

# Introduction

The Exiles must now face the true threat they need to overcome. With the help of their allied Kadeshi and guided in spirit by Mark Soban, they will defeat the Taiidan. They must or all is lost. They are all that remain. They are all that matters. They must survive.

Now past the Great Wastelands, the lonely fleet has entered Taiidan territory. Their encounters are going to increase. Their challenges will become greater and their fleet will grow stronger.

Their home long gone, the Mothership Fleet is on its way through the heart of the Empire.

Their mission was simple. Seek and destroy. One research station did not seem much of a threat. Exiting hyperspace, they soon discovered the region to be hostile. Fighters and corvettes were proven useless. They needed to remain in the dust veins to prevent being destroyed by radiation.

Just over a month had passed since the last jump. In that time, more of the crew came out of cryogenic freeze to keep up with the growth of the fleet. Merchants became technicians and farmers became engineers. Many more people trust in the future promised to them by their god.

The remnants of the entire Kushan race, returning from exile . . . opposing a galactic wide empire . . . this is the final chapter of the Exile's Return.

# Chapter One

## Supernova Station

JOHN

“Breach in starboard side.” Said Taalin, the damage monitor aboard the *Ifriit 3*.

“Captain I think this is getting out of hand!” Fiira suggested. The carrier was surrounded by enemies.

“Head for the upper dust vein.” He commanded.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” she asked. “The radiation—

“We’re better off out there than here. Assign all support frigates and repair corvettes to assist us. We should make it. And they’d have to be suicidal to follow us.” He said. There was no arguing with that. She nodded to someone on the deck who gave orders to the others.

MARK

Well the battle’s back on again. No more break. My squad and I can’t do much right now anyway. We wouldn’t last five minutes out there with the radiation. It’s pretty bright, I’d have to say. The supernova I mean.

I’ve been told no fighter pilots are to go out, so I’m in the all too familiar observation deck alone with Arazis. I’ve found myself spending a lot more time with her than before. But I won’t get into that.

I can’t see much from here. It’s dusty and quite far from the action. John’s fleet went down the lower dust vein and is fleeing to the upper vein. Probes were sent down the upper one followed by the *Rancor*. So far, we’ve discovered a minelayer corvette and a group of strike craft. I don’t see much of a threat. Our new gravity well generators are a great tool, it makes salvaging fighters and vettes easier.

“Well this is just great, what are we supposed to do!” Isel said walking in the room. “I’m so bored it’s unbelievable! We get out of hyperspace for what? Just to get stuck doing nothing?” she wasn’t in a good mood. As usual.

“I think she’s getting space fever.” Arazis said.

“What?” I asked.

“When you feel bored, homesick and restless I guess. It usually happens to travellers.

“Hey I’m not insane.” She stated.

“No one said you were.” I said. “It would be great to do something though.”

ERIC

“Entering mine field.” The captain said. All they could do was watch. In the observation room, Eric, Saiin and Triikor were looking out at the path ahead.

“Hey what’s that?” Saiin asked. He was staring off into the distance at something.

“Uh-oh.” The Taiidan said.

“What?” Eric asked.

“That.” As they approached further, they could make out two destroyers and one larger ship.

“What’s that?” Eric asked worried.

“It’s a Qwaar-Jet. I need to get to the command bridge.” Her voice was tense, meaning this was serious. Eric only wondered what it could be. A ship more powerful than a destroyer? The thought scared him. They followed closely behind.

“Turn the ship around!” she alerted the entire bridge.

“What is the meaning of this?” Captain Sjet asked.

“That thing is gonna blow us up if you don’t listen.” She said pointing to the monstrous cruiser in the distance.

“Sir it appears to have many advanced weapons systems. I think we should listen.” Someone said.

“Why should I?” he asked.

“Because I know Taiidan ships better than anyone here. And when Raiders don’t follow orders, it takes exactly two minutes for one Qwaar-Jet it to completely destroy a Lord-class.” That got his attention. He looked back and forth between the ship and the Taiidan.

“Turn the ship around!” he announced. But it was too late. The ships were already following them.

“All drives at maximum capacity.”

“Sir, they’re still gaining on us.”

“Send in the salvage teams.” He said.

“Are you mad? They’ll never make it!” Eric said.

“They need to. We have five aboard this ship, which should be enough to distract them.”

“What about the salvagers? Aren’t you worried about them?”

“They’ll be fine. I’ll order support frigates to draw the fire away and repair them. They just need to avoid the ion beams.”

## JOHN

“I think we’ve lost them captain.” Paul said.

“Good. Let’s go meet up with the *Rancor*. It looks like they could use some help.”

They approached the group and noticed them being followed.

“*Rancor* to *Ifriit 3*. Come in. we need assistance. Send salvage corvettes and try to redirect their fire.” said the captain.

“You heard him.” He said.

“Why do they need salvagers?” Fiira asked.

“Have you seen the size of that cruiser?” just then he pulled up the rear view of the *Rancor*. “We don’t have the firepower to take out that thing and two destroyers. It’s the only thing we can

do right now.”

“And besides. They’d make a great addition to our fleet.” Paul commented.

## ARAZIS

“This is lame!” Isel said leaning over the railings.

“Well I don’t know about you two, but I’m gonna go take a nap until the action starts.” Mark said walking off.

“He’s so . . .”

“Weird?” Isel finished.

“My word was interesting, but yeah I guess that too.” She said smiling while gazing out at the yellow background of the galaxy.

“Must be incredible.” Isel said.

“Yeah. I’ve only known of the red nebula of Kadesh.” She replied.

“Even that was one of the most amazing sights in my life!” she exclaimed. “We haven’t been able to travel into space for very long. And in the Kharak system, we’re too far from the galactic core to see anything like you do. It’s all dark and grey. There aren’t any nebulae or dust clouds. There’s our seven planets including Kharak, and all the others are deadly. Even Kharak is deadly if you travel too far towards the equator. And I would know, I was a nomad. Our days are usually windy and brown skies with nothing but sand.”

“Sounds incredible to me.” She replied.

“No, it’s not. It’s a lonely and desolate wasteland. Even before . . .” she couldn’t finish.

“Mark told me about Kharak. But he liked it. His side was a little more positive, but I still picture the same thing.”

“And what’s that?” Isel asked.

“Freedom!”

“What?”

“It seems that forever my people have been in hiding from a threat that you are attacking full force! It’s like nothing I’ve ever heard of! It’s just all so . . . incredible.

“Or suicide.” She said.

“Maybe, but I think we’ll make it. If his dreams are so in depth, maybe he can see the future.”

“But in them he sees a huge explosion as if a mothership where to explode.”

“Maybe it’s the enemy.”

“Or us. And he’s floating in space. What happens to him? Does he get rescued or does he fall to Hiigara?”

“You’re very pessimistic.”

“Maybe I’m just tired. I think Mark has the right idea. I’ll see you around.”

She left the observation deck, leaving the Kadesh alone in the darkened room. She was alone. It felt like she was back aboard the *Amun* with all her friends. She expected Saiin to show up out of nowhere saying “Hey how are you? Feeling okay? Want company?” but that never happened, which just made her feel even more alone. She thought he was dead. There had been

no mention of him to her at all. Not from any Kushan or Kadeshi.

“Oh Saiin, it feels like only yesterday we were together.”

## ERIC

The hangar deck was badly damaged. Ion cannons from the destroyers lacerated the walls. The salvage corvettes made it off before then thankfully. Three were destroyed by beams. Some were coming from the *Ifriit 3* also, which helped because they didn't expect it. The large ship had been disabled so it was not a problem. The destroyers however were not so easy to get.

“Damn it! Seal that section off too!” the captain yelled.

“But sir, there are still people inside!”

“Losses are expected in war. If we let that section stay open we risk venting all our oxygen. And the tanks aren't as full as they used to be.”

“Yes sir.” He said grimly as he sealed off the section. “Alright Taiidan, what should we do about this since you're such an expert?”

She didn't know what to say. “Well . . . there isn't much you can do really. The destroyer's ion cannons are placed so it has a wide angle of assault in the front. As you know, the armor is strongest in the front too.”

“Great.”

“We have the first frigate.” said one of the salvagers over the intercom.

“At least there's only one to deal with now.” Eric said. He didn't know what to think of the situation. He felt it every time an ion beam hit the hull. Every time he expected the ship to just crack in half. He looked around for Saiin and found him in the corner shaking and holding onto the walls.

“You scared?” he asked.

“Hell yeah!” he replied. “I was a nervous wreck on the *Amun* and I'm a nervous wreck here too. I'm so pathetic.” He said before another beam hit.

“Well I'm not feeling so confident myself if it helps.”

“Thanks but that just makes it worse.”

“One thing you could do is turn the damn ship so they're not firing into the hangar.” She suggested with attitude.

“Right. Alright turn the ship!” he ordered.

“*Ifriit 3* to *Rancor*. How are you holding up?” said the captain John Nabaal.”

“Not too well I'm afraid. The hangar got severely damaged by the beams. We're turning to draw the fire to other sections of the hull. It's about all we can do at this point.”

“Hang on we'll even things out.” Just then, the Emperor-class dropped from above vertically taking the next shot directly to the top. “Get on outa here we've got this.”

“Thanks. We owe you. I'm not sure how long we would have lasted.”

“Don't mention it. I'm ordering one of my support frigates to help with repairs.”

Eric felt relieved that the battle was over for them. Saiin was still shaking in the corner, and Trix was just relieved not to be giving orders. “So who wants a barbecue after this is all over?” asked the captain. This made a bunch of people laugh. If only they had one of those.

## JOHN

The last destroyer didn't last too long against the *Ifriit 3's* fleet. Three more salvage corvettes were built and sent to it. It was disabled and sent on its way to the *Mothership*. "Lousy enemies. I wish we weren't always trying to capture them and just blow them up."

"Maybe after this slow part of the mission. I mean there's bound to be more defences near the research station." said Paul.

"Right. Well at least the *Mothership's* engines will get some repairs done."

"Why do you think they'd be let live?" Fiira asked.

"Because this time we're the attackers. They're not the ones who destroyed Kharak. I doubt they even knew we were coming. We owe them at least a chance to live. We're better than the Taiidan. Just look at the Kadeshi part of our fleet. We invaded them. They're working with us to get to Hiigara. The Taiidan could too if they surrender."

"You're actually speaking of allowing them to be a part of the fleet? The Kadeshi are our own blood. There's good reason they're free. The Taiidan are not."

"I didn't say free, I said as slaves instead of space junk. Like the Turanic Raiders."

"I guess that works."

The fleet took formation and continued on down the resource vein.

# Chapter Two

## The Station

MARK

“Mark! Hey get up!” before I had time to think about it, I was on the floor and water was splashed in my face.

“What the hell! I can get up on my own you know!” It was Isel, so I guessed she wanted to do that anyway.

“What’s going on?”

“They want our squad ready to go. They’ve found the station.”

“What’s the unit count?”

“Lots.” Great. Well hey at least I get to do something. I’ve felt pretty damn useless for a while. Some leader I am right?

We got to the hangar, and Arazis was already there in her swarmer. She’s a part of my squad now. I had the request sent in. Cromell thought it was a great strategy for the Kadeshi to see they were being respected by having one of their own on the main fighter squadron of the fleet.

“You ready?” I asked Isel.

“Like always.” We got in our ships and headed out the hangar when the clamps released us.

We then continued on heading through the upper dust vein and met up with Eric and his Taiidan girlfriend. I tried to get over it but I really couldn’t. And a Gaalsien, already hated by the majority of the fleet, dating a Taiidan? It just seems stupid for his social status still in shambles. All he has going for him is being on this squad. But I tossed my negative feelings aside. He was still my friend. I had to respect his decisions. She became part of the squad too. It wasn’t easy but she still made it. Mostly because Eric wanted her on it, again because we’re the toughest one to kill, and everyone will be trying to kill us, and they’ll be more merciful on a Taiidan. I just hope she won’t be the same to them or this could go very badly.

“Oh we have a Kadeshi with us?” the Taiidan asked.

“Yeah what about it?” I said. Damn it. I’m supposed to be nice. Okay I’ll try harder. “She’s the one who killed Green Leader and was constantly after us. She’s skilled. Just remember that.

“Hold on, you’re saying it’s the red demon?” Eric said.

“Oh you and your religious views. But yes.”

“I guess I missed something. We should all move to the *Ifriit 3* with John and Jay. I’m getting sick of the stench of the *Rancor* and we’re always so far apart.” Eric suggested.

“I was thinking about that too. Well, we should be here for another three days after we defeat them. It gives me time to say goodbye to my family.”

“I thought you didn’t have any except for Rob. And he’s already on the carrier.”

“My foster family. They’re farmers.”

“Oh bring some of that hallucination root with you. I want to try some.” Eric said. I had told him about the root. He was very fascinated by it.

“Agrisak? Well sure but it’s not very safe to eat it raw. You could pass out for hours in a flashback that you think lasts weeks. It’s not very fun.”

“How detailed?”

“Well, I was able to read the numbers on the control panel of my fighter in my Rank Seven incident.”

“So it’s kind of like a flashback?”

“Yeah except you are just trapped in your own body for weeks, it’s like reliving a movie of your life. It only shows significant events that helped shape you, like being stuck on a desert island for a week with a sprained ankle. You feel all the pain too.”

“Well, I’d love some raw. I have a good past.” Arazis said.

“Well, Ara, sad to say, it might give you the events leading up to you and me being thrown in prison. You’d be reliving that painful spot where your life is about to get turned around and you’d be tortured inside your own body. You’ll want to make yourself change the past, but no matter what you do, it’ll still happen. It’s been used as a mental weapon in ancient times and had been ordered eradicated by the Daiamid hundreds of year ago. My family in particular secretly kept it living.”

“Well, that would suck.” Isel said.

“Almost there I think I can see the fleet ahead.” I said. There was the carrier, that was captained by my good friend John Nabaal, that giant ship they found that I heard about while walking down the halls towards my room, and five destroyers that I could barely make out.

As we got closer, I saw the Kadeshi frigates and some of ours. There were a few Taiidan ships left, though most had been ordered to retire to be recycled into new ones. It was actually cheaper than painting it. The destroyers didn’t even bother getting painted. They were too big. We just slapped on the national crest and sent it on its way.

“Red Squad reporting for duty. What are our orders?”

“Hey Mark, well we have a situation here. There’s a lot of fighters and a few frigates and a carrier. We need more space, so we’ve planned out capturing the carrier and whatever frigates we can salvage for scraps. I’ve spoken with Cromell Soban and he said he’d attempt to get the Taiidan working in the engineering division with the Raiders since they’re not really responsible for the genocide. You need to guard the salvage teams until they clear the dust. The Kadeshi will sneak around the back and start firing on the station along with the destroyers and the cruiser from the frontal assault. The missile destroyers will help with the small fighters. We’re expecting the carrier to launch fighters. So be careful.”

“Will there be any support?”

“Three repair corvettes are all we can offer. The support frigates are repairing the destroyers and the corvettes have their hands full escorting the Kadeshi.”

“Won’t the radiation still be too strong for us here?”

“Not really. There are small amounts of dust but you’ll need a chemical shower when you’re done.”

“Very reassuring. I meant the ships.”

“They should be fine. It’s not like they’ll blow up seconds after leaving the dust vein.”

“I hope you’re right about that. What about the swarmer? It’s hull is very weak.”

“That I’m not too sure about. I think the swarmer should just come and dock just to be safe.”

John said.

“Well, you heard him Ara.” I’ve started calling her that. Like a nickname.

“First day on the job and I’m already being told to go home.” She said.

“Alright, four of us.”

“Actually I’m sending in Yellow Squad. You didn’t think I’d leave it all to you did you?”

“Well yeah, since you managed to indirectly wake me up with a bucket of water for this.” I said. Isel laughed over the intercom then apologized, probably for leaving the microphone on. Not for the bucket of water.

“Alright guys, set sphere formation around the salvettes.” I said. The two squads did as I commanded and there were now seven interceptors and two heavy corvettes with three repair corvettes. We moved out after the Kadeshi were in position on the other side. We were sitting there for a few minutes.

“Alright, move out.” I heard Rob say.

We did. Immediately, the carrier launched fighters. The missile destroyers took care of the small ones in wall formation around the station, but these ones were our fight. The sphere held, but it didn’t do too well for maneuverability. “Better idea. Claw formation.” I said after the third interceptor blew up. No one objected.

This was much better. The claw was up, and the fight was on. Enemy fighters exploded as the salvage teams were taking hold of the carrier. Jay was one of them. I heard a few hits on the hull, but no real damage happened. I saw three interceptors break away and dock with the repairers.

Then some heavy corvettes launched from the carrier and I swerved out of the way of the bullets. They were slow and I could stay clear. I opened fire on one, but it took a while to actually cause damage. Our heavy corvettes were taking the hits. I was starting to feel the effects of the radiation on top of that. The salvagers were now moving the carrier out of range. The fight was almost over. I glanced at the tactical screen and saw little red blips disappear around the station. I saw some ion frigates being captured. An assault frigate came to help us out too.

Eric headed to the repairers now. This battle wasn’t that hard. Either they weren’t trained too well or I was just getting too used to this.

## ARAZIS

Her ship docked on the carrier, and she was immediately attended to by a group of Kadeshi. They got her out of the swarmer and welcomed her.

“I remember you.” She said to some of them. Familiar faces came to her. Some were her friends from the *Amun* while others were strangers, probably from the other two ships. “How are you treated here?” she asked curiously.

“It’s not home, but they don’t seem to mind us. Except for the secretary. She doesn’t like having us here. Apparently we’re a nuisance.”

“Oh. But is the crew friendly?”

“Yes, we’ve made some friends here, why?” one answered.

“Because I was thinking of relocating.” She said. She looked at the large room that was the

only fighter bay of the carrier. It was one huge open area with docking stations. Fighters in front corvettes in back. It was all compact. There were conveyors on the walls for when the ship was full. There were small platforms on five floors along all walls. She guessed when the ship was in hyperspace they kept it as clean as possible so people could move around. Ships docked through the bottom and launched out the front.

She left the Kadeshi to their work. She walked to the front where there was an escalator to a higher level. The ship was empty. It felt roomy and comfortable. She didn't even care where she was going. It gave her something to do. She walked passed some supply rooms and up the escalator to a level where she guessed pilots lived. There were rooms, meeting areas, and there was a mess hall at the end. She kept walking to another area. She guessed this was now the command section of the ship because there were more people.

She peeked into several rooms, and they were doing stuff with equipment she didn't recognize. The *Amun* had been automated as much as possible. It was made simple, so anyone could manage the ship. It didn't take an expert. The hull was a material that was transparent on the inside, giving constant light to the ship, with a beautiful red nebula background.

This ship was dull and plain with its white painted walls, but still managed to stay attractive. She eventually made it up to the bridge.

"Hey look who it is." John said.

"This area is off limits I'm sorry to say," said a woman with glasses and a clipboard. The word "secretary" associated itself with her.

"Oh ignore Fiira. We're not busy anyway." He said.

"Alright, you're the captain," said the secretary.

"Nice place you have here." She said taking a seat in one of the chairs. "Mark, Isel, Eric and I were thinking of relocating here. Eric says the *Rancor* smells bad and the *Mothership* is lacking in the awesome John and Jay Nabaal."

He laughed. "Well, be my guest. Karu already decided he was going to ask Isel if she would."

"The place seems so . . . empty. Is there some meeting going on?" she asked.

"Nah it's just always like this. The crew is pretty much people from the two support frigates I commanded."

"I see. So it's understaffed." She said.

"Well most of the people that need to be here are where they should be. Later on you'll see more faces, but it's still pretty casual. You've changed a lot yourself from the last time I saw you." He said.

"I guess I have. Mark tells me all the time."

"Uh captain, do you mean The Mark Soban?" asked one of the technicians.

"Yes, Paul, for the last time, we're good friends. Get over it it's not like he's Sajuuk himself or anything."

"Right. Well, I'll get to meet him at least." Paul said.

"Does everyone in the fleet look up to him or something? I thought it was just the fighter pilots." She asked.

"No, it's pretty much everyone."

"Well, I know the Kadeshi respect him a lot for how he helped us all. I mean even just realiz-

ing that we didn't know how to sleep saved our lives."

"That's stupid how can no one know how to sleep? It's instinct."

"No, Fiira, actually if it's been thousands of years since your people stopped sleeping then they'd all have serious insomnia like symptoms."

"Sleeper tubes. You should try it. Just saying. You go in for five hours and you feel like you slept for ten. And you're clean. It's like a bed, bath, toothbrush, and toilet."

"Sounds disgusting to me." Fiira commented.

"Wow what else does it do? I've never actually asked about it before but you have me very interested."

"It does anything related to personal hygiene. It also replenishes your cells. The average Kadeshi life expectancy is ninety years. Our people have no disease because it cures any illness. It gives you what you call breakfast too. You wake up feeling amazing and you get in feeling exhausted. The Kadeshi people are happy. Even with martial law. You really should have joined. You might have had an influence in the government because of who your people are. Then we might have helped out with the quest you're on. The elders would definitely agree to the chance to finally hit back on the great evil the people fear so much. It's all propaganda to me now."

"I guess, but that's all in the past now. But ninety years. That's long."

"Well for captains like you it would be nearly two hundred give or take a decade."

"Why's that?"

"Cloning. Like the captain of the *Amun*. He was a clone. Jeremiah the second. If you deserve it, or are just a great leader, you can be cloned. It's very strict though. Only captains of needle-ships get one, the presidents of the seven colonies get two, and the elders get however many they please."

"By Elders, how old do you mean?" Fiira asked.

"Well, as old as our people. They're of religious significance, because they are the lone living members of the original exile thousands of years ago."

"That's incredible!" John exclaimed.

"But you can only clone from the original tissue. That is why the bodies of the Elders are kept in permanent sleeper chambers. Oh one more thing it's like the equivalent of your cryostasis but there's no freezing involved."

"I'm honestly beginning to regret leaving the nebula." John said.

"Well, so do we!" she said.

"I still have faith in Mark, however. We can still defeat the Taiidan."

"What's the situation with the battle?" she asked.

"Well, we've lost two ion frigates and a few fighters, no one we know, and they've lost quite a bit. The fighters are just finishing up now. The missile destroyers are almost done with the wall of fighters. I can't see this going on for very long."

## ERIC

The last enemy was killed by none other than Mark Soban. The battle was over for them now.

"That went well, so are we still doing this moving?" Eric asked.

“I guess. I have nothing else to do, but we still need that chemical shower before we do anything.” Mark said.

They docked with the carrier and a team was already set up. The radiation wasn't too serious for them to need to strip down, to which everyone was relieved, so the team just sprayed their uniforms and the skin that wasn't covered.

“You're all set,” said one of them.

Their ships had been cleaned too. They got in, and started heading down the resource vein.

Eric and Triikor left the squad and headed into the *Rancor*'s hangar now that it was repaired.

The clamps took hold, and they got out. “Well, we should pack up. I'll tell Saiin.” She said.

“Right. Hey look at that,” he said pointing to a large explosion outside. It was the research station.

## MARK

“Well, I guess we won now.” I said. The others saw it too. No one could miss it. The explosion was so bright I couldn't even make out the silhouette of the *Rancor* that was not too far away.

“You know, this barely seems real.” Isel said. “I mean here we are a bunch of kids, the best pilots around.”

“Not really. I mean everyone else is older and used to jet fighters. And I was better than my flight instructor even then. We're used to this now. It seems weird, but it's true. I'm used to this. It's easy now. After the battle in the nebula nothing seems to compare to the speed and agility of those pilots and their ships. But don't get soft. I'm sure once they realize we're fighting back they'll bring in some professional pilots to attack us. And then the fight gets hard again. This is a pit stop, pretty much to show the crew that we can defeat them, to show ourselves that we're not pushovers. The next battle will be a real fight.”

# Chapter Three

## The Move

SAIIN

“A Kadeshi on your squad, huh? Good to hear,” said Saiin.

“So we’re going to meet up with Jay in the hangar. He’s giving you a ride over to the *Ifriit 3*.” Eric said.

“Right. And then?” he asked.

“The head to room twenty-eight. It’s yours. At the front of the hangar there’s an escalator, up that is the pilot quarters.” He said.

“You can’t miss it.” She said.

“We’ve heard that your swarmer is over there too. They transported a few over there before we jumped last time.” Eric informed.

“Oh that’s fine I’d rather not fight.” He said nervously.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Well, I’m not exactly fit for combat. It was my friend who got me into it you see, I’m a nervous wreck as you know.” He scratched his head then realized his hair was turning blonde again. He had dyed it red weeks ago to show his Kadeshi pride, but it was fading. “Do they have hair dye on the *Ifriit 3*?” he asked.

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Oh well I guess it doesn’t matter.” He said. They kept walking and arrived at the hangar.

“Hey Jay, here’s your passenger.” Eric said.

“Hi there. The name’s Jay.” He said. They had a conversation for a few minutes about nothing important, when he realized his friends left him.

“When do we leave?” he asked.

“Whenever I guess. Is that all your stuff?” he asked pointing at Saiin’s bag.

“Yeah that’s everything.”

“Then hop aboard. Bradley start up the engines will you?” he said.

The ship powered up and lifted to a hover. The captain of the corvette didn’t look very happy to have a passenger. The other two didn’t mind.

“I’ve never been in a corvette before. It’s different, bigger than a fighter but not much smaller than a multi-beam frigate.” He commented.

I’ve talked to my Kadeshi friend and she said those needleships were pretty impressive.”

“They are but you get used to it.” He said.

MARK

I hope all of this fits in the *Ferin Sha*. I brought everything I own with me because I’m probably

not coming back here. I put all the stuff in my fighter, and then Isel and I headed to the farm levels.

We got there within ten minutes. We walked down the dirt road to the house. I knocked, and Janet answered.

“Well, hello there.” She said. We walked in and sat at the table.

“So where are they?” I asked.

“Out back. So what brings you here?” she asked.

“I’m leaving again. This time I’m going to the *Ifriit 3* with all my friends.”

“Well, then you better visit us on Hiigara very often.”

“I’ll make sure to do that.” I said then got up and walked out the door and headed to the back. They were sitting on the porch.

“Oh hi Mark, how are you?”

“I’m great. Listen I came to say goodbye. I’m relocating to the *Ifriit 3*.”

“Oh that’s fine. Make sure to take some fresh food with you. I heard you don’t get good food on those.” Dane suggested.

“I’ll try and plant a garden or something.” I said. Then I remembered what Eric asked. It’d be disappointing if I left without some of that root.

“I’m taking some Agriisak too. My friend wants to try it.” I said.

“No problem we have lots. We sell it in the market now. It’s legal now because people want some all the time to relive the past. There’s a high price for it so make sure to take lots so you don’t have to buy any.” Lisa said.

“Thanks.” I said and headed into the field. I picked whatever I wanted, corn, potatoes, onions, and then I got to the Agriisak. I took ten, just to be safe. They had roughly two hundred planted, which was all that existed when I was a kid. I guess all that exists now too.

I took a few other things until the bag was full. Then I got some seeds from the seed box. They keep it in the middle of the field so it’s close to everything.

“Thanks again for all this.”

“No problem Mark. Good luck on the battles ahead. I heard they’re gonna get harder.” Dane said. We left after that.

“So what’d you two talk about?” I asked.

“Oh girl stuff.”

“Then I don’t wanna know.” I said.

It took a half hour to get ready after that. I managed to fit everything into the fighter, though there wasn’t much room afterwards.

