. “Does it matter?”

“Yes! This is the Gaalsien event all over again. Is that really what you want in such a condition?” Leonard had my back.

“Look people. This is turning out to sound like we are turning our backs on ourselves. On our teachings! Remember the Hersey wars? All because some aspects of basically the same religion were different. We’re turning into the Taiidan, don’t you see?” I said.

“No, I can’t say I do.” Someone challenged.

“Why do the Taiidan want to destroy us?” I asked.

“Because they fear us,” someone said.

“I would love that, but realistically it’s because they just don’t like us. Why do we enslave the Kadeshi?”

They stayed silent.

“If only we had someone stronger with us.” that was insulting,

“Someone like . . . your f—

“No! I do not need his help for this.”

The argument lasted a while longer. Most sided with us, which I was glad to hear.

## ARAZIS

“So what’s your story?” Arazis asked.

“Who, me? Oh I’ve been with Mark since we were kids. We were separated when I chose to pilot corvettes instead of fighters.” He smiled at her as if it was normal talking to a Kadeshi.

She thought there may indeed be hope for her friends. They may be able to live amongst the Kushan as one of them. She hoped the best for Mark.

“Listen. There’s no use staying here. Let’s go get some food.” Isel said already moving.

“Not really giving us much of a choice, are you?” Jay said and walked off too.

She stared back at the hangar exit. She knew there was something these people could achieve. And for all this time she thought she was within a sea of lost souls wandering aimlessly into the darkness, simply to push forward. She now realized these people had life in them. They were not all what they call “zombies”.

“Hey! Are you coming?” Isel yelled back at her.

The only thing she could ask of their god Sajuuk is for her people to become alive once more as well.



# Chapter Twenty-Six

## The Hunters Become the Hunted

MARK

The best thing just happened since we defeated the Taiidan in the Great Wastelands. The decision was final. The Kadeshi were forced onto their own ships, but at least they are no longer working on the engines. The pilots for the many Swarmer ships were allowed to stay. That's even better because now Arazis can stay. I can honestly say that things are going as I planned for once.

Like usual, me and my friends are watching the whole event. This is a forced boarding, but to be honest, they look happy to be leaving. Arazis was smiling too. It probably meant a lot to her as well.

My experiment was a success. Arazis and Isel are getting along great. They're now the best of friends instead of enemies. It made me think back on Eric as he used to hate me for who I was. I shook my head. I didn't want to think of him right now.

He's probably watching the same thing with that . . . Taiidani right now. Then it made me think some more. About her. The one he called Trix. Am I such a hypocrite? I have allowed Eric to be my friend when he thought of me as his enemy. Then I set Isel up to trust Arazis. It was the same situation. And now, it's me who hates this Taiidani whose friends with Eric. And now I can't stop hating her.

"I think I made a huge mistake." I said half to myself.

"What? This was all your idea!" Isel said. I tuned back into reality and saw everyone staring at me.

"Oh! No not this. This is great!"

"Then what is it?" Jay asked.

"It's Eric. I think I just made a huge mistake with him." Jay knew what I meant. We'd talk about it later when there weren't so many people. For now, we're just going to watch as they all board these ships.

They all walked to their new homes. Lines of pale-skinned Kadeshi. Some with hair coloured red, blonde, and white. They stood out easily among the crowd of dark-haired tanned-skin Kushan.

I noticed the reactions on the faces of the Kushan people. My people. Most didn't look too surprised. Some even looked like they were glad this was happening. That's not to say they were *all* happy about this. I saw some who looked angry about this. In all, there were many feelings towards this.

It's a big moment. We're giving them their lives. They still have guards on their ships to make sure they behave and a Kushan captain, but other than that, it's their choice what they do.

The three in the hangar were loaded and sent on their way. We watched as they exited and the next three entered.

After a while, Isel left with Karu and John was called to the large capital hangar.

We met up after that day and found out he had been assigned to the first ever carrier-class ship. So far, his crew and I are the only ones he told about it.

Left in the group, were me, Arazis, and Jay.

“I told you I’d do it.” I said.

She then took my hand. That’s when I felt it. It was the same when I was in the interrogation room with her. Back then, I just thought it was me wanting to help her. Now I’m not so sure.

“I should prepare the ship.” Jay said.

“Why?” I asked.

“I have been scheduled to board the new carrier.”

“Oh. Well I’m not supposed to tell anyone, but John is captain of that ship.”

“So that’s what’s up with him!” he said.

“So now I lose two friends at the same time?” I said.

“No, you’re not losing us. We’ll just be a short ways away. I will miss you, my friend.”

“As will I. Well, I’ll see you again.” And then he left. Just me and her.

“This is it? Isn’t it? It’s over.”

“No, it’s far from over.”

## ERIC

The last of the Kadeshi ships left. There were no more on the *Rancor* but the few pilots.

“He did all of this, didn’t he?” she said.

“Yes. He did.” Eric said.

“I wish he didn’t hate me.”

“He hates the Taiidan. He’ll come around. I promise you that. He’s not a bad person.”

“I hope you’re right.” She said. “What now?” she asked.

“We wait for the fun.”

## MARK

We made our way to the capital hangar to say goodbye. Fleet Intelligence had a message before we arrived. We are about to enter the outer limits of the Taiidan Empire. As we approach the galactic core, resistance is expected to increase. But we have identified a weak point in the enemy defences. There is a remote research station located near an active supernova. It should only have a minor garrison protecting it. It is time to hunt the enemy as they have hunted us.

As I stand at the large viewport with my friends, Isel, Karu, and Arazis, and my family, Dane, Lisa and Janet Paktu, watching the three hundred man crew of the new imperator-class carrier board, I realized just how much I really have.

# Epilogue

The *Mothership* fleet has now seen the future they must face. Hiigara is just within their grasp. The Kadeshi have been given back their lives, and the young pilot is now seeing his true feelings.

The fleet now sees Mark Soban as a leader. After every loss, every pain he has suffered throughout this war, he has found what he had gained. New friends and he is reunited with his family. The only thing left to do is to win back their home. To Hiigara they must go.

This finalizes the second chapter of the Homeworld War. Though there is much more to tell . . .

TO BE CONTINUED