We launched, and travelled up the dust vein. I had the food behind the seat to protect it from any small amounts of radiation. I’d rather not eat a mutant Agriisak and end up in some nightmare for a year . . . just a thought.

When we launched, I could see the Taiidan carrier we captured launching from the capital bay. Again, they didn’t bother painting it.

We got to the carrier of our destination. It was moving into formation with the *Mothership*. We docked in the bay, and got out. Jay, Eric, the Taiidan, and some other guy were already there.

“Hey! Haven’t seen you in a while!” I said to Jay. He gave me a friendly hug and then we did a handshake thing we developed a while back.

“So where’s everyone else?” I asked.

“Apparently the ship’s normally empty like this,” said the Taiidan. I smiled, but I still couldn’t stand seeing her here with us.

“To yonder bridge me lads!” Jay said in a pirate voice. Good old Jay.

“I’m confused. Something about a bridge?” said the new guy. All we did was laugh. I grabbed the stuff out of my ship.

“Oh hey Eric I brought what you asked for.” I said. He saw the root and smiled.

I got to my room, twenty four, and dropped everything off inside and caught up with the others.

“So new guy,”

“Saiin.” He said.

“So Saiin, what one of the ships did you come from?” I asked.

“The *Amun*.”

“What a coincidence. My friend comes from that one.” I said.

“Friend, what friend?” he asked. The door opened to the bridge and John Greeted us. Arazis turned, and Saiin stared ahead wide eyed unmoving. He didn’t look like he was entirely in this room.

“Saiin!” she yelled.

# Chapter Four

## Reunion

ARAZIS

She thought he was dead, her nervous wreck of a friend. Her blond haired friend who she lost contact with when she chased the *Ferin Sha* to the exile ship.

She was speechless. So was he.

“So you two know each other I guess.” Mark said. She pinched her arm to make sure she was awake. She was, but the moment still seemed unreal. She ran to him and they embraced.

“I thought you were dead!” he said before she could.

“I thought the same.” She said. She noticed everyone else staring at them. “Let’s go talk somewhere.” She said. They both left the room. They got a few questioning looks but ignored them.

They were alone to talk now. She didn’t know what to tell him. She told herself he was dead so she could get over him while the rest of the problems were still registering back when she was a refugee.

“Oh Saiin, I’m glad you’re alive. I’ve made some new friends, as you can see. But now I have someone from the past. Someone I have a history with.”

“Same here, I even befriended one of the “Evil Ones”.” He said

“I’m partially the reason for our freedom here. Mark did most of the work though. I guess he felt bad for me.”

“I heard. I just didn’t know it was you.” He said.

“I’ve thought of things I’d tell you if you were alive, but now I forgot them.” She said. “All I want to say is that I’m glad you’re alive.

“I’ll have to be honest I didn’t. I didn’t think of many things. I’ve been kind of dead to the world. I saw our people in prisons. I couldn’t stand it. They were beaten. I should thank Mark in person sometime. I had help from a Taiidani. So far, they’re not all evil, though she’s the only one so far that I’ve actually gotten to know.”

The one that Mark doesn’t like? I hear him talking about it a lot to himself. He doesn’t realize it but I spy on him a lot.”

“She’s nice. A normal person. She knows he doesn’t like her. She thinks he’s just not ready to hear the truth. He needs more time to calm down.”

“We should get back to the meeting. We’ll talk more later in my room.” She said.

MARK

They walked back into the room together. I guess he’s a friend from her home or something.

“It’s like a huge reunion here.” Eric commented.

“Well . . . not for me anyway,” said the Taiidani.

“Oh yeah.” He said feeling guilty.

“Hey it’s not a problem, all the people I care about are on Hiigara.” The room went silent.

“So how is it there this time of year?” I asked trying to break the uneasy calm.

“It’s winter right now, so there’s probably a lot of snow. Oh you don’t know what that is.”

“We do,” said Saiin.

“Oh then that helps. It’s like frozen water droplets falling from the sky like flakes. It makes everything white. It’s nice.”

“That sounds deathly cold!” John said. “Water freezes at a temperature that’s way too cold.”

“No, Kharak is just very hot compared to most planets.” Saiin said.

“Unbelievable.”

“What colour is the sun?” I asked.

“A golden yellow. But it’s so bright that close to the galactic core it’s bright enough to see even at night.” Then it was the same as in my vision, a golden sun darker than the harsh one above Kharak.

“I can’t wait to see it.” Eric said.

“Me neither.” She said.

“I already have.” I said. They all turned to face me like I’m insane. “The Agriisak. It’s a kind of hallucinogenic that apparently is told to give visions, future, past, whatever. It’s been declared extinct but my step parents kept growing them anyway. Good thing they did too.”

“I’m a bit skeptical about that. Let’s face it we Kadeshi are far superior in technology than you. Even we don’t have a technology like that.” Arazis said.

“But you also come from a society of religious zealots. Who’s to say that someone didn’t invent it at one point?”

“Good point.” Saiin agreed.

“I don’t have enough for everyone of course. Only what I brought with me.”

“So are we eating it cooked or raw?” Eric asked. I’ve explained its function to him before.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Triikor asked.

“Well, just trust me, if you have it raw, you’ll be out for only a few seconds. You’ll be trapped inside your body in an event that greatly affected your life to make you who you are. You could be stuck in yourself unable to control your movements for days, weeks, possibly even months. I have no idea actually how long, but there hasn’t been a case that they haven’t woken up after twenty five seconds.”

“How do you fit months into seconds?” Saiin asked.

“It’s like a dream. You only dream in the last few milliseconds of falling asleep. Oh right you wouldn’t know. Well for the rest of you, it’s like having that little bit of dream span out the entire time you’re subconscious. Meaning your mind is dreaming faster than time passes. The brain is just like that.”

“It sounds dangerous.”

“It is if you’re out for more than a day, which is impossible of course.”

There was a silent pause.

“How long have you been out for?”

“Me, I’ve been out many times before. But it is the same experience over and over. Three

weeks in the dream with a sprained ankle stranded on a desert island.” Everyone stopped to think.

“So that’s the time you’re talking about.” Jay said.

No one else had the slightest clue what I was talking about. “Yeah.”

“Stuck in the future for two weeks sounds fun.”

“Raw only lets you see the past. Don’t ask me why I honestly don’t know.”

“We should try it.” Arazis said.

“I’ve warned you. It won’t necessarily be a good event. It could be the most painful event you’ve ever felt. That’s actually a very possible candidate.”

“Then it is dangerous.”

“I dare you all to do it with me.” Jay said.

“Jay, this is serious. You could be seriously scarred if it was an emotionally traumatizing event.”

“I don’t care, we have a month of nothing so let’s do it.” He said.

“I’m in.” Eric said.

“Me too.” Saiin said.

“Why not?” Arazis said.

“Could be interesting.” Triikor said.

“Then it’s settled. Let’s do this. Everyone grab a chair while Mark goes to get it.” John said.

“Fine.” Someone is gonna hate me for this. I know it.

I came back with one root cut up into several pieces. We all sat in the empty chairs of the bridge since we were now in hyperspace and everyone had the rest of the day off.

“Guys, this is not just some joke. Before you take this I need to tell you something. It’s important. First, you will have no control of your body, but will be fully awake. Even when your body goes to sleep you are, unless you fall asleep with it. It’s much easier than it sounds. Two, everything you feel is as you felt it the first time. So if you broke a leg or something, you’re gonna feel real pain. Three, you’re gonna wish you hadn’t done this when you wake up. So please, try and refrain yourself from hurting me if you get a bad dream.”

Jay of course laughed.

“Last thing, and probably the most important, don’t go insane, just remember that this has all happened before and if you are alive here now, you won’t die. But your mind will try and tell you what it tried to at that point in time. Meaning if you’re say falling from a jet fighter from the stratosphere and you’re plummeting to the ground, you’re gonna feel an extreme sensation that you’re gonna die a horribly painful death. Just tell yourself that it’s a dream, because it will look and feel completely real. Enjoy the trip.” I said.

We all sat down, had a nervous moment together, and then ate the root. Then I passed out, and fell off into unconsciousness.

And then woke up, in the jet fighter that I wish I could forget every time I see the control panel.

# Chapter Five

## The Island

ARAZIS

She thought he was dead, her nervous wreck of a friend. Her blond haired friend who she lost contact with when she chased the *Ferin Sha* to the exile ship.

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“The one that Mark doesn’t like? I hear him talking about it a lot to himself. He doesn’t realize it but I spy on him a lot.”

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# Chapter Five

## The Island

MARK

The sound of the explosion was all too familiar to me. I heard it, and my body moved to react. “I have a problem up here!” my body said.

“We hear you Mark. There’s been a malfunction in the fuel cells. You’re leaking. You won’t have enough fuel to get back so you’ll have to head for the habitable southern pole regions. We will send a team for your return. They will be about two weeks.” I heard again.

Of course they didn’t actually find me until three weeks later. The jet flew as south as possible and lowered my altitude as much as I could, until the fuel ran out and I pressed the eject button.

I saw my wonderful home below me in all its might with the great desert to one end and the ocean below me with a light green shoreline beyond that all covered in a blanket of clouds and dust. I could barely think for the next five minutes. I was in a state of semi consciousness. I barely felt my body and it wouldn’t move on its own. This is the point where I was unconscious.

Falling is not one of my favourite sensations. I must have been falling at about forty kilometres. I couldn’t breathe and the ground was getting closer and closer.

My body woke up and stared at the ground for a while, and I was getting this ultimate sensation of fear. The chute came out and I was tugged back with extreme force that might have broken a rib but I never knew for sure. I was still falling too fast. The events lasted maybe fifteen minutes. I wasn’t counting. I kept falling and slowing down but it was still too fast. But hey, I’ve done this before.

As I was about to land, I was still fairly fast but not supersonic so that was good. I would make a smaller splat this way. I flew through a large cloud and that slowed me down too. I was headed for a tiny island just off the main shore. I landed in the ocean at a high speed, and then I felt my ankle crack somehow, or course I know that it’s sprained not broken. I pulled a chord on my military vest and it inflated. All I could do was float there.

It was unimaginably painful. In fact when it happened the pain was so much I passed out from it. This time was different. The midday sun was keeping me awake, and my parachute was pulling me to shore. The water was calm, and there was nothing to do but lie here in my immobile body and feel the salt water burn my injury.

I actually did manage to sleep, because as it seems, I was passed out for several hours floating there.

I woke up the same time my body did, lying on the beach of the island. The sun was lower and the temperature went down. The pain in my ankle also went away. The pale blue sky was cloudless. It almost felt peaceful, a small dream amidst a nightmare.

My body sat up and slowly went to work checking the wound. Sure enough, the ankle was sprained. That wasn’t the problem. The bleeding was. When hitting water at that speed it’s like

hitting cement. It might have been better off if I landed in a sand dune in the middle of the desert if I had a tracking device on me. Hell I've crossed it before anyway.

It was sunset by the time I was done. Khar-Illume turned the dull light blue into a variety of reds and oranges. I couldn't move from where I was, but I guess as long as I didn't fall into the ocean I would be fine. At least that's my account of the story. I hate this one. Maybe that's why it keeps replaying for me. Oh well. In a few weeks it should be fine. Or a few seconds. Depends what timeline you're following.

The next day I took my army gear off to ease the weight on my body. I crawled over to a branch and used it as a crutch to stand. I needed to see where I was.

It was a very small island. There were about twenty palm trees and some shrubs here and there. I could see the other side of the island from here so this was a tiny spec in the sea. I saw some small crabs that I could cook if I ran out of army food, which is going to happen in a week from now. My foot will be out of commission for about a week and a half. Longer than usual but I don't have much of the proper equipment for this.

I decided not to walk much. I sat back down and looked out at the calm ocean and couldn't see the shoreline. I looked behind me and I could see the green coast. I was so close, maybe a few kilometres out. If I wasn't hurt, I could swim there. Or at least float there. I didn't risk it until week three of my story here in my body.

"Damn this!" I screamed. Of course there was nothing to hear me.

For the first week, I'll sum it all up to keep the story flowing. I sat down trying to heal my ankle. The cuts and bruises all healed nicely. I noticed my food supply getting smaller and smaller and ate less and less. The desalination pills I had were all gone within four days and now I was getting dehydrated. I wanted rain but none came.

I tied my parachute to a palm tree thinking the bright orange colours would catch someone's eye. But no one came. Most of the time after the fifth day was me just lying in the sand half dead. Dehydrated and disoriented.

On day seven my dumbass body was having a slight outburst of insanity. I was so thirsty, I drank seawater. But then whatever I had for food came up five minutes later along with the water and some yellow goo. I passed out for another day.

At this point, I was in the danger zone of dehydration. Then I felt something poking my side. It was a crab. When I moved it ran off. My vision was blurred. The only thought I could process was drill. Drill what? Well, I'll let you see for yourself.

I struggled to grasp reality for probably several minutes. Then I saw my bag of army gear. I moved closer to it and remembered that I had a drill in there. It was there in case I couldn't eject properly I could cut myself out. I grabbed it, and crawled over to the long stick. My body and mind at that time went into instinct survival mode. I mindlessly walked over to one of the trees and threw the stick up at the tree. There were a few coconuts that fell down I dropped and grabbed one. I drilled into it and drank the juice inside. It was sweet tasting, and delicious. I had another one.

The days sort of distinguished themselves more coherently after that. I think that's the one point where I realized I was gonna make it through this. I drank enough coconut juice until I got

back on my feet. My two feet. My ankle had healed enough to not need the crutch but it still hurt to walk.

The stick broke on the second tree I tried this trick on, but not to worry. I have the coconuts as ammo now.

I've been cracking them open on a rock after I drink them to eat the seed but coconuts alone isn't gonna keep me alive. As friendly as these little crabs are, I'm hungry. I heard somewhere the crabs of the south are free of any disease, so it's perfectly edible raw. Again, using a coconut as a weapon, I probably looked ridiculous.

The second week passed with me getting my strength back. The whole thing was eventless and I was stuck here.

Day ten was the first day here that I got rain, but now that I stopped drinking water it was just annoying. I guess it was refreshing at least. I exercised too to get in shape since I've been doing literally nothing the entire two weeks I've been stranded here.

Day thirteen was when the small minor pains in my foot stopped. Then I started running from one end of the island to the other. Just running for hours without stopping. If I was gonna swim this I need endurance. I did this for many days.

Then the morning of day nineteen came. I saw the very last palm tree that had fruit still on it. I remember thinking to myself this is it, today I swim out. I have no other options.

I got ready with as little as possible. I had cut my army pants into shorts and all I had on was my canteen filled with the rest of the coconut juice. I ate all the coconut seed and was full of energy. I remembered one last thing. I went to my bag and grabbed my lucky necklace and put it in my pocket. Hey it's worked so far so why not?

I got in the water and started swimming. All I could think about was how useless the spotter planes have been because the parachute was still up and it was pretty big and hard to miss. Then I tried not thinking. Then I remembered this is all a dream so it didn't matter what I thought. My eyes were closed and I was just heading forward.

After a half hour I had to take a break and have a drink. This juice is so full of energy that after I drank some, I kept going. There's not much to tell about this part. All I was concerned about was getting to shore. I had no plans after that. Once on the mainland there was civilization and therefore I was saved.

My arms wanted to give up after a while, but I ignored them. Another survival struggle on my part, first is a desert, next is an island just too far from shore. Would my life ever get easy? I know now that it doesn't. This seems like a vacation compared to fighting in an interceptor.

I have no way of telling just how long I swam for, but I ended up swimming into sand, and opened my eyes to a crowded beach of people all staring at me.

I tried to get up but was stuck on my hands and knees vomiting. My insides were on fire and I think I should have trained harder. But I trained the best I could and I accepted that. Once I finally stopped throwing up white bits of coconut I stood up and took a swig of the coconut juice. I took my necklace and kissed it. Once again, I made it through something any normal person would have just given up on. I walked maybe ten meters and collapsed and just laid down to take a break. I had some people come up to me and ask me questions but I wasn't paying attention. I think I passed out at some point.

I must have because I woke up at sunset. I got up, and left the beach. Come to think of it, I

recognized the beach. It was right at the edge of a small town that I knew all too well. I left the beach and everything I have used to keep myself alive these past weeks. I guess all I really need is me to survive. Of course thinking this made me feel lonely.

Then I woke up again, this time back in reality.

# Chapter Six

## First Launch from Third

ARAZIS

She woke up in the halls of the palace she used to call home. She felt very disoriented and confused. Then remembered what was happening. She could barely believe it was happening. She looked out at the red tinted sky and at the gas giant that her home orbited.

She tried to move but couldn't. It was just like Mark said it was. She wondered why she was brought here. She heard footsteps and turned to see her father, the governor of Third.

"I have news for you. You are being put into the military." He said.

"What? Why? That's the last thing I want!"

"I've read your journal. This could be good for you. It is also your punishment for your blasphemous beliefs."

"You read what! That's mine and no one else's!"

"That isn't important. You leave today to board the newly commissioned *Amun* needleship. Hopefully it will give you enough insight to quench your thirst for knowledge."

"Today!" she said shocked. She remembered this. It was years ago. She hated her father from that moment on.

He left the hall and she was alone, standing there confused and shocked at what just happened. Her body ran out of the hall in the other direction and into the gardens. She remembered doing this a lot as a kid. The plants were exotic and tall on Third. It was due to the small size of the moon. There was an odd circular concrete platform describing the orbits of the moons in relation to the planet that she laid on and stared up at the sky full of colours.

She was there usually for a few hours at a time. She had nothing to do now that school was over for her. She saw a blue object come out from behind the planet's shadow. She had seen it all the time but had never actually been there. Fourth was a watery world larger than her home.

The science behind how moons stretch with other moons or planets was not spoken of generally as it was not needed to know in the eyes of the Protectorate so she knew very little about it. But at some point the moon was frozen. Then another moon crashed into it melting all the ice and the stretching kept it defrosted. The moon was mostly water with very few spots of land. She imagined underwater cities but couldn't quite picture it realistically.

She heard someone talking nearby, which is odd because no one is allowed in this garden. The person with blond hair stepped out into the open area. It was Saiin. It was the same day she met him.

"You're not supposed to be here!" she said. She stood up. He was taller than her and probably a little older too. She knows now that Saiin was not that much older than her, around one Kharak year older.

He turned around fast and looked a little embarrassed. "Oh I thought I was alone. Well uh you neither."

“Of course I am I live here.” She said.

“Oh! Well uh sorry about this but it’s fascinating and I was told that this is the largest collection of exotic plants on the colony. I’m actually waiting to head out on a needleship but it hasn’t been tested yet.”

“Plants! How can you care about something so lame! Look up! That’s much more cool than one of those.” She said.

“The gas giant? Yes interesting but not my interest.”

“You speak geeky.” She said. In her mind she had to relive being young and stupid and it was kind of funny hearing herself call Saiin a geek. Well it did describe him well enough.

“That’s not very nice. You said you live here so that means you must be the governors daughter right? I was told that you would be accompanying us on the *Amun*. The captain is a clone or something. It’s kind of creepy.”

“Oh . . . yeah . . . I don’t really care to talk about that right now. That’s why I’m here. Alone.”

“So you don’t actually want to go? Why not? I’ve spend most of my life off world. You see lots of cool things.”

“He’s punishing me for wanting to think. I hate him.” She said.

Seeing Saiin for the first time again reminded her of how dumb she was for not wanting to go. It was the best years of her life.

“Everyone hates their parents sometimes but we get over it.” Sure enough she did, but only years later. “I’m sure you will once you get on a needleship. The walls are invisible so it feels like you’re floating right up there in the nebula. I’m from Second so there is really not much to look at. It’s all white and lame. I’ve lived in space my whole life. It’s fun. I’ve been to every colony there is. Even Fourth.” He said looking at it now that it was fully in view.

They talked more before Saiin got a call to come to the hangar to board the *Amun*. “Well I’ll be sure to look for you on the ship.” He said and walked off.

She decided to go back inside too before her father got angry at her.

Arriving inside her stuff was already packed up for her in a transport. “So that’s it? No goodbyes? Mother would hate you for this.” She said.

“Well she can’t. We’ll meet again but not until you get this thirst for knowledge out of you. I can’t be a governor knowing my own daughter might end up becoming a rebel of some sort.”

“Whatever. Just don’t think I’m getting you anything for your birthday. We’re done. I never want to see your face again.” These were the last words she ever spoke to him. She got in the vehicle and looked back at him. He had what could have been a tear in his eye. She didn’t notice it the first time but reliving the events she saw it. Was it her imagination interfering with the dream? Mark said it was pretty much an exact reliving of the events. Maybe she saw it but didn’t register it. She saw her brother completely in tears, the poor kid. She wondered what he was doing now. He would have begun the training last year so he was probably beginning to become the next governor.

The vehicle got to the hangar and some assistants took her stuff onboard for her. What was in front of her was not so much a hangar as it was a huge spaceport. There were four ships under construction and one finished. The ships were huge monsters of metal. She had no idea how something like it would ever get off the ground until she noticed it was floating. Of course, be-

cause science was hidden in the most part, it was killing her to know how it worked which just made her so-called “hunger for knowledge” just that much stronger.

She got on an escalator that took her all the way up to the ship. She got inside and her stuff was taken to her new room. She was greeted by the captain and a few others, but she didn’t care too much to talk to anyone and they clued in pretty fast.

“Which way to somewhere alone?” she asked.

“Level five is a good bet. It’s mostly all catwalks in the front of the ship. There aren’t many people out and about. Most are getting unpacked. You should be alone there.” The captain said.

“Thanks.” She headed to the elevator and then to the middle of the catwalk to look out at the hull of the ship. Behind her was the inner layer of steel walls and in front was the bulk of the hull that held the ship together. There was a small strip of window in the front to view ahead.

She saw someone with her farther down. She looked closer and saw it was that person from the garden listening to music with huge headphones. She walked up to him and punched him.

“What was that for!” he said.

“Because I need someone to take my anger out on, don’t I?”

He laughed it off. “Impressive ship isn’t it? I’ve only been on one once before.”

“Attention crew of the *Amun*, we have just received launch clearance. Brace yourselves for liftoff.” The captain said over the speaker system.

“I hate this part. Sit here and hold tight.” He said sitting in one of the chairs behind them. There was a brace to hold them in place.

“What’s this for?” she asked.

“Believe me, it’ll all be explained in a few seconds.”

There was a countdown. She didn’t know what they meant by liftoff, but the ship was moving. The small window confirmed that. Then the ship was on a runway or sorts, and there was a huge ramp that sloped straight up.

“By liftoff they don’t mean like a rocket do they?” she asked.

“They sure do.”

The ship moved forward faster and faster until she heard something that sounded like rockets fire in the distance. She was jolted back in her seat and the runway came closer and closer. Then they hit the runway, but the ship didn’t even hit it. She found out later that the ship uses magnetic repulsion on the ground to keep afloat but it only works on metal, so they wouldn’t be able to float up to space. This is what the ramp is for. It’s a huge metal slope that the ship repels against until it gets vertical enough to simply keep going.

The ship came to the top of the slope and then there was nothing but air. She was jolted back down when more powerful rockets fired. Saiin squeezed her hand. Back then she just ignored it because she was doing the same. But it’s become a regular thing over time.

The sound of the rockets got fainter and fainter until it was just on the inside of the ship echoing against the hull.

“Dethatching main thrusters.” There was a noise and then they were in space, because she was feeling weightless. “Initiating artificial gravity.” Then she was brought back down to a weight she was not used to, a lot stronger than her home.

“We can get out now. He said.

“That was fun!”

“Just wait it gets better.” He said. A few seconds later, the hull started to turn invisible. She was frightened a little but then she saw everything outside and was simply speechless with amazement, her home below her with the gas giant and Fourth looking much clearer than she had ever seen it all surrounded by the wide range of reds and pinks of the nebula.

“My name’s Saiin by the way.” he said.

“Arazis.” She said.

“Let’s be friends.” He said.

“Sure.” She said and sat down still dizzy from the launch. “Well, I guess you were right. I think I’ll like it here.” She said and woke up.

# Chapter Seven

## A Little Piece of Heaven

### TRIIKOR

She woke up a bit dizzy, but then came back to reality. She was in a field. *Blue skies?* She thought. She hadn't seen a blue sky in years. Not since she was sent off on a carrier as an interceptor pilot.

*Grass too, oh I miss the smell.* Not in many years had she seen so much green, so much blue, felt so much natural warmth on her face. All these simple things she almost went insane without. She enjoyed this flashback dream thing. The moon was up in the sky and the galactic core was visible too in all its bright glory. But nothing outmatched the bright blue watery skies. There were also very few clouds that day. She wished the moment would never end. She missed her home so much.

But the moment did in fact end. Her body involuntarily got up and walked down to the riverbank which wasn't at all a problem to her. Water. She felt like diving right in. She tried but her body wasn't moving. It was just like Mark said.

Her body moved again. It was heading out to the bush trail that went home. While walking through the forest she could smell the pine trees and hear the birds sing in the dozens. Small woodland creatures were around too looking at her curiously.

She then heard a loud roar above her head that scattered all the animals and made the tops of the trees shake from the wind. Looking up, she caught a glimpse of yellow and red as it flew by. It was here. The carrier.

A sudden intense *deja-vu* happened in her. She knew what it was. The day before the boarding. Her body made no rush to get home. She remembered that at the time she came out to the river for some peace and quiet alone. Reliving the moment now, she felt like running home to her family and screaming because her body wouldn't move, but that wasn't possible either. She wanted to see her family.

She saw her house, just a small house far from the commotion and noise of the city. She wanted to go inside, but she walked around and headed to her friend's house.

"Hey Trix! It's been a while what's going on?" her friend asked.

"Well, I'm pissed off at my parents and I'm going to join the carrier that just passed by on a deep space journey to somewhere the Emperor hasn't even heard of."

"That bad? Well you can stay here until you leave if you want. How long are you going for?"

"A very long time. I don't even know actually. It could be for the rest of my life." She said.

"Oh. So I won't see you again then?"

"I hope so, but probably not. Like I said, I'm pretty damn pissed off."

She was glad she saw someone from her past at least. Her best friend too. They talked for a while until she realized she had to go pack her stuff.

"Are you sure you don't wanna stay here for the night?"

“Nah my parents would hate me for it. Besides all my stuff is at home anyway.”

She opened the door quietly and snuck inside. It was dark out now. The galactic core shines high in the sky in summer. She light makes the streets visible even when it's a new moon.

Her room was in the basement so she headed straight there, but her brother was sitting on her bed.

“I don't want you to leave!” he said and hugged her. He almost never cries but he was now. She remembered this very clearly now that she was reliving it.

“It's not up to me. Mom and dad are making me go. Blame them not me.” She said.

He eventually stopped and went upstairs. She packed up her stuff. Anything she would need for the trip. Nothing else. No memories but her own.

After packing her stuff, she showered to get rid of the smell of dirt from lying in the fields for as long as she did.

It was very late at night when she got out. Her brother was asleep and her parents were coming down the stairs.

“Go away.” She said. *Damn it what's wrong with me! Come in already!*

The doors opened and her parents came in followed by her cousin. He was older than her and was already in the military.

“We have something we need to tell you. It's important.” Her mother said.

“We're part of the rebellion.” Her father said. “We have been for a while now. Sending you into the military is for your own good. This way if we get caught you had nothing to do with it. You're brother's fate is the same as yours.”

“It sounds sickly cruel.” She said. “What do you mean rebels? They're the bad guys aren't they? So I've been living with a bunch of rebels? You too Jarred?” she asked her cousin. She looked up to him.

“Yes. You're too young to understand these things. Just keep this a secret. Anyone who is suspected to be a rebel is considered one now. Just last week they made changes in the military concerning this. You don't even need to be a rebel now. My captain was shot in the head by one of my best friend two days ago. That's also why I'm here. You'll come to notice things you didn't before. Your education is flawed at schools of the Empire. They're too biased. They brainwash you to believe only their point of view. I wasn't a rebel until I saw things I wish I hadn't.”

Only now she realized she had too. She was a rebel now. The worst out of them all. She was actually living with the enemy. She was now an enemy. Not just a rebel. At the time she was just scared and confused. Her life flipped around that night. She didn't sleep at all.

She didn't know what to say back then. She just let them talk.

“Don't worry. I'm confident we'll all meet again.” He said. They left her room. The moon was staring down through her window. She knew the Taiidan didn't live here originally, but she didn't know who did. There was no name. There were stories from rebels that were executed publicly. She didn't know the story of what happened to those people.

Now that all this was happening to her, she didn't sleep at all that night. Of course now her questions on the matter have been answered, there was still much she didn't know about her own government. So she had other things to think about this time, still, she couldn't sleep. There were questions about how far the rebellion has gotten, there were questions about what the Empire is

thinking and what was the reason to order genocide on the Kushan people. Hundreds more questions she had about the Empire, and even the Kushan. She would have much more to ask Eric when this whole thing was over.

Morning came. She got no sleep at all. Jarred opened her door.

“I guessed you wouldn’t sleep. You’re too much like me. Get up we don’t want to wake your brother up. It would just make you feel worse.” He said.

“Okay.” She got up and she brought her stuff upstairs and outside quietly.

“We’ll stop somewhere to eat. The carrier is leaving at noon.”

“What about my parents?” she asked.

“They asked me to do this. They couldn’t handle it.”

They drove out to the city. The carrier was very prominent in the skyline. It hovered there docked to the four tallest towers for supplies. It was a makeshift landing area since the country was against clearing more land for a spaceport. They’re very environmental as opposed to most others.

“So did you say goodbye to all of your friends?” he asked while driving down the highway.

“No. I can’t. I’ll just update my profile. They’ll find out eventually.”

“It was easier for me. I didn’t have any friends. They were all either in the military or dead in the plant meltdown. I’m glad we were on vacation or I would have been too.”

The whole day was very casual. They drove to the city and ate a burger for lunch and even went to the arcade to have some fun before she left.

They were going up the elevator to the ship when she asked him, “What do you believe? Do you think there used to be people here?”

“Maybe. We know we didn’t evolve here, but we haven’t been told anything about our homeworld or about the ancient ruins. What can I think about it? Think one thing and you could be shot nowadays!” he said.

The elevator arrived and opened to the windy rooftop with the huge yellow and red carrier.

“Good luck.” He said to her. She turned around and didn’t look back. This was her life now. Things happen and you just need to move on. She walked towards the carrier and saw the captain and many other members of the crew. She knew they weren’t friendly, so she decided not to be friendly either.

She boarded, and woke up.

# Chapter Eight

## Towers Falling, Bloody Sea

SAIN

He was staring out at the sunken city on Second. He was confused for a few seconds, but he dismissed that as normal for the circumstances.

“Saiin!” he heard his younger sister yell from down the hall. He looked and she was running towards him.

“What is it?”

“I want to go diving!” she said.

“Do you now. Well you need permission first.” He said.

“I have permission. Let’s go!” she said. He remembered what day it was. It was one he wanted to forget. It was one he had forgotten. One memory that he suppressed for being so terrible. His mind wanted to say no, but he knew that wasn’t how it worked.

He went with her to the diving area. There were steps needed to take to dive as deep as they usually do. The pressure is so great you need to take time surfacing.

They got ready to go along with three guides. It was very common for people to go diving in the ruins of the city. The city was an island on top of another city. The buildings were build up and then above the water burying the city below. Some of the underwater sections were repaired and drained to be habitable as the city’s population was increasing all the time.

The water levels were constantly rising submerging more and more of the older parts of the city every year. It was because of the melting ice on both hemispheres. The meteorite impact erupted many volcanoes causing an initial mega rise in the sea level, but the atmosphere was heated above normal from then on, so every year the water rises a little more. The only habitable area on Second was a thin vein of an ocean with small islands sticking out. The shores were also habited where there was actual land and not glaciers.

They dove in the water through a small pool of water in the room. They descended slowly, all the while observing the marvelous city of Serpent’s Eye Island. The landmass was only ten meters under water at the time. He also saw the large ring like structures filled with air to help keep the city afloat. He saw skyscrapers that were rebuilt so tall they were still on the surface. They had large metal plates attached to the tops with land poured on it to imitate soil where their food was grown and where people could go to relax.

Saiin got his relaxation diving. It took a while to get down and back up but while down there, he could spend hours. His sister had only gone three times this being her fourth. They saw many different fish and large sea creatures in the distance that rarely if ever bothered to come too close to the city.

They were halfway down now. He looked back to the city and marvelled at the many lights that gave it the feel of a starship. Like at any minute it could lift off to space.

“How much longer!” his sister complained.

“Still quite a while. Just look at the place. It’s amazing!” one of the guides said.

The city had very powerful flood lights aimed at the underwater ruins to allow them to be seen from inside. In his room under water it doubled as moonlight at night. Second had no moon.

“Alright we can go all the way down now our bodies should be fine.”

They swam down deep and stood on the roof of a ruined skyscraper that didn’t even come close to scraping the surface of the water. It was only ten stories tall. He could see street signs and abandoned vehicles. He saw shops lining the streets all abandoned. Luckily most of the citizens were evacuated safely.

“It’s incredible.” He said. He took a picture of the city towering above him. They always visit a different area. It was all mostly the same, but some scenery changes.

“Look there!” he said. His sister looked where he was pointing.

“Oh wow! That’s huge!” it was a large sea creature the size of a building far off in the distance.

“I’ve never seen one of those before.” The guide admitted. “Usually they hang around the western side of the sea. I guess climate change screws with all of us.”

“At least it’s not our fault like on Fifth. I hear they’re planning on increasing the temperature by another degree to turn the equators into tropical jungles and offer more habitable land near the poles.” said another guide.

“That’s terrible. Seventh has a low population, people should just move there!” the third guide said. Saiin was paying attention to the island. He saw a boulder fall from the tower.

“Hey there’s a boulder at the green tower.” He said. They called the towers that because that’s pretty much what they were.

“Oh that’s a big one. Oh no.” said one of the guides.

“Tower number twenty seven, you have a falling boulder, fairly large looks like it can cause some damage.” But before he finished, the rock slammed into the building’s side stripping the walls for several floors. No one was living that far down, but that wasn’t the problem. The rock flooded the tower, and the tower started falling. On them.

“Get away! Swim fast!” the guides yelled. Saiin took his sister’s hand and started swimming as fast as he could.

“What’s happening! I’m scared!” she said.

He kept looking back, and he could see small pods blasting out of the walls, where people were evacuating. The top part of the tower wasn’t buoyant enough to stay afloat all on its own, so it too started sinking, sending debris and rocks falling all around them. They were swimming as fast as they could, but it was no use. He heard one of the guides screaming as his faceplate was hit with a big rock then the mask collapsed in on itself sending glass into his face killing him. He blocked his sister’s eyes so she wouldn’t have to see that or what was to come. The tower collapsed, and many people didn’t make it out in time.

There was no use swimming any more so they swam down to street level and hid inside one of the smaller buildings hoping the towers would block the monstrous platform from crushing them to death. He held his sister tight, and looked out the window at the many bodies falling. Boulders hit buildings and they collapsed into dust piles. The large round disk of the platform was covered in debris, and it hit the tops of the buildings where he thought it would, but the buildings didn’t stop it. The buildings fell down and they were being buried alive. He covered his

sister to protect her, and he felt the roof fall on him.

He knew he made it out alive in his mind, but the event seemed too real to him. He was actually afraid in his mind. After what seemed like forever, he woke up from a state of semi-consciousness. He was still alive. His breathing gear was working fine. The water around him was filled with dust and he couldn't see a thing. He looked down and his sister was still there. She wasn't moving. He panicked and checked her pulse. She was alive. Probably unconscious. He checked her air. The mix was fine. She was just hit on the head too hard.

"Is anyone else okay?" he asked. "Anyone?" he asked again. No one answered. The dust settled, and he saw that no one else survived. There was a rubble pile with an arm sticking out of it and a rod sticking through the chest of the other guide. The water had a red look to it. He dug out his sister, and carried her out. She was only six. He didn't want her seeing this. He himself was only thirteen.

But outside was no better. The sea floor had been devastated. Buildings were crumbled to nothing, boulders made craters in the sand and old gravel streets, the disk made a new addition to the devastation of the past rising taller than the tower they were standing on earlier. But worse yet, there were bodies, hundreds of them everywhere. All drowned and sinking down or already there.

At that age he wanted to throw up, but knowing he was in scuba gear he couldn't. Or it would mean the death of him too. His sister was waking up now.

"S-Saiin? What happened?" she asked.

"Don't look." He said trying not to cry.

"What is this? Saiin!" He covered her eyes.

"Don't look. It's bad." He said.

"Why are there no other voices? Where are the others?" she sounded worried and scared. Of course she would, she's only six and this is a very brutal event.

"They're . . . dead." He said. He showed her the scene.

She screamed so loud he had to turn the volume down on his hearing system. "A-are all of them . . . dead?" she asked.

"Yes." He said trying to be calm about it.

"Saiin, I want to go home! I don't want to stay here anymore! Let's go now!" she said loudly.

"Alright but we need to do it just as slowly as we did coming down."

"No I want to go now!" she said swimming up.

"Come back! Swimming up too fast can kill you! Do you want to die like them?"

She stopped and started crying. He swam up to her and they started slowly rising and stopping. They did this for an hour until it was safe to surface. They entered one of the pools and took off their gear and took a pill that thinned their blood to prevent any "fizzing" as they would call it. Nitrogen in their blood expands and blocks blood, but thinning the blood and shrinking the nitrogen seems to help.

His six year old sister was crying in his arms. No kid that age should have to see this. He shouldn't have had to see that. But now he was older, nineteen years. His sister would be twelve. The last time he visited she had emotional troubles. The event permanently scarred her. And it would have done the same to him if he hadn't repressed the memory.

Then it got him thinking what she would think if she knew what happened to him. Was she still alive? It was very easy to commit suicide on Second. One second with your mask off under water simple. He didn't want to think of it. He did, and then he woke up.

He ran to the end of the room and vomited in the garbage. He hadn't even registered that he was in reality again.

# Chapter Nine

## Recovery

ERIC

He woke up last headed for the trash, vomited and then left the room.

“Saiin are you alright?” Arazis asked.

“Ara, give him time to adjust. None of us know what he went through.” Eric said. He was the second last to wake. They noticed he didn’t look okay. He was having a nightmare of some sort. I’m just glad everyone got out fine.

“So, how’d it go?” Isel asked.

“Well, it was fine for me. I mean I got to see Hiigara again, which was nice considering it’s been five years.”

“I was home too.” Arazis said.

“I was back in the library the night of the massacre.” Eric said. It seems that only Eric and Saiin had bad memories. Mark hadn’t yet woken up.

They all took a few minutes to get back to reality. Being trapped in their bodies unable to move isn’t very normal. A few minutes later Mark woke up taking a deep breath.

“What’d I miss?” he asked.

“A few minutes.” Eric said.

“Oh is that all? Well it was three weeks for me, same thing as always. The Island.” He got up and stretched as if he didn’t need to recover.

“Shouldn’t you sit down for a bit or something?”

“Nah I was in the middle of a really long nap at the beach after swimming for a whole day. I’m gonna go continue that.” He said.

“I’m gonna go check on Saiin.”

“How can he just get up and walk like that? I can barely move!” John said as Mark and Arazis left the room.

“I never know what he’s thinking.” Isel said.

“Well I sure do. I was back in pilot training with him. He’s done this before.” He said.

“Alright then, okay I’m confused about something are Arazis and Mark dating? They’ve been together this whole time and I just need to ask things like this.” Triikor said. Isel started laughing.

“No, but I think they want to.” She said.

“Oh. Well things might get interesting now that Saiin’s back.” She said.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s in love with her still.”

“Oh. Well I guess we can just wait and see what happens.” Jay said.

## MARK

“So don’t you care to know what they dreamed of?” she asked.

“Not really, Everyone’s memories are theirs to share if they want. I just did this because it’ll get them thinking. I already knew where I was going.”

“Oh. So what is it that I learned exactly?” she asked.

“That’s for you to decide. Saiin probably relived something he wishes he could forget. I can already guess at what Jay and Eric relived. And I’m really tired from a day of swimming.”

“I saw Saiin when I first met him as well as the rest of the crew of the *Amun*.”

“Every end is a new beginning.” I said.

“That’s what the captain said in his final words.” She said.

“And how true they are.”

“There’s Saiin.” She said. He was on a balcony in the hangar bay. We walked over to him but he continued to stare into the hangar.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Not really.” He said.

“Was it liftoff?” She asked.

“Not even close.” He said.

“Well we can’t help you if we don’t know what happened.” I said.

“The whole thing seems stupid now that I’ve seen so much more death anyway.” He said. “But at the time it was mentally traumatizing. And my sister. Oh Kadesh what happened to her now that she thinks I’m dead?” he said. His face lost colour and that’s hard to tell with his pale skin to begin with.

“You don’t talk about her much was she involved?” she asked.

“Yes. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not? You know me Saiin.” She said.

“Well I don’t know him.” He said.

“Hey if I’m the problem I’ll be glad to leave. I was gonna go sleep this headache off anyway.” I said leaving them. I got to my room and fell asleep. Not much else to tell for the rest of the day. And there’s still two months of nothing before we get anywhere.

## ARAZIS

Mark left them alone to talk. He didn’t look at her. His eyes were concentrated on the bright blue hangar below them. At the many fighters and corvettes that lined the walls.

“Saiin, please tell me *something*.” She said.

“I was back on Second.” He said.

There was a pause. “And?” she asked.

“I saw my sister. She was only six. Damn it I fear for her right now.” He said.

“Why, did something happen?” she asked.

“I haven’t told you this story yet. I forgot it myself. We went diving out in the old parts of the city. We were having fun.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,”

“Until one of the green towers dropped a boulder. It smashed the tower and it collapsed. We tried swimming away, but we got trapped. We were the only survivors. The worst is that I saw them all dead around me when I came too. I tried to block her from seeing them all but she did. At six years old a couple hundred floating corpses is enough to scar you for life. And there were all the bloody ones that made it worse. And worse yet we had to ascent slowly through it. But what I’m really frightened about now is how she’s holding up thinking I’m dead. She’s not stable.” He said.

“Oh. So there really isn’t much I can do to help then.”

“Not a thing.”

“The worst that’ll happen is they’ll drug her sleeper tube so that she’s not suicidal. Don’t worry Saiin. When we get to Hiigara you can return to the nebula on a transport.” She said. He didn’t look too convinced.

“If we even get there alive. The only assault I’ve seen against the Taiidan is against an unsuspecting research station. That’s far from a serious Taiidan fleet. Even Triikor says that everything we’ve been against is nothing compared to the imperial fleet.”

“Well, let’s just wait and find out. That’s really all we can do.” She said.

He wanted to be alone. At least she knew what was wrong.

She got to her room and decided to sleep too. It’s been a long day for everyone. Even if it only passed by in a matter of seconds. She collapsed on her bed and stared at the ceiling. After hearing of Saiin’s problems, she started to think about her own. Her brother was probably the heir to the governor’s seat now and her father was probably glad of it. But how did he feel about her? Did he miss her? How would he feel about hearing of her being killed? There was no way to know. And that was the biggest problem.

She stared at the ceiling and observed the patterns of the steel in the roof. She pictured all the faces of her dead friends. Captain Jeremiah, her friends on the *Amun*, the faceless pilots who have died in battle, even the people of the other two ships that she had never met. Thankfully she could now remove Saiin from that list, but there were still so many.

She got up and turned off the lights. She lay back down with her hair in her face.

She brushed it off, but noticed it had grown a lot. And the red dye was gone. It was now the natural orange it should be. She decided to keep it that way.

Her life changed so much, as had she herself. She wasn’t curious anymore. All she wanted now was to go home wherever that might be. She felt the same as all the Kushan did.

Then Jeremiah kept coming back to her mind. Was he insane or just wise, committing suicide to help the Kushan on their journey? If he had repaired in hyperspace and alerted the colonies she would be safely at home right now with her never-ending curiosity. Now she and the rest of the survivors knew the truth. But was it worth it? She couldn’t mourn them in front of Mark or any Kushan for that matter. They already lost more than she could imagine. And yet they moved on.

No, they didn’t move on. They united under a common goal. And now her people are added into that unity. *Was Saiin right to think we won’t make it? No. The unity is stronger than he thinks.*

## TRIIKOR

She and Eric left the bridge twenty minutes after Mark did.

“So you were on Hiigara?” he asked.

“Yeah. It was nice. It was actually just what I needed. I saw my family again and everything.”

“Must be nice. I was sent back to the time of the massacre. I watched my family and friends die and the library of Saju-ka lit on fire. I put it out but hundreds of works were lost or damaged.”

“Great now I feel bad for taking up all the good.” She said.

“It’s fine. I’ve dreamed of it and remembered it so many times before that it doesn’t faze me much.”

“Oh.”

“So what was it like? I’m very curious when it comes to Hiigara.” He said.

“Well, I woke up lying down in the greenest field of grass you can imagine. It was tall grass. I was staring up at the sky, the big blue sky. I got up and went to the river. I hadn’t seen that much water in years. I wanted to jump in. Then I headed back through the forest. There was a loud noise in the sky, so I looked up and saw the carrier through the treetops.”

“I can’t wait to see this for myself.” He said.

“It’s amazing. The clean open air with the heat of the sun on your skin followed by the cool breeze, there’s so many different things there it’s impossible to imagine them all. But finally being there again makes me want to be home even more. It’s definitely something worth fighting for, absolutely something worth dying for.”

## JOHN

“So where did you go in your dream captain?” Fiira asked.

“Oh so you care? Well I was at home with my family hearing of the *Mothership*’s completion. We all agreed to go to Hiigara. I was put on the crew and the rest of them were put on one of the Trays. It changed my life all right.”

“I see.” She said.

“I gotta try that stuff sometime.” Paul said.

“Maybe later. Anyway you’re all dismissed until further notice. The journey is gonna take forever.” He said.

“Aye captain.”

“Well, I’m off for a drink.” He said.

“I hear you to that!” Hariik said as they both left the bridge.

# Chapter Ten

## Opening Eyes

MARK

I slept for a while. When I woke up the lights were dimmed so I guess it was night. I went on a mission to find caffeine.

I went down a couple of levels where the carrier's crew lived. The pilots lived so close to the hangar for tactical advantages if we ever need to deploy immediately. Like if we get attacked with another group of Kadeshi which sounds completely ridiculous.

I passed by some people mostly older than me. I got used to feeling incredibly young. Hell I can't imagine how Isel feels. I found a bar and met with John and his friend. The two were wasted.

"Hey do any of you have a watch?" I asked taking a drink myself.

"Aren't you underage?" John asked.

"Well in this mess it hardly seems to matter. I was actually looking for some coffee. But I found this place first."

"Well coffee isn't ready until morning. Oh the time. Uh it's oh four hundred. Damn we'd better hit the sack soon." His friend said.

"Yeah Fiira's gonna have a shit fit tomorrow if I don't report to the bridge on time. I just dismissed the crew but I have to go back there at seven-o'clock every day to check in."

"Well we're off." His friend said picking him up off his chair.

"Oh and if you're interested there's a cool looking observation deck in the front two floors up. Kind of the same feel as the one on the *Mothership*. Dark and empty." John said. They both left and I did too. I didn't belong at a bar. I didn't even like most alcohol. Especially not this stuff made here in space out of Sajuuk knows what.

I travelled throughout the whole ship. Generally it all looked the same. Then I stumbled upon a huge round open room with many large round benches. It looked like an amphitheater. My guess is that it was just a kind of hangout spot. I walked down the stairs that felt like they were made of stone. It was probably just gravel paint over steel. The bottom of the area was a window that you could stand on and feel like you were floating in space. It was cool to see. I watched some dust clouds and small nebulas fly by in the blink of an eye.

I looked around. I guess it was something different from the usual boring rectangular corridors and the blue light of the hangar bay. There wasn't anything like it on the *Mothership*. Then again this ship doesn't have a produce level where you feel like you're actually outdoors.

"Is that you?" I heard a voice call out. I looked and there was someone standing way at the top of the stairs.

"Depends on who's asking."

She walked down to meet me. She got closer and I recognized her. It was the Taiidan.

"Oh. It's you." I said.

“Isn’t this something else? I mean it cuts right through the other levels.” I looked up and saw there were balconies lined on the walls. “It’s kind of hard to miss.”

“And I guess anyone eavesdropping could hear us crystal clear.”

“Yeah but it’s four in the morning. I doubt anyone’s listening.”

“Hey you never know. I’m famous apparently. I feel like I’m being watched a lot on the *Mothership* and the feeling hasn’t stopped here.”

“We’ve never talked at all.” She said. Maybe it’s because you’re a Taiidan and I don’t care to. Be nice Mark.

“Eric talks about me I’m guessing?”

“Yeah. There’s a lot to listen to with you. I mean crossing a desert alone at twelve? Sounds crazy. And leading this whole fleet to its fullest potential. Impressive.

“Yeah it’s mostly luck I guess.”

“Luck or fate? Maybe a little bit of both.”

“So what brings you here?” I asked.

“Time alone. Don’t get me wrong I love Eric but I like to think by myself sometimes.”

“Same here. It’s easy to find time alone on the *Mothership* because it’s so big. I hope it won’t be a problem here. Isel wakes up early but she’s learned to leave me to my thoughts.”

“The mind of a hero. Doesn’t it hurt to keep all your thoughts to yourself all the time?”

“I haven’t really done any more on the battlefield than Eric. And yeah I’ve had a constant headache for a long time. But most of the stuff floating around in my head isn’t for anyone to know but me. No one knows me good enough for me to share all this stuff. Jay’s my best friend so he already knows what I’m thinking.”

“Get a girlfriend then. Arazis seems to be a good match.” She said.

“You’re joking I hope.”

“I’m not the only one who thinks it. Hell I don’t know you at all. Your friends know you like her.”

“I don’t need any relationship pointers from you.” I said. She rolled her eyes.

“Well in any case, there’s a long road ahead for you.”

“Oh yeah you know some military stuff. Any tips?” I asked. Wouldn’t it be great if she could tell me all the strategies of the Taiidan military? Yeah I don’t think that’s going to happen.

“Sorry but everyone’s good in their own way. Personally I like to avoid getting hit. Not much else to say. Every battle is different I guess.”

“Oh well I guess it just means more fun.”

“No questions about Hiigara? Not a single interest in some of the major fleets on your trajectory?”

“Not really. I’ve already seen Hiigara in my dreams, and any fleet we come across we’ll crush into dust. If you really feel like talking to someone about your imperial secrets I’m not the right guy for that. I’m just the leader of their spirits and only have authority in their minds. Legally I’m just a normal rank eight fighter pilot.”

“But the people see you as more than that. That’s what matters.”

“I wish they didn’t need a leader. But I’m stuck with the job I suppose.” I said.

There was a short pause. I went and sat down on one of the benches.

“Listen there’s no reason you need to hate me if that’s still on your mind. I’ve killed my own

to get here and I won't be scared to do it again."

"You want to know the truth? I'm a hypocrite. I tried so hard to get our kind to accept the Kadeshi as one of us only to turn around on Eric, someone who's been through just as much shit as I have and I insult him before I could get an explanation about you. He deserved better. You both did. I'm just a man with a burning revenge."

"He's already forgiven you. As for me, I couldn't care less as long as I get home alive." She then walked away. And then I was alone. I had a lot of time to think at least.

## SAIIN

He had not slept that night. He stared out into the hangar all night, even after the lights dimmed out. He worried for many reasons. His home, his family, his own life even came into the mix, and the feeling of loss. He could call all his friends on the *Amun* his family.

And with them all gone, it was hard to put names to all their faces.

Then he heard someone approaching. "So you couldn't sleep either then." He said. It was Mark.

"I can't. There's too much to think now that I had the dream. That cursed dream. But it wasn't a dream. And that is what worries me. I forced myself to forget that event. It took a long time to do. And now it's back."

"What memory?"

"It's a long story involving me and my six year old sister diving under the submerged city, then a few hundred dead bodies float down because of an accident with one of the towers. Her mind never recovered. And now she thinks I'm dead, and I fear the same for her."

"Suicide?" he asked.

"I remember when she was just three or four. She was so cute and innocent. She always asked me what was beyond the walls of the city and on the ocean floor. Now she knows, not everyone was evacuated. And then seeing that whole mess happen before her eyes in such a confined space, I couldn't imagine ever recovering from that. I've seen so much now that I'm used to it. We're not on the colonies. Weapons are forbidden and usually everyone is at peace with one another."

"I have a sister. She always worried for me. Then I left home and found a better life in the north. She never forgave me to this day."

"It's funny I always pictured you as the one who's always cheerful and happy. Why the sudden depressed look?" he asked.

"Well, I had a long chat with Trix just an hour ago followed by a lot of time to think. And believe me I have a lot to be depressed about. So every now and then when I'm alone, I let it take over for a short time. Then I don't feel depressed for a while. It also helps ease the headache."

"Take these." He said handing Mark a pill bottle. "I kept a few from when I was being detained. They help the head."

"Thanks." He said taking two.

"Do you love her?" he asked not even reconsidering it. Mark looked at him puzzled.

"Ara? Why?"

“Because I won’t get in the way if you do. I’m not the dating type.” He said.

“What is it with you all thinking I love Ara? You say it, Trix says it, and she also says everyone thinks it.”

“It’s just very obvious in the way you two look at each other. In the meeting you two were looking at each other the whole time. And she only looked at me a few times, and she thought I was dead. She looked happy to see me I’ll give her that much.” He said.

“Well, the truth is, I do feel something for her. As to if it’s love, that’s totally beyond me. I was in love once, it’s not the same as back then.”

“Well, you have a lot of time to think about it. Just tell her before we all die or I will. I’m sorry but this fleet isn’t enough to take down a galactic empire and there’s nothing that’s going to change my mind on that.”

“We can try our hardest. That’s all I can ask of anyone, because it’s what I’m willing to give. Here’s a little hint to battling your hardest, go into battle expecting to die. Because if you think you’re already doomed, there’s no emotions left to hold you back from focusing with your whole being on the single goal to kill over and over again until there isn’t anything left to kill.”

“I suppose you used those tactics in the Garden?” he asked.

“Yes I did. Ara knows it, but I’ve already made up for that for what I’ve done for your people. It’s just one of those unfortunate events in times of war.”

“I wouldn’t blame you anyway. And I have no right to mourn their losses. You’ve lost far more than I ever will.”

“And that, Saiin, Is why I’m depressed tonight.”

# Chapter Eleven

## Oh, Sleeper

MARK

Three weeks went by after that night until anything remotely interesting happened. I mean sure there was exploring the ship and getting to know the crew and John's friends more, Paul seems like a decent guy to hang out with, but in the end, the whole time, there was not much to do, so uninteresting and quite frankly boring.

Today, still a month or so away from the next exit from hyperspace I stand alone in the front observation deck. The hangar is a few floors directly below where I am, and I could hear a prominent humming from my feet. And from the outside I could see a feint blue glow. It wasn't very powerful, but it still distracted me from the otherwise complete darkness compared to the *Mothership's* observation decks. I did, however, turn the lights off in the room to reduce strain on my eyes and allow for the true colours of the galaxy to shine brighter than imaginable.

The galaxy grew brighter and brighter in front of us each time we jump. Now, I can't even hold the galaxy in the palm of my hand. In fact, it stretches past the walls of the viewport, which was the length of the room, about twenty meters.

The colours of the sky were painted in yellow and faded to dark violet and blue near the edges of the galaxy. So much different from the dark starry skies of a Kharak night, and the sight could only be compared to that of the Great Nebula Kadesh herself. There was no way possible to describe either of them. Any description would not be worthy of the sight they both behold.

I spend hours here daily. It's not even one of the lesser used ones like the one from the *Mothership*. It's fairly popular when I'm not around. My guess is that people have respect for my privacy. It kind of makes you feel like a celebrity or something. Regardless of the reason, it's nice to have time. Nothing but time. It's how I describe my life in hyperspace.

It takes months to travel the distance between the two spiral arms, though in real space it would take hundreds of years. So really, this is no time at all compared to what our ancestors went through.

I admired the sight for a few more minutes before I heard the door open and close. I looked and saw Arazis. She's been avoiding me a lot lately. Usually we stand and admire the sky together. It all started three days after the jump from the ghost ship and when her people were made part of the fleet. We were in an observation area in the rear of the *Mothership* staring back at Kadesh. But lately this jump she wasn't the same towards me.

I turned back to the sky.

"All our friends want us to be in love." I said as straight forward as possible. I needed to say it eventually, so I decided just to get it over with.

ARAZIS

She had not expected that. She stood beside him leaning on the railing. Of course she knew it as much as he did. It was part of the reason she was avoiding him. "I know. But I can't right now." She said.

"I understand. I feel the same way. We have a job to do first." He said.

"Maybe when all this is over." She said.

"Well at least Saiin hasn't rubbed off on you. He's very pessimistic about the whole matter." He said.

"Usually he's like that. But not depressing to be around. Usually he's the funny one. He's always been pessimistic but he's never let it get to him like this." She said.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Mark said, "You don't need to avoid me anymore."

"I hope not. It's been impossible to avoid you all the time." She was glad that was now out of the way.

There was another long pause. This time the silence was broken by a couple of kids about the age of twelve poking their heads in talking to each other. They weren't doing much to try and stay quiet either. They were arguing whether or not she and Mark were going to kiss. She didn't know that this rumor spread to everyone around the ship. In all fairness, it wasn't really a rumor.

"Will you two get lost I'm trying to admire the beauty of the cosmos!" Mark said.

"More like hers!" one of them said closing the door.

He sighed and went back to the galaxy.

"Talk to your uncle lately?" she asked trying to start some small talk.

"Actually, yes as a matter of fact, but it wasn't a good conversation. He was diagnosed with a severe skin cancer. He said it was the radiation from the supernova. The doctors were baffled because he was the only one out of all the Porter crews that got it."

"What's cancer?" she asked embarrassed. She started reading up on many things Kushan, but this one she hadn't come across.

"It's a deadly illness. Has something to do with cells mutating and reproducing exponentially. I'm not a scientist so I can't tell you the exact details, but the doctors told him he has four months left to live."

"But that means . . ."

"He won't even get to see Hiigara. Such a cruel fate."

"I'm sorry I asked." She said.

"He didn't expect to live to see Hiigara to begin with. He's kind of pessimistic about this crusade too."

"Can he still pilot?"

"For now he can. But sooner or later he'll be in pretty rough shape. Jay and Brad are transferring to the *Mothership* after we drop out with him. They still don't know yet. So far, the doctors, John, me, and you are the only people who know. So keep it a secret. I can't imagine what it would be like if everyone felt pity for him. He would really hate that." He said.

"I feel bad for you. Now you have no more family. Not counting the farmers."

"I know. All my uncle can say about it is that at least he lived longer than Markus. They never got along. Hell they never remotely liked each other. I would say I hope he dies in battle like a warrior should, but that means I'd be losing two of my friends too and that's not something I

want. Cancer, no matter what kind, is always one of the worst diseases. Because you can't do anything about it but watch as they slowly rot away."

"There's information on many diseases in the medical archives of Third. I might have stumbled across it at one point. But the truth is we have no treatments or doctors in the colonies. Our sleeper tubes regenerate us completely. So any mutated cells would have been killed and replaced overnight. It's a great investment. I think you Kushans should look into it."

"Sounds like a good idea."

## ERIC

During the last few weeks he had begun some light reading on a portable electronic library he purchased from his pay from his latest job as a delivery person. He delivered whatever it may be, from letters to food orders. He enjoyed reading. He lived in a library in his youth so it was fairly obvious he would.

Triikor found it odd that he only read history books or non-fiction books. She said he should read less boring things like story books. His response to that was that he liked to know things. Fiction to him was mostly a fun pastime. His real passion was the information. The collective knowledge of thousands of years had been collecting in his mind since his childhood. Some would say he was addicted to it.

"That doesn't make sense though." She would say, "Wasn't that Khar-Halla book fiction to you before all of this?"

"Yes, but it was the only one of many that I've wanted to keep for the sheer incredibility of its content. It's so real. And now I know it is. Now the green and blue paradise of our expulsion is just beyond the horizon. I've tried hundreds of times to picture it in my mind, and apparently Mark dreams of it all the time. I wish that was me."

"Hello! I've lived there Eric. Sheesh you're so lost in thought sometimes that you make no sense." She said. He lifted his head from the device.

"Oh yeah. Sorry about that." He said. "But don't you want to know things about the past? For instance, has it ever occurred to you why the Kushan and the Taiidan are essentially the same though from different planets? You said yourself you didn't come from Hiigara and we're aware of this. So why are we the same? And the Turanics look like some freak evolution of us, probably modified for their liquid environment."

"Well, it is something to think about. I don't bother trying to figure stuff that complicated out. There's no way to know the reasons for things like that."

"I guess you're right. No one can know everything I suppose. I guess I'll have a lot of fun in the Taiidan archives."

"Have you seen Saiin lately?" she asked. "I haven't even run into him in the halls."

"He told me he moved to one of the lower decks for time alone to think. I haven't seen him in two weeks either. Arazis is keeping in touch with him still but I'm starting to worry for him." He said.

It was true that Saiin was trying to distance himself from people as much as possible. But it wouldn't draw attention away from him as he would like.

## SAIIN

He sat alone in his dark lonely room, with a rope. He started tying a knot in it and put it around his neck. *Damn it what am I doing? This is the opposite of what I want.* He thought taking off the rope. He wanted to live, but he couldn't take the wait. He was too tired, too lonely and too bored. He wasn't happy and cheery as he had once been on the *Amun* with his friends who had become his family.

He saw some familiar faces and they always tried to have a conversation, but nothing ever lasted. His fellow Kadeshi would go about their business trying to stay as busy as possible.

They too truly believed that the Kushan could get their home back from the great evil. Saiin wasn't optimistic in this regard, and he doubted anything would change his mind until he saw some real fighting, some real large scale battles against the enemy. Then he could see for himself if these people are truly as strong and united as they claim.

After hours of lying in his bed staring at the roof, unable to sleep or stay awake, he decided it was the best option.

He got up, wrote a note, left his room and walked to the rear sections of the ship, past the resourcing levels. He found where he needed to be.

"Is this cryo-deck?" he asked.

"It sure is son, why do you ask?" a man said.

"Is there any room for one more bored soul?" he asked.

"There sure is. It costs usually about three hundred credits a month, but I'll let you in for free seeing as you're a Kadeshi and all. I didn't agree with what we did either but it was just self-defense. All is fair in war right?" he said. He showed him to a bed that was hooked up with many sensors.

He didn't like having these people feel bad for him. They lost more. It didn't feel right. But since he didn't have any money, he was thanking his generosity anyway.

"Take off your shirt and pants and get inside. I'll give you something that'll preserve your cell structure so that we don't have anything going wrong when you wake up."

"Alright." He did as he was told and then he was injected with a blue fluid that made him queasy. He then saw the man attach some sensors to his body, and then close the top of the bed. And just like that, within five minutes, he had become a sleeper. It was better than the thoughts of suicide that sometimes ran through his mind. His last thought was of the first day he met Ara. Then he was asleep, in the longest sleep any Kadeshi he had known had ever been in.

## ARAZIS

Walking along the halls of the lower decks, she came upon his door. She wanted to check up on him. She did this every few days to make sure he was doing fine.

She pressed the button and the door slid open, but the room was empty. She was about to turn and leave when she saw a note on the desk.

She walked over to it, and recognized it as Saiin's handwriting. She had only seen it four times ever in her life, as most Kadeshi living in ships don't have any use for paper. It is all electronic. This was a normal piece of paper with a short message on it.

*I'm sorry I couldn't tell you in person, but my mind isn't what it used to be. I fear if I don't do something about it, I could endanger myself. Therefore, I have left to be put to sleep on the cryo-deck. I will be back when we exit hyperspace. I can't handle the boredom anymore. I'll make sure to try and cheer up afterwards.*

-

*Saiin*

She put the note down on the table and sat in his chair. She didn't know what to make of it. Was she glad he was somewhere safe? Or was she going to miss him during the next month?

She decided it was only a month and she could see him back to normal when he woke up again.

She then saw part of a rope under his bed. She pulled it out, and it was the type of thing people used for suicide. She dropped it and quickly stood up in surprise. "Oh Saiin."

# Chapter Twelve

## Gathering in the Forum

MARK

“Well, it’s for the better I guess.” I said. It was me, Arazis and Jay alone sitting at the edge of the hangar staring out the three nanometer force field protecting us from the harsh unknown of hyperspace where the laws of physics as we know them don’t exist. She had just told us about Saiin.

“He’ll be alive at least.” Jay added.

“I still wish I could’ve helped.”

“Well, where we come from, that’s something no one can really help. Only the individuals can decide whether their depression is enough to drive them into the grave like cowards.” I said.

“It’s not uncommon anymore. Just look at the *Mothership* for example, six accounts of suicide in these past three weeks. The best we *can* do is find them early and freeze them before they do anything rash.” He said.

She yawned and laid down on the metal.

“Didn’t get enough sleep?” I said.

“I didn’t sleep at all actually. I really miss sleeper tubes. You don’t have your brain keeping you up by thinking too much. It’s just instant rest.”

Well, in any case it was better than before. I’ve noticed it a lot in her people, the insomnia they all suffer. I’m the same. I see them a lot. I see more of them than Kushan. They wander the halls quietly meeting up and talking. Over the past weeks, it’s another thing I noticed. There are a lot more Kadeshi here than I thought.

In this hangar I saw ten Swarmers on the deck to my left and some construction on the walls. All Kushan fighters are in the racks on the walls to save space. So these really stand out.

Later that day I talked to John about it. “There’s a total Kadeshi crew of ninety three including Ara and Saiin.” He said spinning around in a chair in the communications room. “That’s a lot considering this ship’s crew is only two hundred and fifty.”

“Yeah that is a lot. More than a third!”

“Most of them boarded as the original crew. I don’t mind it.”

“Hey they don’t complain as much as the awakened sleepers that I’ve met.” I said.

“No kidding. I’m the captain so I have to listen to them in engineering every damn day about how hot and damp it is and how bad it smells and everything you can think of that doesn’t matter. Don’t they realize we’re faced with extinction? Sheesh.”

“Might as well just ask over some more Kadeshi and order the sleepers back to the *Mothership*.” I said jokingly.

“Twenty or so of the sleepers already told me they were going. Good riddance to them.” He said. “So do you have anyone to call? This place is always open.”

“Everyone I know in the fleet is here already so I don’t think so.”

“Really? What about your family?” he said.

“John, they’re used to me not being around. They’ll manage.” I said.

## ERIC

“Really? Wow I didn’t know he was feeling that bad.” Triikor said. Mark had brought them the news on Saiin.

“That Kadeshi has some serious problems right now. The problem is he doesn’t talk to anyone about them, so none of us really know what they are!” Eric said. “Well, at least he’s still alive. That’s what matters right now I guess. How’s Arazis taking this?” he asked.

“Rather well surprisingly. She couldn’t sleep last night, but that’s not that bad. She’ll be fine. I just thought I’d tell you guys.”

“Thanks. I’ve been wondering about him.” Eric said.

Mark left soon afterwards. He only stayed for a short time to deliver the news.

“Poor Saiin.” Triikor said.

“He’s not the only one. Not by a long shot. More and more people are being frozen each day. Soon there won’t be enough room to freeze or enough people left to fight.” He said.

“I doubt it’ll get that bad stop worrying.” She said.

“It could happen.” He insisted.

“I doubt it.”

“Maybe I’m just overthinking again. Can’t blame a guy for being a little paranoid.”

## MARK

Again, it’s late at night and I’m wandering the halls. I found John and his friend at the bar an hour ago, but of course I don’t really enjoy the taste of alcohol anyway so I left before they did.

I sat on the rail of the observation deck for an hour then started walking again, anything to keep my mind busy. Every now and then I would see one of them staring at me and passing by. I saved these people from a miserable death by insomnia and imprisonment. I didn’t feel threatened by them, quite the opposite. None of them talked to me though. I waved and they would nod, but that’s it.

On the rare occasion I’d see a sleeper wandering around shivering as if it was snowing in the mountains. They really are strange. First they complain it’s too hot in engineering then they are too cold in the halls. This isn’t Kharak for Sajuuk’s sake.

I got to the open room that I found a while back. There was some sort of large gathering going on. The sight was breathtaking. The candles were lit and it was aglow a warm orange. At least seventy people were sitting down there. I was on a balcony listening in curiously.

“These people hate us! These newcomers. They compare us to the Evil Ones and I’m sick of it!” one person from the crowd said. It was loud even up here but I guessed that was just the effects of the acoustics. It was nowhere near yelling. It was also very late and people were trying to sleep so I guess they couldn’t.

“I know I’ve felt the same vibe.” Another said.

“Maybe we should go back to their *Mothership*. Or we can get a frigate built that we can be put on to get away from them.” A third said.

There seemed to be no leading speaker. It was more of a group of people talking amongst themselves. I knew they were all Kadeshi at this point.

“We can’t just leave. They did all they could for us. We owe them our lives.”

“No we don’t. We owe them nothing. They destroyed our brothers and sisters. The Colonies believe we are all dead.”

“But *we* know that not to be true. We are alive. Sure they may have killed over two thousands of us in the Garden, but they are fighting an enemy that has killed hundreds of millions of them, their entire planet. There’s nothing we can compare it to. I’ve heard stories of their enemy burning their planet to glass. They are evil and any Kadeshi who follows the teachings of the church would gladly join them to rid the galaxy this evil.” Another said.

The arguments continued, but I decided to get closer.

I got to ground level, and they were still arguing over whether or not to leave the ship.

I casually walked in and sat down on a seat. No one noticed until a few minutes later. Someone somewhere pointed me out and in a matter of seconds they were all looking at me. The room became silent.

“Oh by all means continue. I’m very interested. Oh and some advice, a lot of the sleepers are leaving the ship once we exit hyperspace. So there’s no need to go anywhere.” I said. Some of them were still a little confused as to why I was there, but they didn’t seem to mind me crashing the party.

“So then how does the rest of the crew feel about us?” someone asked.

“The whole crew, I couldn’t tell you. All I know is the captain’s a friend of mine and he’s pretty fond of you. You do your work with no complaints and it’s always done right. The sleepers on the other hand, well we want them gone too.” I said. This brought a bit of relief to the crowd.

“What brings you here, Mark, our saviour?”

“Please I’m just Mark. I don’t sleep well either. So what to talk about . . . oh yeah these “Evil Ones” we call the Taiidan, not all of them are bad by the way. At least one of them I know. I didn’t like the thought of her walking around freely at first, but now we’re friends. Saiin was friends with her long before that. He’s a Kadeshi.” I said. Many people whispered to each other.

“I knew Saiin, from the *Amun* right?” a girl asked.

“Yeah that’s him. He’s been frozen for now. He’s not feeling too cheery lately. Who am I kidding he’s completely depressed.”

“I hope what you’re saying isn’t that the Evil Ones are anything like us.”

“Some of them, yes. I can say they are. They have homes and families. The ones we’ve encountered are servants of the emperor. They’re mercenaries who live to kill and slaughter. Over the years, anyone who was not fitting in was considered a rebel and burned alive in the hangar bay. So I’ve been told.” I said.

They continued their talking. I listened, quite interested. As it seems they really are struggling without their sleeper tubes. They’ve sometimes forgotten to keep up with their hygiene and others gave suggestions. And they don’t mind doing the work we give them either. It was better than engineering on the *Mothership* with those dangerously unstable engines that haven’t even

been finished yet.

It must have been a half hour now. They started singing songs together. Some I even recognized. It seems they were as old as the ancestors. The crowds dissipated quite a bit. Some were falling asleep in their seats and others got up to help them to their quarters. I then felt a head on my shoulder. I turned and saw Arazis.

“Hey. I didn’t know you came to these.” She said.

“I don’t. I kind of found it by accident. What is this anyway?”

“It’s something we used to do on the *Amun*. We would all gather around a large area similar to this and talk for a long time on every fifth day of the week. It’s gotten a lot more personal now that we’re here. We’re closer together now. There’s more to talk about. No one knows about it yet. I hope you don’t mind keeping it a secret.”

“Not at all. I think it’s good. What’s it called?” I asked.

“There really isn’t a name for it. Some call it a forum others just call it a gathering. Some days we talk about problems we’re having, other times we’re telling old Kadeshi tales and myths. We’re very superstitious as you might have noticed. Sometimes, mostly near the end, we break out into song. Not loudly, just casually chanting along.” She said. One song I recognized over the others. The one that started playing I remember from when I was four or five, very young.

“The nostalgia of this one is both astounding and creepy.” I commented.

“It’s a really old one. A sort of song for the children, but the lyrics is . . . by no means peaceful.”

“Yeah. I found that out a while ago.” I said. It talked about the loss of paradise and a love torn apart with something about a lonely child cast out to sea by the one who made us all. Quite the tale actually.

The room was down to ten people including us. One of them came and sat next to Arazis.

“So this is him.” She said. “You’re so lucky.”

“He’s really quite normal when you get to know him.”

“Just a regular guy thrown into this hell without a choice.” I said.

“Everyone has a choice. I could’ve kamikaze’d into one of your ships if I chose to. But I didn’t.” she said.

“I didn’t get a choice because my father is an international war hero. And I wasn’t even supposed to be here. I was just testing out the fighters then I was to get back to Kharak. Now, all I’ve got left is this necklace and a picture I took on the transport.”

“Can I see?” she asked.

“Yeah sure I keep a copy on me at all times.” I gave her the picture I had folded into four.

“Oh wow it’s beautiful. The impression I got from others it was a scorching hellhole. No offence.”

“It’s quite nice when there are no dust storms.”

“No kidding.” She said giving me back the picture.

“Oh I almost forgot, Mark, this is Natel. I call her Nat.”

“Nice to meet you. I was beginning to think she was a loner or something.”

“Yeah because I’m always in my room right?” Arazis said laughing.

“I heard someone say they knew Saiin a while ago.”

“That was Dannik. She’s only ten. Saiin spent some afternoons reading to the kids. She was on one of the fuel pods with her parents.” Natel said.

“Whole families. Some of us still think you’re all ultra-religious zealots.”

“Well not all of us are. I think leaving the Garden made us second guess our religion others still believe the Evil Ones will bring destruction to the Colonies for this crusade. Maybe if we win an actual battle they’ll get the hint.” She said.

“What about the research station?”

“That was more of a hit and run. There was no challenge. I mean a full scale assault where the enemy is fighting back full force. With Kadeshi leading the assault. To take our first blow at the enemy. It’s something I hope to live to see.”

“All in due time, although your frigates *are* impressive weapons. They’ll be very useful in battle. John told me they were actually working on building updated Swarmers with the technology we have so that your pilots stand a chance in battle. After all Swarmers only work well in swarms.”

“That would be cool. They have all the designs from fuel pod databases I guess.” Arazis said.

“Only on this ship though. The *Mothership* didn’t approve of it there because it would mean giving up half a fighter bay. They’re using two columns on the left wall. That’s the construction we noticed earlier today. They’ll dock and launch very quickly.”

“So that means that more of us are coming here?” Natel asked.

“Most likely, yes. A lot more. Which means that a lot more of the sleepers will get fed up and leave and that’s a good thing in my opinion.”

“Which means the *Ifriit 3* will be a Kushan-Kadeshi ship, tolerant of each other’s religions or battle styles or even the funky hair you guys dye so oddly.” I heard someone say from behind me.

“Captain on deck everybody.” I said but he was a little drunk so he just laughed.

“And Mark, I’m making you the chief when you’re not out there fighting. If that’s alright with you.”

“Well inspecting and repairing ships isn’t exactly my specialty but I’m sure I can get some capable helpers.”

“Congratulations on your promotion then.” He said almost falling over.

“John, you’re drunk. Go sleep before Fiira finds you wandering.” I said.

“Yeah I know, I have a problem. Well when I’m less drunk tomorrow we’ll talk about that.

“Sure.” I said. He managed to leave the room, but just barely, so I got up and assisted him home. I said bye to Arazis and her friend on the way out.

I got him to his room on the bridge level, and as soon as he hit the bed he was out cold.

John, you really need help. But I guess it doesn’t matter until we’re in the midst of battle. “Good night you drunk.” I said pressing the button to close his door.

I turned around and was face to face with Fiira herself.

“Again?” she asked plainly.

“Yeah. He’s all yours.” I said yawning on my way out.

# Chapter Thirteen

## The Seven

MARK

The next day, John and I spoke more about this job position he wanted to put me in.

“Funny I don’t even remember telling you about it!” He said. “I must’ve been really wasted.” He said.

“As long as I don’t need to do too much I’m fine with it. I’ve got too much on my mind already.”

“I get that. No problem.” He said.

Later that day, I met up with Jay. “I don’t think the fleet’s doing too well.” He said.

“I’m not very worried. The next exit is still a long way away.” I said.

“I hope you’re right in hoping for the best.” He said. “Otherwise we could be screwed.”

“There’s nothing to worry about. Even if we’re not up for it, the Kadeshi can lead us into battle. I have confidence in their will to kill their “Evil Ones”. And then everyone will take the hint and keep up with them.”

“If it works.” He said.

He was right though. So far, the fleet is in stasis for the most part. The *Mothership* is being crewed by fewer than twenty thousand. It’s supposed to be at fifty thousand.

A few days went by. I was hanging out with Jay again, but this time we had Karu to talk to. Apparently he and Isel had their first fight in the relationship.

“So you’ve been kicked out?” Jay said.

“Yeah just for a week I think, something about time alone. Sheesh she’s very annoying lately.” He said.

“More than usual? Oh dear that does sound bad. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.” I said trying not to laugh. That would be mean.

“I’m not. Besides a man’s gotta have his own space sometimes too. She’s the one hanging out with me. I’ve tried to get away from her a lot of times.” He said.

“You two will be fine. Isel and I would have never worked out anyway. We’re in the same squadron for starters and the rest I don’t want to get into.” I said.

“And that’s different with Ara?” he said

“We’re not dating are we? We’re gonna hold off on that until Hiigara for a very specific reason.” I said.

“It’s still far from here. You should get ahead while you can. Once that Saiin guy’s out of the freezer she’ll be all over him with his emotional problems.” Jay said.

“And you’re an expert in relationships?” I said.

“Hey I’ve been in a few. I’m just enjoying not having any additional distractions.” He said.

“If that’s the way you’d like to put it it’s a very smart move.” Karu said.

“Let’s go get something to eat.” I said.

“I’ll come but I’m not having any of that fast crap. It’s almost disgusting enough to make me go vegetarian.” He said. “And this is coming from someone who enjoys his steak more than his videogames.”

## ARAZIS

She was in her bed staring at the ceiling. Her mind raced with thoughts of death and murder that she herself caused, and then jumped to thoughts of her undeniable love.

*Damn this! Why can't it wait!* She thought to herself. She was wandering in and out of thoughts and moving on to others. Some would call it insanity while other would simply call it giving one’s self a headache.

Then she heard someone yelling to herself in the halls about something. Her door opened and the yelling stopped. “Hey you. I’m hungry what about you?” Isel said. Arazis gave her a confused look and agreed to go along with her.

“Fine. But I don’t care what the whining is about I’ve got my own mental meltdown to think of.” She was not in the mood for any of Isel’s complaining. She was also having a bad day to begin with as her shower had no hot water.

She brushed her hair and left with her.

“So you’re not dying it? I see Kadeshi all the time buying dye. I work at the salon part-time.” She said referring to her hair.

“I like it this way better I think.”

“I like it too.”

They walked to the mess hall together. Arazis just got a simple salad with some bird meat she didn’t recognize. It tasted like nothing of the Colonies. Isel on the other hand, had a burger and fries with a cola. It made her gag.

“How can you possibly eat like this and not be excessively overweight?” she said trying not to look at it.

“Exercise. It’s all there is to do here aside from the arcade. I feel old there though. Everyone’s ten to twelve there. No one my age.”

“I still think it’s disgusting in every possible way.”

They sat down and ate. Isel suddenly got up and sat on the other side of the table glaring at the wall trying not to make angry noises.

She turned around and saw that Mark, Karu and Jay were farther down. Mark looked at her and laughed a little. She rolled her eyes.

Isel looked ready to kill something. The Kadeshi girl wondered if all Manaani are like this or if she was an exception.

“Get over it you’ll be back together in a week I can guarantee it.” She said.

“Shut up didn’t you say you didn’t want to talk about it?”

“Your right. Keep your problems.”

“Oh you’re a nice friend.” She said.

“I sure am.”

They finished waiting and Isel immediately stormed off without her. She went back to her room and slept in. Her head was hurting too much and the fluorescent lights weren’t helping much. Her lunch also didn’t stay down.

A week went by. She was in the hangar with Mark and Jay. This time Bradley was there too. The last two were fixing components on their corvette then came and joined Mark and her.

The construction of the Swarmer docks had been completed. Now the ten Swarmers that were on the ground were docked in the racks.

And sure enough, Isel and Karu made up and were together again, just as predicted by all of them.

“John says they’re starting research on the Swarmer tech in the research division. The scientists in charge are very happy to do so. They find it interesting.” Mark said. “Personally though, I think I would find it too cramped in there. I need leg room.”

“Well I’m used to it. I think your interceptors are too spacious.”

“Everyone has their preferences. I find your interceptors too cramped!” Bradley said. “And I bet John would say the same about Corvettes.”

“I feel like I want to go touch it. But I think I’d probably fall out.” Jay said breaking the silence that fell. He was talking about the thin barrier protecting them from the vacuum.

“Well the air’s staying in somehow so I don’t know about that.” She said.

“Let’s just not think about that.” Mark suggested.

They stayed there for another hour, not really doing anything. There was not much to do to spend time on this carrier ship. On the *Mothership* there was some kind of large mall area and an entire level dedicated to food production to explore. There were also many levels that she hadn’t even been to them all before she left.

The carrier was different. She had been to every floor and walked through every hallway in the time that she had been aboard. There was nothing very interesting. Frigates had cryo tubes for everyone but the captain and a few officers, and even the Kadeshi ones had sleeper tubes, which worked the same way. On the carrier, there weren’t enough for everyone. So people got bored. Fast.

She wandered the halls on the higher decks as her mind wandered back to the first ship she was ever on, specifically a week after its first liftoff from the ramp at Fifth Central Spaceport.

Saiin had shown her his favourite spot on the whole ship. It was a resource collection room, a room of no gravity. A large one too. Large pieces of rocks were transported inside while minerals were extracted and transported to another room. The rest was returned to the Garden.

During the day between mining operations, Saiin showed her the room. They had to wear special magnetic boots or they would stay floating forever, but when she was floating there staring out the large opening at the back, she felt weightless and completely free.

It was also fun to chase Saiin on the walls or the ceiling. There was no sense of up or down unless looking for a door.

She remembered then that on that same mission, about a week later, the room broke somewhere and the asteroid inside smashed against the inside of the ship. They were stranded for days with power draining away.

Everyone was told to go into sleeper tubes as life support was cut off from the entire spire section of the ship, where the crew quarters are. In the tubes, they would be safe from the vacuum.

The ship was badly damaged, and was left without enough power for hyperspace or even basic sub-light travel. It took their beacon five days to reach Sixth, the closest of the colonies.

Just one of the many hard times the *Amun* had to endure. She had to stop thinking about that.

She got to the large speaking room after a while. It was now late at night and no one was awake. No one but the many Kadeshi gathered beneath her in the candle light.

She saw Mark, who was the odd one out compared to the pale skin of the Kadeshi. She could hear conversations from high up on the balcony, but she wanted to get closer anyway.

Joining Mark, she was walking in on a conversation ending, and then another one starting up about the Colonies themselves.

A speaker walked to the centre of the room and stood on the small circle of glass. "First, a world shrouded by nebulosity thicker than any in the Garden, its days long and hot, its nights equally as long and deathly cold, the sun red as a slowly burning ember, smaller than all other suns in the Garden save the beacon star." Someone said as she sat down beside him.

"Been wandering?" he asked.

"I'm getting bored of the same walls." She said.

The conversation started up again with another walking to the centre. She said, "Second, a world frozen by enough ice to flood all seven colonies, only a sliver is warm enough to breathe the air freely. The oceans underneath contain ruins of our own civilization long forgotten. A forgotten truth lies there, though no one knows what it is, because when any stone is moved, it crumbles to dust."

She offered to say her own words of Third. Walking to the centre, she stepped on the glass that showed the dark depths of space. She looked, and the sight amazed her. The room was enormous. All of it was centred on her. But these were her people. She was not at all nervous.

"Third, the smallest of the colonies, falling around a ball of gas bigger than all the colonies put together, is home to the largest gardens and the most vivid art of Kadesh. The skies inspire anyone on first sight. A small world in the vast protection of Kadesh, only accompanied by a companion bluer than any other blue found in the Garden's palette of reds and pinks." She said.

"Sound's nice." Mark said as she sat down.

"It really is."

"Fourth," another came to speak, "the companion to Third, truly is a world of blue. The skies are blue and the Garden is nearly unseen compared to others, the waters stretch across the horizon. The air is cold, but the oceans are warm. The large creatures of the sea forbid anyone to enter."

"Fifth, a world of land and sea, alone around a bright star blinds any who stare into its majesty. Its large areas of land are home to the widest variety of life. Fifth is home to the largest

collective of scientists, researchers, and accused heretics. It is a safe refuge for many.

“Sixth, a warm humid world of islands around an orange star is the destination of many on their retreats. There are not many who live there their whole lives, however most who set foot on the surface wish they could never leave.”

“Seventh . . .” an old man said. “Seventh is home to all taken captive by the Kadeshi. It is a cold desert planet around an ordinary yellow star. There is little water, and the water that is there is in the form of ices that are mined by the captives. The refugees choose to stay once arrived, as they are all alike. On the other colonies, outsiders are cast aside and are spat at sometimes. I have lived there a long while in my youth. The people there are happy to be together in their bubble cities. Life only continues there for the mining of minerals that cannot be gathered by asteroids in the farthest reaches of the Garden. It is the wealthiest colony, and the farthest from First, the capital of Kadesh. They are their own people, under guard by soldiers of Kadesh, though their beliefs will never be crushed.”

The old man finished and sat down. She had heard very little of Seventh, she simply knew it as the desert world only a colony for its riches. It made sense that the outsiders would be sent there, or choose to be there together.

“The Seven Colonies of Kadesh. Let them be remembered. Let them stay safe for eternity. Let us fight for that safety along with our brothers of this fleet. The great evil that drove us from paradise will be crushed, and Kadesh shall forever thrive in safety.” Someone else said. His words got many nods through the crowd.

“Together we will fight, together we will win.” Mark said.

When the forum disbanded, he told her this was his idea. He got someone to say his words to ensure that the Kadeshi would do all they could to aid the cause.

“Isn’t that cheating?” she said.

“Actually, I think it’s nice not to have the responsibility for once.” He said.

The days were getting shorter and shorter to her. She slept more often now that she was taking sleeping pills. She hadn’t before because she wanted to prove to herself that she was stronger than the rest. She wanted to show the Kushan or at least Mark that the Kadeshi were not all weak.

But he knew this now. And she could not stand the headaches anymore. She gave up on trying impressing no one about something that didn’t matter. And she was glad.

She walked over to Mark’s room, knocked, but no one answered. She opened the door and the room was empty. She walked in anyway. She sat on his bed and looked around.

This person she knew named Mark. Who was he? She loved him. But she wanted to know more about him.

She found some objects on a nightstand. There was a picture of him and his father. It was the first time she had seen this Markus person’s face.

She also found a picture of a woman. She guessed it was his mother by the resemblance. He told her he never met his mother, so she questioned why he would keep something like this around.

She found a watch. She knew that when he wanted to be alone and do nothing but think for a

long time, he removed all distractions including his method of keeping time.

She found his camera next. She turned it on and the memory was nearly full. She started at the beginning. It was a picture of sand dunes. She couldn't believe it. She was looking at the desert of Kharak. Many pictures later, she saw a block of dirt with an opening. Then there were photos of the inside. It was his home. There was everything you would expect to find in a house in this one open area.

Out of this, she found out that Mark had a normal life without all the media his father would have gotten in the city he described to her so many times. Lying down on his bed, she stared at more pictures. She saw other people she would never know. Then there was one of him kissing a girl she did not know. This was his girlfriend.

She put the camera down. She felt like she was invading his privacy too much. But she was too curious. She always has been, after all.

"It seemed like it was a party of some sort. Then, as if answering her question, it had a cake with *HAPPY BIRTHDAY MARK* written on it in blue letters.

She continued. It was now night, and there was a photo of the sky. It was dark. It was a darkness that she could not have imagined. But in the next one, it showed a moon. No, a structure. A large structure for sure, but a structure none the less. From the picture you wouldn't be able to tell, but she knew Kharak had no moons.

It was day again. It was a picture of what she imagined a sandstorm would look like coming in. The next one was showing a dusty sky with a silver structure in the background. After that, it was a city. It was Tiir. There were roads and towers all of metal and glass covered by a white dome. A giant replica of the Guidestone was the centerpiece.

There were many more pictures of this city, and then there was Markus again. She figured out that he was visiting his father while the sandstorm was blowing by.

She passed many pictures of his day to day life. Then she got to the picture of Kharak he had shown her. There were more pictures. There were pictures of him, John, Jay, Isel, Karu, their ships and many more. There were pictures of around the *Mothership*, some of the places she recognized immediately others she remembered vaguely.

There were pictures of a crowd gathering and cheering, perhaps of a successful mission.

She caught a glimpse of something on the ceiling of his room. She put the camera aside after turning it off. Laying back staring at Mark's ceiling, she was confused and amazed and a little bit scared for his sanity. On the ceiling was a painting. It looked like blue wings surrounding a blue and green ball, and there were details like darkness and yellow and orange veins.

It took a while, but she then came to the conclusion, that above her head was Mark's vision of Hiigara.

She thought she was forgetting something and it took her a while to realize what it was. The silent hum of the hyperspace module was gone. She looked out the small viewport, and the stars were not moving. She got up, and the door opened. Mark came running in at full speed.

"What are you doing here? Never mind go get ready." He said getting into his pilot suit.

"Why? What's going on? Did we exit hyperspace?" she asked worried.

"We picked up a distress beacon two minutes ago. We've stopped at the source. We're definitely going out for battle."

# Chapter Fourteen

## Tenhauser Gate

ERIC

He arrived in the hangar with Triikor as ships were launching off every wall. There was no time to waste. If they did not hurry, their only allies in this war would be killed.

“My ship’s on the main floor. I’ll see you outside.” She said as the elevator closed. Eric ran to his fighter, got in, waited for the green light, pressed the button and the clamps let go of his ship. The engines fired, and he was sent out the hangar. Eric was the first one out, followed by Triikor, and then they waited for Mark, Isel and Arazis.

“Sorry I’m late. I was not prepared for this.” The fearless squadron leader said.

“Don’t worry about it. None of us were.” Eric replied.

The fleet coalesced in their groups, the ion force getting ready around the destroyers and the heavy cruiser and moving forward, not wasting a minute.

The battle would be a swift one.

He could see the battle from where he was. The Bentusi Tradeship was under heavy fire. He saw a frigate-sized ship launch, but it didn’t last more than a few seconds against the assault force.

“The Bentusi must be protected. Draw the Taiidan fleet away and destroy them.” Intelligence said.

He was amazed by how fast the enemy drew instantly away from the Tradeship and headed towards the ion force.

“We’re useless again aren’t we . . .” Isel said.

“Yeah, I’d say so.” Mark said. The enemy fleet consisted only of capital ships. The twenty thunderbolt bombers launched from the *Mothership* to assist against the frigates, but any interceptors would be of no use in this battle.

Instead, he watched as the Kadeshi multi-beam frigates swung into a sphere formation around the enemy fleet, and started firing their four ion beams each into the enemy ships performing acrobatic barrel rolls in the process to cause maximum damage.

“What the . . .” Triikor said. A destroyer went from zero damage to a charred carcass in ten seconds, then another following that one. The Qwaar-Jet fired. One Kadesh frigate exploded. They then maneuvered evasively out of range of the ion beams backing off and joining the main ion force.

The Kushan ships were slower, and took longer to arrive. The Kadeshi got a head start and destroyed two destroyers before losing a single ship. That was exceedingly impressive by any standards to Eric. The ion force opened fire on the destroyers while the Kadeshi swung into a sphere again, and decimated three frigates before firing on the heavy cruiser.

Explosions were constantly seen, some of them Kushan frigates, others were the few Taiidan ships in the area. The Qwaar-Jet set off explosions around its hull then in a final flash, it was

nothing but debris.

Ion beams were seen from every direction around the Taiidan fleet, and in a panic, their last destroyer rammed itself into three frigates and a previously captured destroyer, causing damage on the destroyer and exploding the three Firelances.

“This is Ishiin Soban captain of the Taiidan destroyer *Kaliir*. We have damage on all decks and can only access half the ship. We’ve lost half our crew our engines are not working and are requesting salvagers to bring us in for retirement.”

The salvage corvettes launched, and at the same time, the remaining frigates dropped their assault on the Bentusi ship and headed full speed against the salvage team.

Eric could not figure out why this was, but before he could figure it out, one of the corvettes was already lost. All weapons fired, and the frigates were defeated, but a second salvager was lost.

From his point of view Eric saw a Taiidan fleet capable of taking down a Bentusi Tradeship completely eradicated in the timeframe of ten minutes.

“What a show.” Mark said.

“They did very well. It seems the Kadeshi will be gaining a lot more recognition in the fleet after this.” Eric said.

“Let us hope.” Arazis said.

## MARK

It was all over so fast. Yet the sight was beautiful nonetheless. It gave me, and probably many others throughout the fleet, hope. Hope that in the end, we will win any battle that comes our way.

The Tradeship started moving. Again, its speed will always impress me, knowing that it has no engines. We went back and docked.

As the fleet reassembled, I headed straight for the Bridge. We all did. “Some show of power right there.” I said.

“Yeah no kidding. That went by so fast I couldn’t even keep up!” Isel said.

We got to the bridge and saw John, but before we could say anything, the Bentusi started speaking to the fleet.

“For the first time in memory, the Bentusi are in the debt of another. It has been forbidden to possess this information for some time. But after your intervention on our behalf, we feel compelled to share it with you. Behold.”

Immediately upon saying this, a hologram of the galaxy appeared in space. It must have been five kilometres in diameter, absolutely enormous.

“In the first time, a terrible war brought with it the collapse of your ancient empire. So vicious were your enemies that all would have been slaughtered were it not for the collective outcry for mercy.” A bunch of blue patches appeared, presumably the extents of the ancient Hiigaran Empire. “In an effort to smooth relations, the conquerors spared the lives of the defeated. All survivors were sent into exile.” Is this really it? Are they about to tell us our forgotten history?

The hologram changed. It now showed the Angelmoon as a completely white ball in the or-

ange sky with many Khar-Toba ships moving through space in a long line.

“None were permitted to follow or aid the fallen. All memory of them was to be erased. For generations the convoy moved silently through space. They endured great difficulties. Imperfect technology.” One of the ships swerved upwards and exploded.

The scene changed again to one that the Kadeshi would appreciate, the Great Nebula appeared, with several of the ships in the convoy changing course and heading towards it, thus explaining the origins of our long lost brethren. The scene then changed again, now to dark grey space.

“In time, a suitable system to receive them was found. This barren world appeared to be salvation. Their true legacy forgotten, a new vision of destiny had grown out of captivity.” It was now showing the exile ships crashing into Kharak. “A single artifact survived the journey. The Guidestone you now carry. It was removed from the sacred Angel Moon of your Homeworld, a place long since reduced to myth and tale.”

The hologram changed back into the galaxy. Everyone on the Bridge stared out the main viewport in awe. Even John was out of his seat pushing up against the glass.

“Your progress is becoming known among the Inner Rim worlds and elsewhere. Many cultures have prophesied your return.” The hologram was now gone. “Reach your Homeworld. Establish your claim. We will summon the Council.”

And just like that, the Bentusi entered hyperspace leaving us in the vast empty expanse between the galactic arms.

We all had to find somewhere to sit down. It was so much to take in. I mean I read this all in the book Eric gave me, but it was still too much. Eric seemed to be the only one not affected by this. He looked impressed by the light show but that was it.

“All has been recorded in the Khar-Halla.” He said.

“Did we get that recorded?” John asked on the intercom.

“We sure did captain. The sleepers will enjoy these recordings when they wake up.” Intelligence said.

My mind was racing. My adrenaline was rushing. Why is this happening? *I didn't do anything.* So what was it?

“We're ready aren't we?” Arazis said.

“Yes. That must be it. I've seen our fleet in battle. I'm confident now. There is no doubt in my mind anymore, that we will crush them. Finally, I can get some peace of mind.” I said and closed my eyes.

“And Mark,” she said. “You're a very good painter.” I let out a laugh.

Later that day, after the fleet had rebuilt, I checked the status with John. I had to take a rest. We met in a meeting room with a long viewport.

“Well, the Kadeshi frigates are in formation with the *Ifriit 3* and all the Kadeshi pilots are transferring here. More swarmer racks are being planned out for the hangar also. We were thinking of installing a catwalk at the very top of the hangar ceiling to dock them on. The gravity would be low enough up there that they could be held up with nothing but a two inch hollow steel bar and a few tubes for fuel.”

“And what about the sleepers that you said were leaving?”

“They’re already on their way in the salvagers. Speaking of which, did you say goodbye to Jay and your uncle?”

“Oh damn I forgot!”

“Well it’s too late now. You can call them in the comm room later.” He said.

“So what do you make of all this?” I asked.

“Well, it’s quite a bit to process, but it helps explain a lot about ourselves. And hey if we can’t trust the “unbound” to tell us the truth, then who can we?” he said.

“Well it fits with that book Eric gave me, so I’d believe every word of it.”

“I’m not much of a reader.”

“What’s the crew count for the Kadeshi at now? Or what it will be anyway.”

“The crew of the ship nearly doubled, so now it’s a total of two hundred and fifty Kadeshi out of four hundred. More than half now.”

“That’s incredible.” I said turning to the viewport as one of the fuel pods was passing by.

“We’re building them ourselves now. We have nearly all of the swarmers we’ve captured now. We’re not going to build any until we have somewhere to put them all. A multi-beam frigate is in the works right now. I have no idea how their sleeper tubes work, so they’re cryo tubes instead. It does the same thing anyway. They just need extra cargo of food supplements. So what did she mean about being a good painter anyway?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh that. Well let’s just say I got a little creative with finger-painting my ceiling.” He just laughed at that.

“How long until jump?” I asked.

“Well there isn’t even a speck of dust out here for a hundred kilometers so I’d say right when they’re done building more ships. About a day maximum.”

“So here we go again.”

“Here we go again.” He repeated.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Morality of the Ruthless

MARK

It's only been the second day falling asleep and waking up in normal space of this entire journey, and again I got a good night sleep. Maybe it was just something about hyperspace that interferes with your subconscious. No one really knows much about it yet, so it's possible.

I woke up, staring at my artwork. I got a little crazy some nights the last jump. The dreams have been more frequent now. I was starting to think I was going insane myself sometimes.

I turned to look at my watch. It was the afternoon. In the corner of my eye, I caught the glimpse of her highly contrasting hair. "Were you watching me sleep?" I asked.

"Yeah sorry. I had nothing better to do. Isel's with Karu and Jay's not here anymore. I'm not that close with the captain either. All of the Kadeshi are finding loved ones that they might not have ran into yet. I'd be there too it's just that I've found everyone I know." She said.

"Funny. I get great sleep in normal space. I guess it's not everyone." I got up and put on a shirt. "Is Saiin still frozen?" I asked.

"I asked and they said that this didn't really count as a battle, so they didn't bother waking him up." I now remembered that he said not to wake him up unless it was time for battle.

We stayed in my room for a while. I didn't want to get a headache from the fluorescent halls of this carrier. On the *Mothership* it's all dimmed to save energy, or some places are just too old and don't have much power. Some places I've run into had nothing but the red emergency lights on.

Ten minutes later we decided to go find food. They had been importing it from the *Mothership* all night long with other supplies.

Since carriers couldn't fit in the resupply bay, the *Ifriit 3* docked with an area just above the bulge of the hangar section and other super capital ships did the same. The *Rancor* was too big for that, so they had constant shipments from hollowed out Porters.

I decided to get some mashed gyenn and some green bits of nayaan. This one grew on a cob and the leftovers were fed to cattle. There's none of that here, so it was made into biofuel for their farming machines.

There was also some simulated meat, but I didn't like that stuff so Arazis took all of it.

She had the same thing as me. "Finally some actual food again!" she complimented.

In the mess hall, it was weird to see so many Kadeshi. I was now in the minority on this ship. It felt a bit awkward, but most of them knew who I was and they accepted me almost as one of their own. That and the fact my closest friend on the ship is a Kadeshi kind of helped.

"How long will the resupplying take?" she asked.

"The rest of the day I guess. The frigates are all docking one by one, and only one of the six destroyers has docked. We're also retiring the three Turanic frigates, so that's gonna take some time too. And the squads are being rebalanced. They're building five more bombers, ten defend-

ers for the newbies, and replacing all the heavy corvettes with the multi-gun corvettes.”

“So lots of work.”

“Yeah.”

“I still don’t understand why you have so many kinds of ships. Our swarmers work for everything.” She said.

“Well, your swarmers have the damaging capability of one of our bombers, it’s smaller and faster than our scouts, and it’s two and a half times tougher than our interceptors. The only downside is that it has a third the coverage of our interceptors and its fuel consumption is atrocious.” I said.

“We know. That’s why the fuel pods were designed to move so fast.” She said.

“Our bombers are weaker, but are better against capital ships. The defenders are for training pilots, because they can take a beating, but they cause very minimal damage. For the corvettes, well we have the Mercy repair corvette that docks one fighter for repair and refuelling and can use its repair beam to fix any ship larger than a fighter. The salvagers, well that’s kinda self-explanatory. The light corvette was supposed to be a cheap throw together of a larger ship than a fighter, but it failed miserably due to its extremely low firepower, less than a scout. That’s why we made the Hammer heavy corvette. It had far more damage at just a little less than an interceptor and could take a serious beating from a frigate before succumbing to damage. The multi-gun corvette is the product of needing a way to combat your swarmers. It could focus on many fast enemies at once, though had a lower firepower. The minelayer is good for strategic defence stuff and laying traps. The frigates are another thing altogether.”

“That explains it.” She said. “We have very few ship types because they’re multipurpose.”

“Yeah. Your fuel pods and multi-beam frigates are the only two frigates. And then you just have the Needleships after that.”

“Well, we have ships like your destroyers. They’re just not usually used because it would mean that there was a battle that needed them. If we were able to hold you off for a day, then they would have showed up. If there are any revolts in the colonies, they send in five of them and it solves the problem rather quickly without the need of a Needleship. They’re useless on a mining mission though. The only reason for the multi-beam frigates being available is that sometimes we come across asteroids that are too big and need to be cut.” I really didn’t want to meet one of their destroyers then. What did they have on them, twelve ion cannons? I didn’t want to know.

We finished eating and left the mess hall. We were granted permission to go out in our fighters and fly around.

I was still amazed at the speed of the swarmers. It was like a faster and tougher bomber, a real nemesis for any fighters or even frigate.

“Catch me if you can!” she said. I already knew I couldn’t, but whatever, I was having fun. I pressed the little red button for the boosters, and felt the instant acceleration sucking me into my seat. We flew around the Taiidan heavy cruiser and made our way to the *Rancor* too.

We flew up to the bridge section of the *Mothership* and stopped in the opening and saw people waving to us from the many windows. We continued and flew around the ship and then through the opening again. It would be a long time until we would ever get the chance to do this again, and then it would be in battle, and it would be more terrifying than fun. So we took in the

moment while we had the chance, and death to any rules we might have been breaking.

## JARRED

He lay awake in his bed that morning, having nearly been discovered the day before. He had to sneak around and meet with his fellow rebels in quiet and be even better at it lately.

There was increased suspicion because of the increased amount of rebels that joined because of the Kushan and the bombing of Kharak. The civilian Taiids did not agree on this genocide committed by the Empire. It was only one major reason of many.

He stared at the window out onto the cityscape of Haalt-Nar, the port city of the western hemisphere. The city was so large it could be seen from space. It was the location of the Imperial Palace and the heart of the empire.

His mission was to gather as many of the rebels as he could, and take the imperial palace when the signal was given. His closest ally was the captain of the *Kapella* and leader of the Rebellion, captain P'teer Elson. He was currently massing a fleet at Idea.

The seeds of their rebellion were planted on Triistara, the meeting place of the Assembly of Lords. They began to question many of the actions of the Emperor, however before any action by them could be made, the Emperor dissolved the Assembly and became the one and only ruler of the Empire with unlimited political power among the Taiidan worlds.

The imperial armada had been undeniably powerful, however with the increased amounts of rebels, the ships had been "filtered" of all the rebels in the recent years, which meant that any ship with rebels on it had to arrest and execute them on the spot. If they failed to do so, the Elite Guard would destroy the ship. This in itself caused panic in the rebels, and thus made the rebel spy ships defect and join the Rebel Fleet, now massing even more allies to the cause. Taiidan Rebels, Osyrians, Nubians, Tobari, even some of the Vaygr warlords agreed to supply them with resources.

Elson's ultimate plan in the end was to cripple any fleet near the path of the Exiles, to allow them a swift return home, and then aid them in the siege of Hiigara. Already four imperial and three Turanic fleets were destroyed near their path in the Great Wastelands, and he has lost many rebels. This is why he was gathering more to his cause.

Jarred could not help the battle on the galactic scale, but he could aid in the end by having a capable force take down the palace. It was his mission.

He walked out onto the balcony as the sun of Hiigara rose. Three Elite Guard carriers had been docked above the city for some time. They were doing something, but he did not know what. All he knew was that the next few months would not be easy for the rebels on Hiigara.

He went into the city to gather information. The closer he got to the south tower, where one of the carriers was docked, the more soldiers of the empire he saw in full uniform and armed.

He decided to stay away from them and enter the underground levels. There were fewer guards there and the ones that were there, were local unarmed police.

He was in luck. When he got to the tower, he snuck up to the level the carrier was docked. He overheard some people talking. He hid in the air vents to get a closer look to the outside balcony where they were.

“All of them?” one asked.

“Yeah I heard that they all got completely wiped out. The entire fleet! They say that it was the Kushan who helped them.” The second said.

“Let’s just hope they don’t get this far.”

“No kidding. The armada is spread so thin in dealing with these rebels. They’ve done well in starting small uproars in the people here and there, and so all the ships are everywhere. I’ve also hear rumours of a fleet massing in Osyrian space.”

“Sure is. Half of my fleet defected last week headed there.”

He looked at their ranking badges, they were both captains. It must have been the captains of two of the carriers.

“Damn.”

“I know. I knew a lot of them. Some were my friends, those bastards.”

“In any case, the Flagship is going to enter orbit in three weeks after the Elite Guard is done with the resistance on Iyoto.” The second said.

“Any threats from the Warlords at all?” asked the first.

“No they’re staying neutral in this. Three of them are supplying the rebels with resources, but that’s it. They’ve also backed off our major colonies to watch the battle.” He answered. “Those damn Vaygr. They have control of a quarter the galaxy and love a good battle. We’ve asked for a temporary alliance so many times but they keep refusing. It’s because of their respect for the ancient Hiigarans. They have similar ideals.”

“So that’s what it is.”

“Yeah I was there a few months ago.”

“And what of the council?”

“The Bentusi have called for a meeting. We’ll know soon enough.” He had heard enough. Slowly, he backed off and returned to the city. He had not been seen.

He found his way back to the surface and turned on his locator. He sat on a bench in front of a waterfall. This is what many rebels were told to do, as the sound of the water masked their voices from any recording devices.

Three arrived. He gave them the information he knew and they theirs, then they left and they would do the same. It was a very inefficient way of communication, but it was quiet and it worked every time.

He opened his wallet to see how much money he had on him, and he had barely enough for a burger. A picture fell out and he picked it up. It was his cousin. He hadn’t heard any word of her. Her fleet was destroyed by the Kushan. He feared the worst for her, as her fleet was the one to bombard Kharak. She was a rebel, and she was a pilot. It made it easy to get captured, and hopefully she was spared. But in the end, the dark truth in his mind was that she was dead. He wanted to deny it, but another part of him told him it was useless to believe in something so hopeless, which was kind of hypocritical, as he was part of a rebellion against a galactic empire.

Her brother Caleb was one of his messengers, one of the ones he trusted with his life. He watched him walk away headed to his next meeting at another fountain halfway across town. He knew he would be fine, because he knew the emperor’s daughter. They were friends.

They had met when his parents were discovered and executed. He was taken in for questioning, and she happened to be there. He refused to say anything, and the guards would not shoot a

child. They had personal reasons, as well as political reasons. If they started killing children in the name of the Emperor, it didn't matter how many people knew the kid, millions would immediately join the rebellion on hearing of the news that would have most certainly made it to the top of the list. Jarred would have made sure of it.

She looked into his eyes and saw terror. The military commanders that were there to protect him shot his parents without warning and without asking them anything. They were murdered in cold blood in their home. He was making dinner with his mother when suddenly her hear exploded. It scarred him and he went into a mental block for months. He attempted suicide many times, but the doctors did not allow it.

The emperor's daughter ordered them to stop the questioning in that she knew they were being too harsh on him. There was no way they would get anything out of him that way. They let her in instead. They were about the same age she was thirteen he was a year older. She asked him if he knew his parents were rebels.

Shaking and terrified, he managed to get only a whisper out. "I didn't know." That was all that was needed for him to be let free. But eventually he became a rebel because of what the empire did to his parents.

After a time, they became friends, and she saw him as a brother. She only ever had one brother, but he was forty years older than her and died by a gunning that happened when she was five. He was from before the cloning. Her father was never around, and she was left alone at the palace with other members of the royal family. They became very close. But he still said there was no information he could get from her. He believed his cousin. Even if he was the only rebel to ever set foot inside the palace, it was unlikely that he would have heard anything important. The Emperor did not stay too close to his family. He saw them as a security hazard.

Caleb turned and waved.

Jarred waved back and stared at the picture. He put it back in his wallet, got up, and left. He kind of hoped a little that she was dead. If not, it would have to be him to break the news of her parents' death. He wouldn't allow Caleb to have to relive those moments.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Forgotten Heroes of Rebellion

ARAZIS

She stood in the balcony above the auditorium. She had stopped coming to the meetings. They had become far less personal. There were too many Kadeshi showing up to them now. Mark still showed up to them, but she didn't see him there today. They saw him as a sort of leader, then again everyone in the fleet aside the sleepers did.

It was two weeks after they had entered hyperspace. Boredom seeped into their minds once more, as nothing was at all even slightly interesting. Isel and Karu went into cryo sleep too. She considered it, but then Mark would be even more alone.

Eric and Triikor were standing next to her staring down at the candle lit event.

"It's so beautiful." The Taiidan commented.

"It reminds me of the old temples of Saju-Ka when I had first arrived there, lit only by candle light and not a single ray of light from above. It had a warm feel to it, even though the sandstone walls were cold as ice. The Gaalsien would gather in prayer for Sajuuk. I was in the libraries while they did this. I could see them from far above the city we built from the sand."

They left to find Mark. It had become a game to them, whoever guessed where he was won. He was only ever either in his room, in the observation room at the very front of the ship, or in the hangar bay lying staring at the ceiling. He was now chief of the deck, so he spent more time there.

This time, he was found in the hangar.

"Wake up you!" Arazis said kicking him."

"Ah! Wha . . . oh hi."

"Dreaming of Hiigara again?" she asked.

"No actually, I was prescribed medication for that. I haven't dreamed since last week."

"So how's training going?" Triikor asked him. He was training the new pilots on the *Mother-ship* from the comm room by request of strike command.

"Not bad, some of them have at least been in a jet fighter before. Others, well they're gonna need someone better at teaching than me." He said.

"Maybe Eric can. He's good at teaching." She said.

"What? No way! First of all I'm a Gaalsien and second of all I'm not exactly wanting to be known. I like being the "other guy" in Mark's squad." He said.

"What about you? Taiidan interceptor pilots are some of the best are they not? I remember you saying this at some point. Something to do with the way the centre of gravity is or something." Arazis said.

"He's a Gaalsien and he's worried. Hello, I'm a Taiidan. I don't think that would go over very well either."

"Well, don't look at me I hate teaching!" she said when they looked at her.

They were startled by a swarmer crashing onto the deck.  
“Damn it I told them to fix that one!” Mark said.

## JARRED

Two of his close rebel allies were discovered and questioned. They were then killed. He was glad his cousin was not one of them. He moved from his apartment in fear of being discovered. He took a shuttle to eighth division, one of the areas surrounding the imperial palace in an octagonal shape separated by green space.

He decided to spend the day with his cousin since he had nothing else to do. He met the Emperor’s daughter before, but never actually had a conversation with her or anything. He thought it would be too weird.

“So your cousin used to be on a Qwaar-Jet? That’s so cool!” she said.

“Yeah it’s cool alright, being in the most powerful weapon made by this empire.”

“Why did you leave?” she asked.

“My captain was believed to be a rebel and my best friend shot him on the spot on the bridge in front of me while I was talking to him. Not even an interrogation. I saw the evidence, but there wasn’t that much to go on. In any case, the military is way too strict for my taste now. I’d much rather be down here on a safe planet.” It was also far more strategic.

“Oh those rebels! They’re helping those desert rats come here and kill us all! Mostly me, and it’s scary.” She said. That was another thing he tried not to think about. This girl was in the middle of something she could not possibly understand. It was sad to say it, but she would most likely be killed when they invaded the palace. He could not picture him shooting this girl. If it came down to him or Caleb, it would be him. But if there was another way to go about it, he would gladly. He just did not know if the other rebels would feel the same way. The moment would come, but only in due time, so for the moment, this girl was just an innocent kid in his eyes.

They were at a park that surrounded an ancient stone monument half wrecked and covered in moss. It was a large statue of some kind the size of a building. No one knew what it was, and it was illegal to remove the moss hiding the history.

He watched as dogs ran playfully chasing toys thrown by their owners and small children at the playground down the hill. He saw the two of them sitting on the slope of the hill staring at the monument, her head resting on his shoulder. He then thought that maybe they were closer than friends after all which only made it harder for him to imagine his objectives.

There was a shadow that cast itself on the valley below and they all looked to see what it could be. He looked up and saw one of the carriers launching, and the two others in the distance doing the same. *Has something changed? What can it be, I wonder . . .* he thought.

## P'TEER

The rebel armada was three hundred ships strong. His flagship, the *Kapella* was but a destroyer class however their fleet had three heavy cruisers as well, and many Osyrian and Nubian war-

ships greater in power than his.

“Captain, we’re detecting another hyperspace entry, more frigates, twenty of them.”

“Thank you. Patch me through.”

“Go ahead sir.”

“This is rebel leader Captain Elson. We welcome you.”

“It’s nice to hear that sir. Thank you for allowing us somewhere to go. But I believe a Taiidan fleet will be right behind us. A massive one.” They said.

“And you led them here?” he shouted in anger.

“They found the coordinates already. We were members of this fleet. They were searching for you for a while. They got the coordinates, and as soon as we found out, we used the carrier’s hyperspace module and jumped early to warn you to prepare for battle. We have lost many rebels to bring you this message.” He fell into his chair and mourned for those lost.

“Very well. Prepare for battle! All rebels to combat status red! As soon as they emerge from hyperspace I want to know about it. Do not wait for orders, when you see them, shoot to kill and leave no survivors!” he said. He was a true leader. The fleet respected him.

“Aye captain,” said the captain of the *Hellek-Jet*, one of the heavy cruisers.

“We are with you, captain,” said the captain in charge of the fleet of Tobari frigates that had joined them.

Three minutes later, they exited hyperspace from their gravity well generators. As soon as they did, their hundred ion cannon frigates placed on the top, bottom, and sides began firing immediately.

Three destroyers and at least thirty frigates were destroyed within the first moments of battle, but then the enemy returned fire. Other enemy ships exploded from the inside.

“We have spies on some of those ships.” Elson thought in despair.

The enemy carriers launched fighters. “All assault frigates open fire! All fighters launch!” he said. The one carrier they did possess was Tobari as well, it launched its entirely full supply of interceptors, bombers, corvettes and Taiidan defence fighters, capable of shooting down projectiles and missiles before they hit their targets.

“All ion cannons fire on their heavy cruisers!” he ordered. Seven heavy cruisers were in this thwarted surprise attack. One had damage in its bridge, probably a suicide bomber whose name will never be known, but his efforts saved many.

The battle raged on for hours, and frigates were easy targets for the enemy. The fighters could not handle the influx of two carrier loads of interceptors and the fifty assault frigates. It was too much.

The more time went by, the more Elson feared for the rebellion. This battle was bloody and kept him on his toes the whole time. They had no more fighters, and no more ion frigates. It felt like eternity.

Though the entire defence of ion cannons had been picked off, they managed to destroy all but two of the heavy cruisers, both carriers, and dozens more frigates, although their losses were far greater.

For every one rebel ship, there were five imperial ones. The battle was simply too much. His own destroyer went into battle long ago, and was taking serious damage. His crew did the best they could to keep her stable, but soon it would all be over.

The last enemy heavy cruiser swerved and collided with a destroyer eliminating both.

“Captain Elson. We need you to survive at all costs.” said the captain of the carrier. She sounded worried. “Use our hyperdrive to escape. There are more rebels out there, and this must be at least half the imperial fleet in this side of the galaxy. We will overload the drive and destroy all of them within a thousand kilometres. We urge you to leave immediately with the rest of the fleet.”

“What? But we can’t!” he said.

“We’ve taken too much damage, Elson! Our ship won’t survive a jump! We are not waiting on you. We have discovered an allied rebel carrier at the coordinates we are sending you to. Farewell, rebel leader.” said the carrier’s captain. A green door of hyperspace opened in front of him.

“No damn it! We can’t just retreat!” he said.

“Look captain!” one of his crew said. He saw that all the rebel ships were experiencing the same thing. They entered hyperspace, coordinates unknown to them. The waveform collapsed behind them, and they would never see the carrier again, but he could imagine the outcome.

He wept in his defeat. Hundreds of rebel, Osyrian, Nubian and Tobari ships destroyed in just hours. The captain of the carrier had allowed him a second chance at an assault.

“Captain . . .” started his second in command. “You did the best you could. There is nothing else that could have been done. I’ve added the name Shrel Katatre to the list of notable rebels.”

“Very well.” He said. He blew his nose in a tissue and deposited of it in the trash by his seat. “How many do we have left?” he asked.

“We have three Osyrian laser frigates, a Tobari assault frigate, two Taiidan support frigates, a Nubian ion destroyer and two Taiidan destroyers, sir.” she said.

“Is that all then . . . well, it is better than none.” As he said this, the *Kapella* exited hyperspace near a fleet of rebels. He could tell by the large crudely painted symbol on the side of the yellow and red hull.

It was a fleet of a carrier, a heavy cruiser, five missile destroyers, and dozens of frigates.

“We have received the message captain. We are here to serve the cause.” said the captain.

“What is the status of the area we have just left?” he asked.

“The black box transmitter is telling us that the area is highly radioactive. The carrier had overloaded its hyperdrive to destroy everything within a thousand kilometres. We are three light years away from there.”

“Thank you for the update.” He said. “May we not let the deaths of our brothers be in vain.”

# Chapter Seventeen

## Gravity of the Situation

MARK

The pilots all ran to their ships as fast as they could. Within three minutes, the hangar of the *Ifriit 3* was full and ready for battle.

“Alright that’s good! The fastest drill yet! Just keep this in mind, if the enemy is waiting for us, we don’t have three minutes. We need to be quicker. Next time I expect you all here under a minute. You’re dismissed.” I said. I had to run drills to get them prepared for battle as quick as possible. It also helped their reflexes during battle, always being on edge.

“I think it went pretty well.” Eric said.

“I know. I’m just seeing if they can get it done under a minute.”

“I doubt we’ll be attacked by the Kadeshi again by the way.” He said joking.

“What about us?” Arazis asked.

“Oh he was just saying how in real life he doubted that the Taiidan would be as quick with their fighters as the Kadeshi so these drills are pretty useless. I’m just testing their reaction time.” I said.

“Oh come on we still have a while to go before we’re anywhere near our destination cut ‘em some slack!” Triikor said.

“Emergency alert! Hyperdrive malfunction. The quantum waveform is collapsing. Safety interrupt engaged. Prepare for immediate return to normal space.” Karan’s voice said over the loudspeaker before the hangar lights began flashing between the normal blue glow and the emergency red lights.

There was a sound of the hull creaking, and then the blue wavefront appeared, and we dropped into normal space. It took a few seconds to realize what was happening. We had a month to go before we’d be where we needed to be.

The pilots and mechanics stopped what they were doing and looked out the hangar door confused.

“Battle stations! All pilots prepare for launch!” I said and ran to my fighter sitting nicely on the deck.

JARRED

The fleet was gathering together. That was all he knew. From far across the galaxy, even the most remote defence fleets were preparing to defend the imperial capital. Some would take a long time to arrive. Others have already arrived. He had never seen so many ships in one area.

“Is it nearly time then?” asked his cousin.

“Soon Caleb. We must await the arrival of the Exiles before we make our strike.”

“Are we ready?”

“I have over two hundred rebels who are willing to march into the palace and seize control at my mark. Others will surely follow once the palace has been captured.” He said confidently.

“And what of the daughter?” he asked.

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“I need to know! She’s done nothing against us!”

“That’s not the point Caleb! She is part of the bloodline! There’s nothing that I can do to stop it! If we don’t shoot her, someone else will and they won’t listen to me on behalf of you!” he shouted. They were far outside the city. It was safe to speak.

“I won’t let anyone kill her!” he said and started walking away.

“Caleb . . . I’m sorry.” He said and walked in the opposite direction.

## P'TEER

The rebel fleet had gathered new recruits. Not nearly the size of his previously built up fleet, but still a force to be reckoned with.

“Captain, we’re receiving a subspace distress call from a rebel fleet that was en route here. They’re roughly a hundred light-years from here. They were pulled out of hyperspace by a gravity well anomaly.” His second in command said.

“How many of them are there?” he asked.

“There were six frigates. They presumably used their carrier’s hyperdrive to defect here. They were caught in the well and broadcast this message to us. Our position is most likely compromised now.”

“Again with this! Well it’s to be expected. Get the carrier on the line so we can engage the hyperdrive and rally at their coordinates.”

“But sir, we have no idea what the size is of the enemy fleet!” she protested.

“Does it look like I care? Half the armada is already destroyed, so there can’t be that many of them.” He said. His logic was sound.

“This is Captain Elson speaking. We’re jumping to the coordinates of the gravity well. It seems like a bad idea to jump to the coordinates we were warned to stay away from, but the well is directly on the path of the Exiles. We do not know the size of the fleet, but we must stop them at all costs. The primary goal is to allow the Exiles the chance to return to Hiigara. Only then will the signal be given to overthrow the imperial palace.” He said. He hung up the communicator and sat down as the blue waveform surrounded the ship.

Three days later, they arrived at the gravity well. The Taiidan fleet encountered was half Elite Guard and half imperial guard. This fleet was a sizeable one.

“All ships to battle stations! Launch all fighters and bring ions to bear!” he said. Again he would have to fight.

The enemy had several gravity well generators spaced far apart in groups of threes defended by their fleets.

“Cancel that dock all strike craft until the gravity wells are destroyed!” he said.

For some it was too late. For others, the carrier used its tractor beams to pull the fighters back in.

“All ion cannons fire on the gravity well generators! Assault frigates defend against the enemy fighters! Ignore the rest!” Destroyers and cruisers fire on their capital ships!” he yelled as the *Kapella* moved in along with the others to fire on the nearest destroyer.

The destroyer exploded, and the *Kapella* along with two other destroyers fired on a heavy cruiser. “Ion gunnery, focus the beams specifically on their bridge section.” He said over the ship’s communications system.

“Roger that.”

The ship’s two ion cannons fired and hit the enemy Qwaar-Jet’s bridge section, sending gas, equipment, and even crew venting into space.

“Now aim for the weapons.” He said. The ion turrets went down and then the heavy mass drivers as well.

“They’re disabled now let’s not waste time on them we still have three more of these to deal with.” He said as the destroyers and frigates moved with him to the next.

They did the same, but this time the cruiser swerved sideways making the bridge section out of range. They then fired on the weapons disabling them. However, that time the third heavy cruiser came to the aid of this one and now they were against two of them. The rest of the ion frigates finished with the gravity wells near them and joined in with the battle against the heavy cruiser.

“Ion frigates engage the Elite Guard cruiser in sphere formation. Fire on any major systems you can think of. We have no time to destroy them, just disable them so they cannot move, fire, or call for help. Leave them with as little as possible then move on to the next.”

HE hadn’t finished his orders when the first one was completely disabled. They fired on the third, this one was far better. The pinpoint accuracy of the Elite Guard gunners was astounding. Their mass drivers fired on the frigates’ bridge sections and their ion barrels jamming them. They did this and managed to eliminate half the ion frigates before they could no longer fire.

The *Kapella* moved into firing range of a destroyer and began again in battle. The ion cannons of the Skaal-Tel class were impenetrable and invulnerable, causing the need to completely eradicate the ship. There was no disabling a Taiidan destroyer. He knew this very well. It was the reason the *Kapella* was still his flagship.

“Sir we’ve lost our heavy cruiser and the last of the Osyrian ships has been lost. Our fighters are in the air battling their bombers, but they have us outnumbered in carrier capacity four fold.”

“Send the ion frigates to the nearest carrier.” He said.

The battle went on seemingly for hours. The whole time he was focusing and planning on what they would do next, making decisions, some of them bad ones but most of them good. But in the end, they simply managed to destroy one carrier and all but three of the gravity well generators. They were too far away to reach.

They were down to three destroyers and five ion frigates. One of the enemy fighters had infiltrated the carrier with an antimatter bomb and detonated it in the hangar, severing the ship into three pieces. The crews were still aboard, but not in good condition with the failing life support.

“Fleet, this is captain Elson. Retreat to the last gravity well generators. We must destroy

them.” But as he said this, he saw a massive waveform, revealing a two kilometer tall grey ship emerging from hyperspace.

“Great gods . . . it’s the Exiles.” He said. The last of his escorts were eliminated by the Taidan fleet emerging from hyperspace.

“Move in towards the Exiles!” he said. The *Kapella* needed to survive to be able to tell them of the situation. If not, they would enter the Hiigaran system without knowing what to expect.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Galactic Core

MARK

I got into my fighter and was ready to launch, but the light was red. I waited and still it would not change colours. “Deck chief to captain, what’s all this about?” I asked over my radio.

“It seems like some kind of gravity well. I still don’t know what that means but that’s what Intelligence called it. It’s not safe for strike craft right now. Wait until the generators are gone.” He said.

“We are under attack by Taiidan forces. They’re concentrating fire on our immobilized strike craft.” the update said. The carrier’s ships were lucky, but the *Mothership* had launched all of its corvettes and most of its fighters.

I got out and met up with the others.

“It’s a damn ambush!” Eric yelled angrily.

“Even I didn’t think the Empire would be such cowards.” Triikor said.

From the edge of the hangar, we all watched, because that was all we could do. We stared at the battle taking place, hoping that it would all be over soon. We were fooling ourselves. This was going to be one long fight.

JOHN

Three green generator machines were being guarded by three support frigates each, and many ion and assault frigates and a missile destroyer to pick off the fighters one by one. He had to sit there as these Taiidan had gone to a whole new low. It sickened him.

The Kadeshi frigates set into a sphere around the assault frigates to attempt to stop them from shooting down all the fighters. The Kushan ion frigates tried to mimic their tactics against the destroyer. Some even got in the path of the missiles and took damage to save the strike craft. It worked, and the enemy lasted less than a minute.

“Alright concentrate all fire on the generators.” He commanded. The *Ifriit 3* was put in charge of the capital ship assault force due to its heavy militarization. The *Mothership* was seeing more and more sleepers awoken, and they had no combat experience. Together, his carrier and the *Rancor* became the military command ships of the fleet.

One by one, after a short while, the gravity machines were destroyed.

“All ships stand down and all Porters proceed to salvage the fleeing frigates.” The captain of the *Rancor* said. The fleet formed around the attack carrier as it started moving forward.

“All fighters launch and guard the *Rancor* fleet.” John said. His eyes were constantly on the sensors manager, watching the red blips be escorted to his carrier or the *Mothership*. He also watched as all the fighters launched and formed their squads, interceptors, defenders, and

swarmers.

## MARK

We got in our fighters when the last generator was destroyed. The light turned green, I started the engines, and the clamps let go. The artificial gravity pulled us down and we fell out the hangar.

Space was a more yellow than the orange it was last time. We were in the core region now, but still not quite there.

“Alright you heard the captain, yellow, blue, and grey squad set to claw and guard the frigates.” I said. I had no real authority of course, but they respected my advice not to get them killed. Most of them were not even ranking pilots now. We’ve just lost so many on this journey.

They’re rank zero which means they’re training under ranked pilots, just like I teach. Some of them may have been my students. I shrugged off the thought not to get attached to them. Because I knew that many of them would die. And I can’t save everyone.

“Sumur Sherden reporting that pink squad will escort the multi-beam frigates.” He was someone I’ve met in the Kadeshi meetings. He’s a high ranking pilot of the Kadeshi, well the highest of the three ships we met anyway. Their ranking system is different from ours, but I’m guessing it was something like rank six or seven. It didn’t really matter, because someone with any moderate level of skill who is trained to use one can fly a swarmer incredibly well.

Three fuel pods were following closely behind.

My squad flew ahead to scout out the area.

“So Taiidan, where’s the best place to look?” I asked.

“Well chances are these inner world fleets wouldn’t want their ships getting too dirty, so I’d have to say in the clearing of that asteroid field.”

We headed there. And sure enough, there they were. We were recognized, and were being fired at. Our allies came to help. The swarmers undocked from their fuel pods and sped towards us.

The Taiidan were no easy enemies. As always, Taiidan interceptor pilots are very good.

“Alright let’s keep ‘em close to that generator. Chances are they won’t want their own fighters trapped inside when our missile destroyers start firing.” I said. There was one generator there. It was a good call because it didn’t activate.

The swarmers helped out against their corvettes since they had more firepower. We handled the bombers and interceptors. The two squads of defenders and the one of interceptors came to help out.

Bullets flew by everywhere. Sometimes I didn’t know if it was friendly fire or not. There were just so many projectiles. I heard small pings on my hull, but nothing serious. Isel on the other hand had a direct hit with a plasma bomb.

“Ahh!” she screamed. But her ship held together. “I think I’ll be alright.” She left to find a support frigate.

“I’ll go too I’m a little low on fuel.” Arazis said.

The other swarmers were docking also. The fuel pods sped forward for them, and they docked. The enemy frigates were taking advantage of the situation and fired everything on them,

but it was too late. The Kadeshi frigates had arrived. Now we had to dodge gunfire, bombs, and ion streams. Great. We made sure not to get between them and their targets.

“Where to now?” Eric asked. I thought about it, and decided we’d head over to defend the *Rancor* group from the bombers.

We got there as an assault frigate exploded.

“Weapons free.” I said. We opened fire on the bombers, and one by one they blew up. They didn’t even try to shoot at us. They fired on the heavy cruiser and actually did manage to do a fair bit of damage before we were finished with them.

Isel and Arazis decided to join us after four minutes. By then the Kadeshi would have all finished refuelling.

We found out that one fuel pod was lost as the *Rancor* group came to firing range. The attack carrier opened fire on the generator and it didn’t last too long. Then the destroyers fired on the support frigates. There was nothing left now but the corvettes and our three missile destroyers were making quick work of them too, along with the swarmers of course.

Then some frigates appeared out of nowhere and fired on a missile destroyer. We were a little confused. Then they disappeared again.

“What the hell?” Isel said.

“They’re cloaked,” said Triikor. They appeared again, and fired on the missile destroyer. Over and over they did this from different positions. The missiles fired but had nowhere to go. The ships managed to take out the missile destroyer and began firing on our frigates, taking down three before a proximity sensor arrived.

As it flew by my display showed the outlines of four ships, three frigates and a generator of some kind. Our capital ships opened fire on the generator. It didn’t last long. It revealed three ion frigates once it was destroyed.

“The *Mothership*’s taking fire. Grey and blue squads are going to help out at that end. Good luck.” Ten defenders headed away from the former battleground.

The enemy carrier was left incapacitated, and salvagers were being launched from the *Rancor*.

We kept moving forward to see what these other red blips were on the sensors manager.

What we found was another carrier, along with their resource collectors and a refinery with a small squad of fighters which took no time to try and attack us. The swarmers moved in behind us and they were dealt with rather quickly. The other carrier was to be salvaged too, so the swarmers just docked again. We decided to do the same. Our fuel was low. We passed by the proximity sensor. It was heading to check out another little blip.

We docked with the *Rancor* and got out to stretch out legs.

“That was a bit hectic.” Eric pointed out.

“No kidding.” Triikor said getting out. She took a few steps to regain balance. All the spinning and barrel rolls must make anyone dizzy after a while.

“So how’d it feel getting hit with a bomb?” I asked casually.

“Well, it’s a good thing the ship had nothing in it. It stopped the ship though, so I flew forward into the windshield.” She said.

“Seatbelts!” I said joking.

“I can’t help it if I’m too short.” She said. We laughed. But that laughter would soon be over.

## JOHN

The proximity sensor gave them time to alert the *Rancor* group and the corvettes that were finished with the repairs from the ambush.

There was an enemy fleet of fighters many corvettes frigates and a heavy cruiser inbound with his carrier. An assault frigate had launched to guard them but it wasn't much.

He sat in his chair feeling tense and stressed.

"Here take one." Fiira said handing him a pill. He didn't care what it was, if it worked, then that would be fine by him. "You're very sweaty." She said. He wiped his forehead, and he hadn't noticed before.

He took a deep breath and picked up the phone. "All stations prepare for combat." He said over the intercom.

The enemy arrived first. The corvettes fired making ping sounds all across the hull of the ship, and the heavy cruiser fired its cannons. Though the explosion was on the other side of the ship, there was definitely a breach from the sound of it.

"Casualties!" he said over the radio.

"Three decks breached, no one injured."

"Seal off the breach." He said.

Friendly corvettes arrived and opened fire on the enemy. At least some fire was being diverted. He looked around the bridge deck, and he saw many worried faces. The pilot was struggling to get the carrier to turn so the enemy fire hits the bulkhead at the top of the ship where the hull is thicker. The comm officers appeared on a screen were chattering with other ships in the area. Fiira was the only one who seemed to remain calm, never breaking a sweat. He hoped that the pill was the same thing she was on, because he needed a lot.

Another explosion was heard, but the bulkhead was always evacuated in times of battle. "Seal the breach." He said.

"Sir the Kadeshi have arrived!" Paul said. "So have five captured support frigates. They've begun repairs."

"Thank Sajuuk." He said exhaling in relief.

The Kadeshi took out the Taiidan frigates one by one very quickly, and Kushan destroyers arrived to combat the heavy cruiser. The enemy had since turned to the destroyers, and managed to defeat an already damaged one before succumbing to the many ion beams literally tearing up its hull in all directions.

The remaining enemy frigates jumped into hyperspace.

"Where are they headed?"

"We don't know, but we suspect another carrier somewhere in our vicinity. Sensory doesn't report any new enemies though. It must be too far out." Paul said as he hung up the phone.

"Set ship to condition yellow, the enemy is no longer a threat." He said.

"Sir we're getting a transmission. The *Mothership* is broadcasting it to the rest of the fleet." The comm officer said on the screen.

It was a black coloured Skaal Tel. "Attention Kushan mothership! This is Captain Elson of

the Taiidan Elite Guard destroyer *Kapella*. We wish to defect and need your assistance. In return we are prepared to help you. Please respond.” He said. He was being pursued.

“This could be a trap but the *Kapella* is clearly damaged. Engage the pursuing fleet and draw it away from the defecting ship.”

He ordered the Kadeshi to help them, as their frigates would arrive fastest.

“Should we trust him?” Fiira asked.

“I don’t see why not. He is being fired at from his fellow Taiidani is he not?” he said.

## MARK

We were sent to assist a defecting destroyer. Ten interceptors jumped in on top of a support frigate. I didn’t even know that was possible. Arazis didn’t join us. She wouldn’t have made it here on one tank. She joined the other swarmers that were picking off the small groups of strike craft that were flying around everywhere making the sensors manager look like a real mess. Salvagers were sent in to get some of them too.

“Captain Elson. He sounds familiar for some reason.” Triikor said. A short while later she continued, “I remember hearing the name on an imperial broadcast a few weeks after the genocide. He might be one of the leaders of the rebellion.” She said.

“Then that makes it just that much more important that he survives.” I said. She told me all about their rebellion. At least what she knew of it. And how her family was involved, and this led them to believe sending her into the military would save her should they ever be found out. If he’s a leader of some kind of massive fleet that might be able to help us, even if it’s a long shot, then the fate of the imperials is sealed.

We got there first and started firing on their interceptors. But they were too quick. They were much better than the others we’ve encountered, even those ones were good. These were all the best of the best. As the words Elite Guard would suggest.

Blue squad came in to help out. They were appreciated. Arazis ran out of fuel and left. As we began slowly taking the upper hand, and I mean slowly, the Kadeshi frigates sped towards the enemy. They stopped firing on the *Kapella* and hopelessly tried to fight off the Kadeshi. As usual, from all directions, the multi-beam frigates tore up the hull and destroyed them all. The interceptors that remained docked with the support frigate and it jumped away.

We went in to dock with the *Mothership* and watched the marines infiltrate the carrier for the rest of the day. The battle was over, and their ambush failed. It felt good to know we stood a chance against an actual fleet sent by the Emperor to kill us full force.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Elson

### P'TEER

He was breathing heavily. He was very relieved. The *Kapella* was very near destruction when the Kushan had arrived to assist him.

The rebellion has taken a serious punch because of these latest battles, but he knew that when the signal was given, more would join him. He had to go to the Karos Graveyard to give the signal. That was all that he had left to do. He hailed the *Mothership*, and they answered.

He took his radio, and spoke. "I am Group Captain Elson of the destroyer *Kapella*." He said. Group Captain was just below admiral. But he never cared to reach the very top. Just close enough. "The Taiidan Empire has become decadent and corrupt over the centuries. The use of the forbidden atmosphere deprivation device on your planer finally triggered the Rebellion. Help me get access to the Rebellion's communication network. I will show you a way through the defences surrounding your homeworld. Take me to the ship graveyard at Karos. Hidden in a derelict there is a relay I can use with your help. The Rebellion waits for my sign to move into its next phase." He waited for a reply. It came, but not as he had expected.

"Sir, a modified Taiidan heavy corvette has latched onto the docking bay."

"Seal the connection and open the doors." He said. "I want all of you to stay here. I'll take a personal guard of ten officers." He said.

"Aye captain." They saluted him as he left.

He walked along the dimly lit halls of his flagship and entered the docking bay with the ten officers he had requested. They were willing to guard him with their lives, though he doubted that would be necessary. The lights of the cargo loading bay revealed soldiers with guns pointed at them. His guards immediately ran in front of him and took firing positions.

"I will not have guns pointed at me on my ship!" his voice boomed in the room. The Kushan all dropped their guns. His guards stood down.

As he walked onto the corvette, the Kushan recognized his powerful stance. He was not someone who took orders. He gave them. They respected that. He didn't speak a word to them. He simply waited until the ship docked with the Kushan *Mothership* in a central hangar that bridged to another large open area where a carrier could be seen being infiltrated.

The doors opened, and he was temporarily blinded with blue. He kept his ship lit very dimly so it was easier on the eyes. He let his eyes adjust and stepped out the door. Again, guns pointed at him and his officers took their positions.

"Stand down officers, this is not our ship." He said to them. They did as he requested, but they refused to stand back, and stood in front of him the whole time.

The corvette then lifted off and left them in the middle of a large docking strip alone with the Kushan marines.

He walked to the one standing in the centre. He looked to be the leader of these soldiers.

“My name is Cromell Soban. I am the chief of security.” He said to him through his guards.

“If we were here to destroy you, we would have simply planted explosives in the corvette and sent it on its way.” He said.

“Yes, but there’s also the possibility that you’re a spy. Or that you have a foolish plan to take the ship by force.” He said laughing, but one of the guards punched the man in his jaw. He stopped laughing and stepped back.

“Forgive my guards. They are very . . . loyal. For future reference I suggest not insulting me or my crew. We have been through hell and back to get here. Thousands have died to get us this far. If not for us, you would have been intercepted the moment the empire found out you survived the nebula.”

Cromell saw in his eyes the eyes of a warrior far greater than he. He looked aged, though he was probably only in his early forties. His eyes stared at nothing and everything, much the same as an old friend whose son was at the other end of the supply hangar watching the carrier with his friends. This man reminded him of Markus every bit. Very powerful with many loyal to him to the death. He saw the greater picture and the present was nothing more than time until fulfillment. “Right this way.” He said as he led the captain up to the interrogation rooms.

In the corner of his eye he saw people in uniforms that could have been his children if he had any. He questioned what they would be doing here of all places and in uniform. Then it struck him. These people were untrained. He felt sorry for them. He wondered if any of these marines had ever killed anyone or even fired a gun to begin with.

“Your children fight?” he inquired still staring at them.

“Believe it or not, the one beside the redhead is the best pilot we’ve got.” He said as they entered the lift.

## MARK

We watched the carrier from the hangar. They had broken into its resource drop off and proceeded from there. Soldiers and equipment went in, and bodies were dragged out. We were above the action and could see it all. Isel was very excited. She hadn’t seen anything quite like this.

I’ve seen it all before. Arazis was interested in the way that they invaded the ship in zero gravity. I explained it to her as best I could.

Jay was still salvaging the other carrier. It was decided this one would be kept and the other would be scrapped for resources.

I saw Cromell in the centre of the room and some activity there. A corvette had docked and he was leading a group of people to the lift.

“Hey where are you going?” Isel asked.

“To go find a friend of mine.” I said. Arazis decided to come along. Which was fine. She could thank him too if she wanted. After all, he is pretty much the reason that the security force didn’t shoot any of the Kadeshi. He thought it would be wrong because they were of the same ancestry. The Taiidan were executed on the *Mothership*. On the carriers they’re prisoned. It made me think we should start seeing some rebels in the fleet now that we’re closer to the core.

We took a lift to get up to where they were headed. I knew he was going to the interrogation

rooms.

“The defecting captain has been brought aboard.” Intelligence said. I guessed that’s who was in the hangar.

“We’re going to the interrogation room. You don’t need to come if you don’t want to.” I said. I didn’t know how she felt about the place.

“I’ll be fine.” She said.

We got to there, but no one was around. It was empty. We walked along until we found the room where they were in. It was a larger one, with a long table. Everyone was sitting at it. Cromell and some marines at one side and the other side were the captain of the *Kapella* and some of his guards.

“Come in Mark, we’re briefing him on our situation before he tells us his.” He said.

“So this is the pilot you speak so highly of? He’s a kid!” he said.

“Would you like to face me in an interceptor to find out yourself? I said taking a seat of one of the marines that got up. I guessed he wanted to leave pretty badly anyway. Another one followed him and Arazis sat beside me. He looked at her intently.

“I guess you told him about the Kadeshi.” I said.

“Yes.” Cromell answered.

“I hate these rooms.” She said. It wasn’t the same one, but I guess in her mind it felt the same. I wondered why she came. I guess to face it again or something. I don’t know.

“Well then pilot, you seem to be a person of the people, how are they about the Taiidan? What is the extent to their hatred for us?” he asked.

“Oh . . . well I guess it depends what ship really. The ones on the *Rancor* and the other carriers seem to be a lot less hostile than here on the *Mothership*. We’ve had to wake up sleepers from one of the cryotrays due to personnel requirements. The Kadeshi have a moderate fear of you still, which is funny because you’re terrified of the nebula.” I said. Arazis chuckled a bit.

“Not all of us anyway. Some do though.”

“I see . . . well then I should not stay on this vessel during transit then.” He said.

“You’re welcome on the *Ifriit 3* with us. We’re mostly Kadeshi. There aren’t any sleepers left on there. It’s a centre of militarization really. The *Mothership* has very little of its original crew left. You see the sleepers that were woken up and the ones that have witnessed the bloodshed and the genocide . . . we don’t get along too well. We see things differently. Too differently. They’re still in great hatred towards the Gaalsien as they had a branch which was an extremist group on Kharak, but they’re no more. So the Gaalsien, the very few that are left, boarded other ships. The Nabaali also are annoyed by the constant wining of them. They’re very high maintenance compared to the rest of us.”

“Oh, so there is internal strife among you. That’s not good at all. But I’d rather be on the *Kapella* during transit with my crew.” He said.

“It’s not too serious. We just don’t like the sleepers very much. The Somtaaw, which make up a rather large portion of our engineers have moved into the previously abandoned construction barracks to get away from them. A lot of them have just completely left by boarding resource collectors and transferring to our refinery ships or carriers.”

“And what of your people? You . . . Sobani?”

“We, oh well we’re not usually on any big ship. We’re a warrior people. We’re soldiers.

You'll find that a lot of us are o along with the Siidim and they infiltrate the salvaged ships. I've heard stories from others about when we encountered the Ghost Ship. Skeletons everywhere. It's as if their life support was just . . . turned off on them. Horrible. As for the majority, we're on the frigates and destroyers as gunners, weapons specialists, and basic military roles along with the Nabaali."

"Your people seem much untrained. At least now I know why. I must tell you information about my history and what has happened in recent years." He said. "And by the way, when do you plan on entering hyperspace?"

"In a few hours, we're finishing up harvesting and constructing. We've captured and crewed one carrier and have just docked the second. I've been getting constant updates. It is my job after all. The second will be decommissioned for resources. We have a model in the process of being made for a cruiser-type ship much like your Qwaar-Jets. But research is still needed for the weapon systems." He said. My friend works in the research division so I know all the latest stuff that's coming out."

"Good. You'll need one." Elson said.

"So tell us, this rebellion you spoke of earlier, where did it start? What is its current progress?" Cromell said.

"The rebellion began on Triistara, it became our homeworld after the destruction of the planet Taiidan by your ancestors. It began as a simple outrage due to incredibly high tax on all imported goods from non-imperial worlds. The Bentusi even stopped trading with us because of this. Owners of large businesses and even local merchants started going on strike and stopping their military funding. It made the people suffer, and they began rioting. The emperor moved the capital to Hiigara for safety measures in the last decade."

"So it was a monetary crisis long before the genocide then?" I asked.

"Please allow me to finish. The violence grew out of control, and the old palace had been set on fire. The emperor's response to it was to demonstrate to all Taiidan worlds in the galaxy what happens when they question his will. He sent three fleets of Qwaar-Jets to Triistara and bombed the planet into submission. Survivors of this attack lived in bunkers underground and learned how to fight quietly. In secret, we have created a spy network and have found many on the other Taiidan colonies to support our cause. And when the Assembly of Lords questioned many of the Emperor's actions, he dissolved the assembly, and outraged many on all the colonies."

"And thus the rebellion was born." Cromell said.

"Yes. But even more recently, the reason I have joined, was for a much greater evidence of corruption and evil. Shortly after the emperor had signed your death sentence, broadcasts were sent out to demonstrate how the emperor defeats his enemies. What fate other worlds will get who oppose him. They signed their own death sentence by doing so. Citizens were horrified. I was horrified. I nearly vomited due to the sickness of it. I looked around to my fellow crew mates, and they felt as I did. No one aboard my ship ever questioned my decision in using my fleet's carrier to hyperspace to Medina, a colony where I knew many rebels to be.

Within months of my stay, I had secretly gathered a fleet of many rebels, who used their ships to gather more to the cause themselves. When you had destroyed the research station and distracted the emperor for even the shortest amount of time, I sent a signal by broadcasting on the imperial emergency frequencies, and it started with the footage of the burning Kharak, now,

to support our and your cause.

I told them to defect to where it all began, to the homeworld. I myself was already at Triistara, the desolate wasteland of a planet. To my surprise, a fleet of hundreds of ships arrived, and we waited there, fighting off imperials that came also, for three days. When the three days was done, we jumped away to Iyoto.

After that, we had come to the conclusion that we needed your convoy to arrive safely at Higara full strength to help with the plans. We detected inhibitors fleets in the Inner Great Wasteland. We arrived, and as we did, sometimes rebels onboard would do their best to sabotage the ships, either jumping the carrier away or suicide bombing the bridge of ships, or basically anything, even setting off EMPs inside the ships too. For months we had done this, and suffered many losses. We had sent out requests to our network of spies to have any rebels jump to our coordinates.

Then, only last week we had gathered more, and even got the assistance from the Osyrians and Tobari. Our first battle, we had nearly been completely eradicated if it were not for the valiant efforts of the Tobari carrier, who used its hyperdrive in its last moments to jump the remainder of us away to another rebel fleet and overload its hyperdrive in doing so, destroying the entire enemy fleet.

We gathered more forces, and then we got a message that not even a hundred light-years from us, there was a gravity well in place to stop you. We had immediately departed here and battled a massive fleet. Only the *Kapella* survived. And now, we are here in this room.”

I listened quite intently to every word he said. He was not just some defecting destroyer, he was a rebel leader. I respected him. He stood up for us, and that is all I could ask of any Taiidani who wanted to help us. “And now we need to do . . . what exactly?” I asked.

“We need to send the signal initiate the third phase.”

“So you have the coordinates we need to go to then?”

“Yes. It is in the Karos Graveyard, in the mess of your ancient warships placed there to rot away.” He handed Cromell the coordinates on a drive that they found out how to access using Taiidan technology. “But be warned, the graveyard is full of automated defences.

“We’ll see to it that we get to these coordinates.

“Thank you.” He said. “I must leave to my flagship.” He said and stood up. His guards followed him out.

## P'TEER

Two and a half hours later, he sat in his command chair on the bridge and looked at his crew, who he had just now appreciated a lot more, and thanked them for their service to him.

They responded by saying that this wouldn’t be the end of their battle. “We’ll be with you to the end, captain.” Yashiir said. He was the destroyer’s pilot.

“Engaging hyperdrive.” A female voice said. The blue window opened and consumed them as it always has. His coordinates were locked in, as he could see on the main screen.

“And so off we go to set our plan in place.” He said to himself.

# Chapter Twenty

## Burning In a New Mentality

MARK

On the hangar deck I stared up at the ceiling with the racks of fighters and the catwalks as pilots got out of their ships. There was one salvage corvette lying in the corner and crews cleaning up from the many frigate infiltrations that had been done. They still had quite a bit of cleaning to do.

“Chief on deck!” someone said. People dropped what they were doing and saluted me. I hate formalities.

“At ease I’m not a general or anything, I’m just a pilot like you. Now get back to work I want to be able to eat off this deck where the ship was being torn into!” I said.

“Tough words for some regular pilot.” Isel said walking past me and punching me in the shoulder.

“So how’s your ship?” I asked.

“Oh . . . well sadly, it’s gonna need a whole new back end . . . you know, one of those jobs where it’s more convenient to just get a whole new ship. I’m thinking about it actually. Those new cloaked fighters seem like some pretty cool ships don’t you think?”

“And get rid of number one?” I said joking.

“Oh please. I’m not in love with my ship like you. Then again to be fair you did put some pretty kickass upgrades into her.”

“Damn right. The last thing those imperials will see is the bloody red stripes of the *Ferin Sha*.”

“But if I get a Spectre no one will see what hit them at all.” She said.

“Nah I’d give ‘em the chance to at least see me. But hey, it’s your choice.” I said as we met up with Eric and Triikor.

“So . . . I hear you actually got a face to face with the rebel leader?” She said.

“Really? Word travels that fast?”

“Apparently so. What’d he say?”

“Stuff, the formation of the rebellion, their next plans, we talked about our tactics and basic stuff really.”

“What about the situation on Hiigara?” she asked.

“He didn’t say. He just said that he needed to get to a relay in some Karos place.” I said. She wasn’t very eager to hear anything anymore.

“What is it?”

“Oh nothing. It’s just that . . . well you’re in for a bit of a surprise when you get there.” She said and walked away. Obviously she didn’t want to talk about it. I wasn’t going to insist.

“Hey don’t just leave us wondering like tha—”

“Let it go. We’ll find out eventually.” I said cutting Isel off.

We climbed up some stairs at the side of the hangar. Arazis joined us after leaving the other

swarmer pilots to their conversations, and we headed up and towards the main deck where the pilots' rooms are.

We were walking out into the hall when we saw someone we didn't expect. I didn't recognize him at first, but she sure did.

"Saiin!"

"Did anyone miss me?" he said.

Later on, we were in a lounge area at a round white table just talking and speaking our minds.

"I woke up expecting some huge battle. What's this all about?" he asked.

"Well, we *were* ambushed. But that didn't last too long." Eric said.

"Well that's no fun for me you know. I actually had the chance to go out, but there weren't any swarmers left in the hangar so I just leaned on the railing of the observation deck and watched ships get captured and pulled into the hangar above me. The background looks much different too."

"You missed one pretty impressive light show. The Bentusi showed us a hologram of our history. About the exile and how we came to Kadesh and then to Kharak." Arazis said.

He seemed interested in the conversation, which was a change from his solitary lifestyle earlier where he just wanted to be alone. I knew the feeling of that. Hell once I was so bored I took some psychedelics and painted wings on my ceiling out of sheer boredom. At least now I have a cool sight to fall asleep to though.

"So . . . I guess you're feeling better?" Triikor asked."

"Much. I don't know what they had me on, or if that freezing affected my mind, but I feel great. I feel like I could sprint across the hangar deck and back!"

"Maybe you should come running with us later then?" Eric offered. There's a makeshift gym in some of the upper decks where the bulkhead is. It's meant to bear the weight of the entire ship as it's basically its spine, and take a serious beating. So it's a large open area with thick armor walls and many supports everywhere. They made a running track by laying rubber mats down on some catwalks on the side that went all the way around. I've been once or twice. It's cool but very poorly lit and loud because of the general creaking and moaning of the ship.

I kind of strayed off from the conversation and was staring into space.

"Hey are you still here?" Isel said snapping her fingers pulling me back to reality.

"Huh? Oh sorry about that, I think I'm just a bit exhausted.

"Agreed." Eric said.

"Oh please. You don't know the meaning. I have to take pills to avoid vomiting after I step out of my fighter." Triikor said.

"Well it was nice seeing you again Saiin." I said.

"Well it felt like maybe yesterday to me." He said.

My door flew open, and I walked in and collapsed on my bed. I reached across to my night stand and took a small blue gel capsule. Headache relief.

I forgot to close the door, but it didn't really matter because the halls around the crew quar-

ters were dimly lit with dark orange lights. It was a simulated night time. I stared at the blue wings on the ceiling that stretched off from the Angelmoon and off to the sides of Hiigara, at least what I crudely drew it to look like. The winds were a design from the Pedestal of Truth, the thing the Guidestone was sitting on in Khar-Toba.

I had to laugh a little at it. I stood up and reheated a bowl of agriisak stew, something Lisa taught me to make while I was on the Mothership. I felt like I reconnected with her most of all out of the Paktu side of my family. I never actually had a mother besides her.

Dane was great and all, but he was never really a father figure to me. He never tried. He kept his distance from me, as if knowing that eventually I would journey back to the north to find my father, who was a planet wide hero of all people.

Either way, when I finished eating I fell into my bed and slept the fake night away, hoping I could submerge into a spatial dream of some sort, maybe the same one or maybe different, but that rarely ever happens. All that really mattered is that I wasn't staying up until morning this time.

## SAIIN

“So you're sure you aren't gonna go suicidal on us anymore?” Triikor said.

“Oh I'm pretty sure. Besides, what happens to my sister if I die? She's not too stable mentally. I have to think of everyone else too. Also I think I want to see the homeworld.” Saiin responded.

“Don't we all?” Eric said. They were walking around the track on the top floor. It was cold in there, probably due to the lack of heating systems in that part of the ship.

It was so cold they could see their breath. Eric thought it was funny to make it look like he was smoking but no one seemed to get the joke. The Kadeshi don't do that, and the Taiidan have other ways to ruin their health.

“What about you? You said you have a brother right?” Saiin asked.

“Caleb. He's fifteen by now I think. It's been so long.” She said. “What about you Eric, I don't think you've ever spoken about any family.”

He stopped and walked to the railing and stared down at the many other catwalks in this open area. “It's because . . . I just don't have any.” He said. “Even before they invaded the ruins of Saju-Ka, I never had any siblings or a father. My mother was the only person I actually talked to. I was young at the time. I was then sent to an adoption agency, but no one would take me because of my lineage. I was fourteen when I ditched that place, and I found a peaceful group of Gaalsien on the edge of the mountains, out of the way of the main conflict between the so-called extremist groups and the Daiamid.”

“You and Mark have a lot in common then.” He said.

“Sort of. I tend to think my story has a bit more pain and suffering than his, but I see your point.”

After their short break, they started walking again.

He could feel his feet hurting, so they decided to call it quits. “How can you just keep walking like this?” he said.

“Practice I guess.” Eric said.

“Well I’ve been doing this long before I was even part of this fleet. On a carrier full of gross smelly mercenaries a girl’s gotta defend herself. Especially since the bar is the only active place on that hellhole.”

“I guess I need to start doing this a lot then.” He said as they walked out the door into the orange-lit halls. They all smelled like sweat.

They talked farther and got to the pilot section. “We’re gonna go take a shower. I guess we’ll see you later.” Eric said.

He left them and walked to the hangar. He stared over the railing as he did so often before. The hangar was redesigned. It held nearly fifty fighters and twenty five corvettes. He never imagined so many ships could fit in the carrier. It was amazing to see so many ships in one place. At least thirty of the fighters were swarmers, which was even stranger to see because this was nothing like a Needleship hangar.

On those, fighters are docked on the front section and all launch outwards. It could hold more than a hundred swarmers if it was completely full, and the general nebulous feel was much different than the bright blue with the yellow colour of space outside.

This carrier was much smaller. It was definitely built for the sole purpose to carry. The walls were filled with ships, and above his head there were corvettes held in place on the ceiling.

There were catwalks everywhere. When they were walking and jogging, he asked about it. Eric said there was very little gravity up there, so it didn’t take much to anchor the ships in place. Pilot uniforms have magnetic boots, so that wasn’t an issue.

The Needleships used artificial gravity since it was much easier in energy requirements. Arazis told him it was magnetic, but he showed her wrong by taking a magnet and trying to have it repel against the floor. It didn’t work as he already knew. She assumed it was because of the way the ship lifts off.

He then imagined this bulky thing trying to lift off. It would disintegrate most likely. There was a huge hole in the front. But then again the Taiidan carriers seem to manage fine. It was confusing him so he stopped thinking about it.

He stayed awake the whole night. He made his way to the bridge at one point where he saw John and Fiira making out, so he walked off quietly.

There was a huge room, more than three decks tall. It was like an open opera house. It must have been the place they described these Kadeshi meet ups to be. The candles were lit already. But no one was there.

He went down to the ground floor to get a good look at this place. He stood on a small glass platform. Below him he could see the emptiness of space, and the blue glow of the hangars. Above was most likely the bulkhead section.

He stood in awe . . . it looked like some kind of old temple on First. Candles were the only things lighting the room giving it a warm feeling.

He had missed out on a lot. But he wouldn’t let that happen again. He had been to his room after leaving the huge room, and found many things.

He found the rope that had many bad memories on it. He untied the knot and placed it in the

trash. He also found papers that he had drawn in his drawer, very dark images resulting from his depression. He hated the sight of them. They were images of death, stuff burning, and the bodies in the ocean of his past, and others that were of the same type.

He crumpled them up and threw them in the trash. The ones he hated the sight of he tore apart into as many pieces as possible. He came upon one image. It was a rough but accurate sketch of Arazis. He drew it completely from memory. This one, he decided, was worthy of keeping. So he placed it back in the drawer.

He took a lighter, and lit the trash on fire. He enjoyed seeing this hatred and anger burn away. It was calming and reassuring. He knew he would have the same amount of time on his hands, but he decided there were much more productive ways to spend it.

He tried to sleep, but there was a feeling itching at him. He wanted to draw. He didn't consider himself an artist by any means, but after destroying the evil work, he decided to draw something he liked. Something big. Something beautiful. He found his papers from the store. He still had some left. He took out the roll, and cut a large piece off, and taped it to his wall after he moved his desk. He picked up his pencil, and started making marks, that would eventually coalesce into something incredible to his eyes. That whole night, again from memory, attempted to draw a masterpiece.

## MARK

It worked alright. I was there again, afloat in space watching the same old battle above the planet below.

I couldn't make out who was winning. I could see red and blue ion beams everywhere in the distance, and explosions of many sizes. I could see the sun. It was bright even through my visor, a nice yellow, unlike the incredibly bright white of Khar-Illume.

I floated there for what felt like hours. But that couldn't be right. The suit only has thirty minutes of air. I then saw an explosion that was blinding, and outshone the Hiigaran sun for a brief moment.

Then I fell off my bed and hit the cold metal floor.

I was disoriented for a few seconds, and then crawled back on my bed. It was not yet morning, so I fell back asleep this time with no dreams.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Kapella

P'TEER

Days passed by. He was in his room reading a book that he still could not bring himself to complete it. It was very long, about nine hundred pages. It talked about the corruption of the Taiidan Empire in the reign of Riesstiu the Fourth's clone. He had read many of these to give him more and more knowledge about the subject, and it also proved to be quite the illegal collection.

He placed the tablet down on his desk as he finished the chapter and powered it down. He decided it would be another casual day. He did this often enough that his crew stopped caring about the formalities of military attire. They were rebels, after all.

He walked into the red lit halls and could smell the food from down the hall. Daily life was the same as usual aboard the *Kapella*. He knew nearly everyone onboard at a personal level. He was known for his harsh punishments, but overall fair treatment of his crew. He was very respected by them all, but there was always this one thing that kept them thinking on if they should really take him seriously sometimes.

He walked into the room wearing sweatpants and no shirt, barefoot. He hadn't showered either, but he at least put on deodorant.

"Hello captain, another day like that is it?" asked Helen, who was in charge of hyperspace monitoring on the afternoon shift.

"It sure is. After all this I think we should just have a casual week really." He said.

With their previous run across the galaxy to stop gravity traps, they had advanced sensors to detect incorrect mass signatures, gravity distortions. It allowed them to see these fields from hundreds of light-years away. Her job was to monitor the mass detections and actually see if the candidates sorted out are in fact distortions or not. The machine isn't perfect after all.

He got on a table and announced, "Henceforth, this is a casual week, and it will go on until we're at Karos. So just basically forget formalities they're useless anyway. And don't bother with the uniform if you don't want to." He said getting down from the table. In most ships, this would get him demoted, but he was in command and this was just the normal for him and people just kind of accepted it. He was weird and that was the end of it.

"Any eggs left?" he asked getting to the front of the line.

"No captain I'm afraid we're all out. We still have everything else on the list though. We ran out of eggs just this morning sir."

"Oh . . . well in any case this shouldn't last more than two more months. But I have noticed other supplies like medical drugs getting low. How's the stock for the rest of the food?" he asked.

"Oh I think we have enough to last us a while. It's nothing to worry about sir."

"Stop with the siring. Anyway, I'll have a bit of everything." He said.

He sat down at a table with the other members of the command bridge's day shift.

They were engaged in a conversation about the traditionalists' opinions on the matter, as

Gaalen, Calin and Viiraik were traditionalists, from one of the northern colonies he had been to gathering recruits. He liked these three so much he brought them aboard his flagship and made them in charge of their fields of expertise.

“My family sides with the rebellion on the most part as they believe anything is better than what that so called Emperor is doing. It’s just not as the Taiidan should be. We used to be peaceful once, only waging war with our betrayer brethren calling themselves *Vaygr*.” He nearly spat the word out.

“Now watch what you say there, Viir. We’ve actually got three Vaygr on this ship. And you can’t possibly still be against them more than the emperor. At least they have some decency in them.” Hiirai said. She was from one of the border worlds where Vaygr and Taiidan lived together on the same world, not always getting along, but they did better than others for the most part.

“You do have a point there. I guess it’s just habit.” Calin said. So captain, what are your opinions on the Vaygr?”

“Just keep your sword sheathed and I’m not gonna care what you feel about them.” He said.

“I’m sure we can handle that much.”

“Remember, we’re all in this together for the same purpose.” Hiirai said.

“Yeah. Tearing Riesstiu’s throat out.” Elson said.

“And desecrating his name for eternity.” Gaalen agreed.

“So tell me, captain, you seem to know the Emperor on some level.” Viir asked.

“It goes back. We never really knew each other on a really personal level, we were just in touch for a few months, and he seemed rather powerful in influencing me to his will. I thought of him as a demigod because of his sphere of influence. No one around him questioned anything he did. But the farther away I got, the more I could tell he wasn’t what I thought. I met other people in the outer colonies, and the opinion was rather negative. Basically when I returned from one of my major missions in the Osyrian northern regions, I could tell he was nervous. He surrounded himself in a bulletproof sphere of glass so he could see all around him and be protected from anything. The way he spoke I could tell he was truly, inside, just a coward.”

“So what made you so mad at him then?” Calin asked.

“That’s between me and him.” He said. “I’ll tell you this, as punishment, I killed his son, ending his true bloodline. He doesn’t know it was me. If he did, we’d have been dead a long time ago, and in his rage the colonies would have surely been eradicated of all hints of rebellion if that meant destroying and igniting dozens of worlds afire.”

“Sajuuk have mercy. You killed his son over whatever it was? It must have been something intense.” Calin said.

“Anyway, let’s get back into a good mood.” He said changing the subject to the big victories of the rebels and Viiraik attempting to imitate the Emperor’s face when hearing of these victories, which was always comedic.

“Well men,” he said as he finished. “We had better think of some strategic plots to add to our final phase.”

“More? I thought we had this down completely.”

“Nonsense! This is the shaping of something great. We can’t just stop at perfect, we need better! One small flaw in the plan can take the rebellion down completely. And there’s a three hundred imperial credit reward for whoever brings me something worthwhile.” He said. He then

saw many grinning faces. Three hundred wasn't much, but still more than they made in a week.

## ARAZIS

She went to see Saiin that morning. She gave him three days of solitude. He was an early riser he discovered. She wanted to see if he was doing alright.

She knocked, but no one answered. She thought maybe he was still asleep or gone from the room, so she let herself in. She immediately looked at the empty bed, then to the desk that was pushed into the corner, and saw ashes in the trash, and then her gaze rested upon him lying on the ground with a pencil still in hand and paper everywhere. She smiled.

She then saw what he was drawing. Her eyes widened and she had to step back and blink. It was a huge wall drawing in pencil of his home. The details were astounding. The towers rose sky high, there was the simulation of shadow and there were realistic clouds and their shadows on the buildings and water. She sat on his bed not to fall over.

The drawing was a work of pure art. She didn't know he was so talented.

She heard a pencil fall to the metal. He woke up. He stood up, and looked at the wall. "I did this?" he said still a bit tired. "Yeah I did. I remember now."

"It's incredible, Saiin." She said.

"I have no idea how long I've been at it. I think I just kind of kept going until I fell to the floor and then woke up to continue. How long has it been?" he asked.

"Three days." She said.

"Has it really been that long already? I couldn't tell."

"Let's get you out of here it looks like you need a break." She said.

"I'm almost done though!" he protested.

"Saiin, it'll be there when you get back." She said staring him down.

"Okay fine." She had won. They left his room, and he locked the door.

"Really?" she said.

"What? I'm paranoid."

They got to the cafeteria area surrounded by food places. She got the usual salad with that bird she could not remember its name. She assumed it was a simulated flavor anyway. She didn't see any birds on the *Mothership*, so she doubted they brought any with them. Not unfrozen anyway.

Saiin got potato fries with some thick brown fluid on them with bits of cheese. "What in Kadesh's name is that?" she said gaging.

"I've tried it before. It's better than it looks."

"Is it really the best thing to eat for breakfast?" she said.

"Why not? It's not like I do anything important around here. And Eric and Triikor have been taking me jogging so I think I can eat this slop and still be as thin as I already am." He said.

"Hey!" they heard. Isel sat down beside Arazis with the same nasty looking burger of nastiness from the last time they had lunch.

"Oh it's the loud one." He said a bit annoyed.

"Be nice." Arazis said giggling.

“Oh it’s the quiet skinny antisocial one. Great.” Isel said back.

“Get along children.”

“Well where has he been? He’s never around.” She asked.

“Like you said, I’m antisocial. And I hang out with Eric, I just don’t really know you or Mark.” He said.

“She’s very temperamental, she’s younger than us, she plays in the arcade, she’s loud and she’s not really someone I see you ever associating with anyway Saiin, so just don’t worry about it.”

“Oh . . . okay then.” He said.

Isel rolled her eyes and bit into her food.

“And you thought this was nasty looking.” Saiin said. She agreed that hers looked worse.

“I don’t get you two! It’s just a sandwich with delicious stuff in it!” she said.

“Well . . . exactly. It’s a bunch of gross things between two pieces of bread. For one, that’s definitely not real meat, and another thing is the many multicoloured sauces that I haven’t a clue what they are.” She said.

“Get over it. This is the norm back on Kharak. It’s called fast food, a great invention that came like thirty years ago. You walk in, order it, and then it’s ready in three minutes or less, that has enough calories to get you through a day.”

“You’re a weird people. Why would you kill yourselves like that?” Saiin said.

“And what do you oh so superior Kadeshi eat?” She asked.

“Nothing usually.”

“Well when we’re on world we do have food, but it’s nothing like this, it’s actually good for you, and it’s usually under ten ingredients. And you can pronounce them all.”

“Oh yeah I keep forgetting your sleeper tubes feed you, bathe you, serve as a toilet, and a bed. Yeah we’re the gross ones.” She said.

Saiin sneezed out his water, which made them all laugh. “I guess she’s right. We’re both really disgusting.”

They talked until Isel finished and said she was going to work out and left.

“You didn’t tell her.” He said.

“I figured you were so paranoid over it and protective that I’d keep it a secret until you say it’s finished.”

“Thanks.”

“By the way, I saw ashes in your trash.”

“Oh . . . well . . .”

“Just tell me.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted to see them. They were horrible, very violent dark and depressing. I hated them, so I lit them on fire along with that damned rope.” She was happy for him. He changed himself. It was as Mark said. Only the individual can decide to change. They finished up and went looking for Mark. She decided since he didn’t really know him, she’s better get them to know each other sooner or later.

He was in his seat on the bridge with his tablet reading. He then heard a creaking in the hull. He looked up then kept reading.

He finished the chapter and got up. He walked to the walls, and leaned on them. The ship took quite the beating recently. Lots of the middle decks were sealed off. The ship was very unstable near the centre of gravity, which was not very good.

But it had more of an emotional feeling since he felt the same way. He was tired and felt much older than he was. He's seen too much death and destruction. War does that to people.

He used his radio and called the chief in charge of repairs. "Elson speaking, I need the ship's repairs to continue. Yeah I know what I said earlier. I know. Just . . . get it done." He said.

He knew that there were only so many times the ship could be patched. "Hold in there. This will all be over soon." He said to the ship. "Oh my sweet Kapella." He said closing his eyes.

The ship was named after the only woman he ever loved. It tied in to the story of earlier about him and the Emperor.

She was suspected of being a rebel, which she wasn't. She was the captain of a carrier and he was her second in command. The emperor ordered them to bomb the capital cities of the planet Terun where there was strong resistance. She refused to launch the attack, because she was being ordered to bombard her homeworld.

It was his sick test to her to prove herself worthy of Elite Guard status, which she didn't care for to begin with.

She refused to commit this to her family and friends. She stood up in tears, and ordered them to arrest her first, because she wasn't going to do it. He did so, because he knew others would shoot her in suspicion. The bridge however, knew her. He never saw any of them after that.

But the end didn't come from that. The Emperor knew them because Kapella's sister was one of his personal guards on his flagship and she boasted so highly of her sister. They were both brought aboard, and were brought before him and questioned. The Emperor knew from recordings they were seeing each other, so he thought it fun to watch him react to it.

"Kill her." He said. He refused instantly without thinking of it. "What is it, Elson, I could make you a member of my Elite Guard right here and now, even give you a new ship. How about a Qwaar-Jet? I can have it commissioned immediately."

He ripped off his pins and threw them to the ground. "I'd rather be court marshalled and you know it." He said.

"That's fine, I can have you watch her die." He said. Guards came up with Taser rods.

He looked at her, she was in a panic. She was crying, and she didn't know what to do. She couldn't protest, because the Emperor already knew why she didn't order the assault. They stabbed her and she screamed. He closed his eyes. The guards saw this, and tortured her some more.

"The more you keep your eyes closed the worse of a fate she will receive. All you have to do is open them and her suffering is over." The Emperor said. He was enjoying it. It angered him.

The screams became worse and worse, and he could smell burning flesh. "Make it stop!" she screamed. He opened his eyes. And they shot her in the head between the eyes.

He fell to the ground in his mental meltdown of emotions. He heard laughing from that evil voice. He screamed up to him in rage. "You'll pay for this!" he cried. "I'll kill you! I'll—" and he was hit in the back of the head and was unconscious.

He later woke up in the barracks of his new ship. As a torment, he had been placed on an Elite Guard destroyer as its captain. He couldn't sacrifice all of these people for his selfish goals, and the Emperor knew this. It was endless torment for him. "So what is the name of your new ship, Captain Elson." He said. He looked at his shoulders, he had been dressed. He was promoted.

"This ship shall be known as the *Kapella*." He said locking his gaze with the Emperor's bubble. He heard the laughter, and the transmission cut out. The others around him were confused, but he ignored them. Every single day after that incident, he was tormented by nightmares of the event. His crew still has no idea about this, as his disguise as a happy and slightly deranged personality would bring about confusion and doubts if anyone had come across this rumor. Hiding his past was the only way he could control himself. He couldn't wait for when Kapella gets her revenge.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## The Immortal Fleet

MARK

I was in the observation deck below the hangar. We were exiting hyperspace today soon, minutes from now.

“A ship graveyard . . . I wonder what could be there.” Eric said.

“You’ll soon find out.” Triikor said.

“Will you just tell us already?”

“No. You’ll know when you see it.” I wonder myself what could be hidden there. I don’t see why there would be a graveyard. Wouldn’t it be smarter to salvage the metal instead? Why just throw them away?

The blue door opened, and back to space we went. We saw what a graveyard of ships looked like.

“Hyperspace transition complete. We have arrived at Karos.” Karan’s voice said.

“The fleet of your ancestors. The ships were placed here to rot away. The Taiidan refused to use or even recycle the ships that destroyed our homeworld. This was the solution.” She said.

The Hiigaran armada . . . There must have been thousands of ships here. All left to die together, forever adrift. There were ships of all sizes. There were dust clouds and gasses spewed out around the ships and all throughout the region for hundreds of kilometers. It seemed to go on forever.

“What does someone say to this?” Eric said. “These used to be ours? Incredible.” My thoughts exactly.

“All pilots report to the hangar deck as soon as possible.” John said.

All fighter pilots were told of the objectives. A fighter or a corvette needed to dock with the station marked on the map at the other end of the debris field. Probes revealed there to be extremely old but still operational autoguns littered everywhere, along with proximity sensors, so we can’t just sneak past them with Spectres either.

Assault frigates and missile destroyers would escort the *Ifriit 3* into the debris field. We were the military command ship after all. All other ships were not needed. Bombers were on standby in the *Khuntala*, another carrier following the *Ifriit* into the debris in case we need any extra help.

“There’s also the matter of a salvage team being asked to gather data on these ships. We’ll be starting with the nearest cruiser below us. Any volunteers?” John said.

“I’d like to go.” Triikor said. “I know some of the systems in these ships. We’ve reused the technology in older Taiidan models. I’d recognize the language and know what’s what quickly.” A few pilots looked at her. She was accepted into the community by us, but I could tell that a lot of others didn’t like the idea of working alongside a Taiidan. And she was no fool either. She

could tell.

“Alright anyone else?” there was no response. There was just an uncomfortable silence.

“Well, I think I’d like to go if that’s alright.” I said. “One of these ship models seems to be a carrier right? I’ve been around a hangar bay for a fairly long time now, and since all of you are either not brave enough or still very against working with her as I can tell by the looks on your faces, I think that’s all of us.” I said. I saw several of them look down in shame. Eric was busy with other stuff. He was in charge of the emergency backup squad in case fighters are needed to launch instantly for whatever reason.

The others going were marines. No one else wanted to go, for reasons from the origins of these ships to the Taiidan going aboard one of them.

We boarded a salvage corvette that had been emptied of its non-essential equipment. Not too long after that, it lifted off and we were on our way. The captain inside said that the mission was to get data. Anything useful, and load it onto the ship.

We got into EVA suits. Triikor was already prepared with her Taiidan uniform, and I had my ejection suit on with an additional oxygen tank.

“Are you two ready for this?” the marines’ commander asked.

“Yeah why?” I asked.

“Oh nothing, it’s just that we’re trained for this. And you’re not.

“We’ll be fine.” She said pressing the button to depressurize the room. One of the marines pressed a button on the wall that launched two ropes with magnets on the ends. They stuck to the derelict ship and gave us a safe way to get there. One by one we got out of the ship on one of the ropes and started to make our way to the cruiser. I took a deep breath, closed my visor, and stepped out.

The ship had two unsettlingly large guns in the front and it had other weapons on it as well. It was probably the equivalent of a heavy cruiser.

The hull was all rusted and warped. We used small jetpacks to move to the ship. We were anchored to the top of what we guessed to be the bridge and anchored our boots as soon as we got to the hull.

Another of the marines opened a box with a tool inside. It folded out in a circular pattern at the bottom. It was a laser cutter.

“What if there’s air in the ship when we cut into it?” I asked.

“Then you’d better get out of the way. Don’t worry your magnetic boots should keep you anchored.”

They made a hole and stepped back quickly, because as I guessed, there was air in the ship. The cut piece was shot into space and hit the corvette. “Hey watch it down there.” The pilot said.

We waited for the venting to stop, which took a little over five minutes. I had time to take in the scenery. In every direction as far as I could see, there were ships. Even the background was a ship of some kind.

There were big broken ring-like structures that were monstrously massive that stretched across space. I didn’t want to know what those could have been. Most of all I didn’t want to know who made them.

This whole place was just a bunch of junk. There were small chunks of metal, crates, bars, ships of all sizes, everything, but no bodies which was a good thing.

“The venting stopped. Porter, we’re going in.” the commander said.

“Roger that. Be safe.”

## JOHN

The carriers waited above the derelict Hiigaran cruiser. He wasn’t surprised the Taiidan offered to go along. She’s wanted to prove herself to the Kushan since she became a member of the fleet. She also knew a fair bit about this place from what Mark told him about her seeming to have been keeping secrets. Though there were more important things to concern himself with.

Elson, the mysterious Taiidan captain that joined their fleet, had a plan. They still hadn’t heard of what it was, though it was obviously something big. A rebellion in this galactic empire could really help them at this point. And from what he heard from interviews of the Taiidan crewmembers over the videophone, he had a grudge of some kind against the emperor on a personal level. He liked that.

“Well don’t you look deep in thought?” Fiira said.

“Hm? Oh it’s nothing. Well actually there’s a lot to think about nowadays it seems.” He said.

She nodded. “This place . . .” she started. “It’s so . . .”

“Incredible?” he finished.

“I’m at a loss for words on this one, a vast graveyard of the old empire which we can’t remember. It leaves you to wonder what happened. Some of these ships have holes clean through them. That carrier over there has its hangar torn off.” She said.

“It does seem mesmerizing. Well, there’s only one way to find out, and Mark’s already on that.” He said.

“Captain Nabaal, we should go on ahead to clear up the area ahead of us.”

“Roger that *Khuntala*, we’ll take the lead.” He responded.

## MARK

We were walking in the halls of the ship. We had closed the door to the room we got into, and the halls pressurized. Over all, it had a basic capital ship layout much the same as the bridge of the *Ifriit*.

“Air pressure checks okay, atmosphere contents, oxygen at twenty-four percent, nitrogen at seventy-six percent with traces of other non-lethal gasses, temperature, cold but survivable. We can breathe this.” One of the marines said.

Another pressed a button and opened his visor, and took a breath. “It’s stale. It smells like mould and wet dirt. It’s also very dusty in here, he said wiping his suit.

We opened our own helmets to conserve our air. It was very vomit inducing but I’d survive.

“Oh Sajuuk it smells horrible!” a third marine said. “Like someone just forgot about the food in the cafeteria and left it all there or something.”

“Well then I guess we won’t be going to the mess hall now will we.” Triikor said smacking him on the back. “Hey, at least this smell means that there isn’t anything but fungus alive in here.” She said. He then proceeded to vomit on the floor.

“Hey Taiidan. Will you give the kid a break? He’s a newbie.”

“Whatever you say, marine. I suggest we split into two teams of five to cover more ground. I’m pretty sure the elevators won’t work, so one team will have to use the support shafts to get down to the weapons section on the top level here.” She said pointing on a map she had found on the wall. She wiped off most of the dust. “Mark will go with them and I’ll head to the bridge with the other group. I might be able to get comm back online if there’s any power left in this not dedicated to life support. I might be able to transmit the database of this vessel back to the *Mothership*.” She stared at the map for a bit longer. “Even power after this long is astounding. I can’t imagine how durable these things were in combat.” She said half to herself.

“Alright you heard her, split up and be on your way.” The leader said. Two people in my group were weapons experts, so that was helpful. I took a picture of the map with my camera so I could tell where we were going.

We parted ways at a service hatch leading down. We had to get out of the bridge section then head over to the weapons sections. We decided to go to the one in the middle of the ship’s top as it was on the way to the large cannons in the front.

The hull was constantly creaking. We felt as if we were inside a ghost ship.

## TRIIKOR

She and her group moved forward into the bridge to find the command section. They passed by some rooms that had pools of water in it, they guessed it was damaged cooling systems from the debris all over the place from the ceiling collapsing in.

They kept moving. They saw rooms that wouldn’t open and others that had been rusted opened some missing doors and others that had been depressurized as they found out, but their magnetic boots kept them attached to the ground. Then, they found a large door that had been sealed shut that stood out from the rest.

“This is it.” She said. The leader ordered them to start cutting and they all put on their visors in case it was depressurized, which it was.

They walked in and found the front windshield had been shot out.

“Creator have mercy.” One of them said backing away. The leader did the same. His breathing pattern said he was horrified.

She walked up to see what the commotion was about, and did the same as them. “The bastards!” she said. She was glad the room was depressurized, because it didn’t smell as bad as it would have.

All along the front of the room were frozen dead bodies, perfectly preserved in time. There were dozens of them, some in their chairs, others just on the floor, and some caught on the glass. The rest must have drifted out into the void over the millennia.

“Wh-what happened here?” the leader finally said. “Tell me Taiidan, tell me now!” he said.

She couldn’t answer.

“I said tell me!” he pointed his gun at her. He was panicking.

“I don’t fucking know! All I was aware of was that this was a ship graveyard of your ancient armada. I never imagined it would be an actual graveyard.” She said.

“Any more vomiting you need to do?” he asked the rookie.

“N-no sir, I don’t think my stomach has anything left in it. I’m kind of glad now.”

“We still need to get to work.” She said. The leader reluctantly agreed and lowered his weapon. They started by finding a power breaker on the wall and turned on the controls that were all turned off by someone. The control panels lit up and she began going to work.

She could read the controls because they were an older variation of Galactic Common. She found the central database and was able to get communications back online by cutting off life support to the lower decks and the rear of the ship.

“Will our men be alright?”

“Yes. It’ll just cut power to everywhere we don’t need. I’m also working on communication. If we can transmit the data here to the corvette then you should know all you need to about the war and your ancestors.”

“It’s really all in there?” he asked.

“Yes.” She found the right breaker on the wall and flipped it but it just sparked. She went to the control panel and the transmitter was dead.

“Damn it! It’s wrecked.” She said. “I’ve got the most recent damage report schematic here. It seems as though hyperspace, engineering, main cannons, and communication are all offline.” She punched the dashboard with frustration. “All of this data. It’s all useless if we can’t get it back.”

“Can we get an interface set up to it using our technology? We can go back to the corvette and get a transmitter with other equipment to figure something out.” One of the others said.

“Do you know what we would need for this?” she asked.

“Well, if it has a data centre we should reroute the others to go there instead of the weapons. I mean if we can get the data out, anything they gather from the actual site is irrelevant in comparison to detailed schematics.” He said.

“I think I know where to find it.” She said. “Go get the equipment.” She said.

“I’ll radio the others.”

## MARK

“Yeah? Alright I understand. Sure. We’ll send someone up to help guide you to our location. Sure. No problem.” One of them was saying. “We’ve got a change of plans. One of us needs to go back up to tell them where we are. They’re sending equipment to transfer data over to the corvette. The data includes schematics to the weapons systems so they don’t really need us to actually go there.”

“I’ll go.” said another of the marines.

We all waited behind. It took him twenty minutes. In the meantime, we just sat around and waited.

“So why’d you come?” one of them asked me.

“To see this. It’s our lineage. The story of our demise is somewhere within here. The Bentusi told us part of the story but I know there’s more. There has to be.”

“And you felt you needed to be here for that?”

“No, not really. I also want to see the carrier among other personal reasons.” I said. There wasn’t much of a reason, I just wanted to go. It seemed like a rare opportunity. Maybe to show the other pilots that they could trust even a Taiidan with their lives.

There were noises coming from the shaft so we looked up, and there were people with boxes tied to them. The first one came through the entrance, it was the other group. All but Triikor and their leader.

“You know, this would be a lot harder with gravity.” The second said.

“Well it’s still a very odd feeling in the stomach.” Another said.

“So what’s the situation like up there?” I asked.

“Well, they’ve vented the entire upper section up to the nearest door.”

“The bridge . . . so many bodies.” The last one said.

“What?” One of my marines asked.

“The bridge . . . the crew’s all dead up there. They still have faces!” he said. He was shaking.

“Calm down, come walk with me over here.” Another said.

Marine number three through the door shook his head. “He’s just a rookie. It’s a mess up there. Bodies frozen to each other in piles at the front of the room, blood stained on the broken glass, the captains still in their chairs.”

“It sounds horrible.” I said.

“It was. I think they committed suicide by shooting out the glass. There were no other bodies anywhere else up there.”

“Then the sooner we get out of this ship the better.” I grabbed the radio and said, “Where to next?”

There was a pause. “On your map there should be a room marked by four rounded squares inside an octagon. Head there.” She said.

I looked at my camera and zoomed in on the schematics and found the symbol. “It’s three decks down and a hundred meters to the bow.”

“We’ve kept life support on in the areas you’ll be in.”

We walked through the barren halls for quite some time. We looked in rooms on the way, but there was not much to see until we got to a medical bay.

“Check the cabinets for anything useful. We’re running low on medical supplies.”

“Do you really think they’d still be worth it after this time?” a marine asked.

“Anything is worth it. Who knows? Maybe there are some cures in there that we don’t know of. Maybe even a cure for cancer.” I said thinking of my uncle. That got them up to the challenge. Even if they went bad, we might still be able to study them.

We grabbed all the pill boxes we could and stuffed them in bags at random.

“Leave them here we’ll get them on the way back.” A marine suggested. Good idea. We tied them to the door.

We kept on going and found a large door. They took a metal hammer-like tool and knocked it on the door. “Well, that’s no good the door’s at least three feet thick!” he said.

“So . . . what now?”

The marine that helped the rookie took out a grey box from his belt and slapped it on the door, and pressed the button. "We should probably get into the next room down there." He said. We walked quickly to the room.

I took my radio and thought of radioing Triikor, but they were in a vacuum and probably wouldn't notice the explosion.

He counted to three and pressed the detonator. I didn't hear anything but the explosion for the next few seconds.

When that was over, we got up off the ground. One marine had a metal sheet from the ceiling on him. Three others went to help him out.

"Mark what's going on I'm getting a bunch of red lights saying there was an explosion. Are you alright?" she asked.

"We're fine. We kinda had to make our own door if you know what I mean."

"You're insane. Just don't try it again. This ship *is* kind of old you know." She said sarcastically.

"Well then let's just hope that was the only door to this place." I said and walked into the hall. It was a real mess. The doors, well the warped flower made of steel, stretched inwards into the room and back to the walls.

"Vanaar's wrath!" she said over the radio. "There's nothing left! What kind of explosives do you have down there?"

"So you see this then?"

"Yeah I just activated surveillance. I'm rerouting all power to this database."

We walked into the compact room in awe. The room itself wasn't that big. It was about three times larger than my room, but it was completely full of this cube structure. It had damaged parts everywhere from the collapsed roof.

I found a control panel and there was a socket of some sort that I didn't know what went in, so I guessed it was a connection port. One of the marines went to work taking the panel apart. It used wires and chip boards, so it was compatible with our technology. It took a half hour at least. He then took out a base with some wires connected and soldered them to the spot Triikor told him to.

"Alright, the panel's display is showing something." I said.

"Press the red button and then the triangle-shaped symbol. It should recognize the components and I can reroute the system to use that as the communication's array."

I did that, and the screen was blank blue. The team set up the metal rods that composed the antenna. It was two and a half meters tall so it took many people to help assemble it. The screen changed and had some codes on it that I didn't recognize, but I did recognize some of the symbols. The Gaalsien crest was there as well as the Sjet one. There were also other characters I didn't know what they meant because they consisted of a series of right angles placed differently and some odd letters that made no sense to me, but it seemed they could be numbers by how they constantly changed in a pattern.

"Alright click on the button with the triangles with a bar on top surrounded by two half circles. That's going to recognize the device as an antenna." I did that.

"Now press the two circles with the wings. I think you'll recognize that one quite easily. Then I'll be able to control it from here." She said. I found it the minute I set eyes on the panel,

the same thing that was on the Guidestone's pedestal.

The screen went black with the symbol in the centre doing a rotating animation. "It's done." I said.

"Good now get out of there we can leave the antenna to transmit. There's so much data it's going to take hours to get it all. I've set it to use all the remaining power to transmit the most important data that could help the fleet, from the weapons to the engines and the advanced sensors and the log files. Maybe even some personal data of the crewmembers to give an idea of the history of your people, but I'm sure that data is on Hiigara somewhere. The Empire couldn't have destroyed all of it."

"Alright people, we're moving out." I said.

We walked back through the hull and grabbed the bag of medicine on the way. We met up with Triikor and the commander, and started loading stuff onto the corvette to head to the *Mothership*.

Stepping out the hole of the ship after everyone else, I wondered how long the thing would last. It would probably be around longer than I would. Forever preserved in the void, doomed to drift together for possibly millions of years to come. Maybe they'll be as old and mysterious as the Ghost Ship eventually. Maybe in time they will be forgotten. A passerby or looter of the future will wander into the ship as we have, and find the faces of the captain and his crew intact, staring at them from beyond the grave. It was a lonely feeling. A creepy one.

Hopefully with our defiling their burial ground, we can find out what happened here so they can finally be remembered in history.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## The Hound of Hades

ARAZIS

She was in the *Ifriit 3*'s hangar on top of her swarmer. They were launching to assist the guarding ships against the enemy ship. Yes, single ship.

The canopy opened forward and she got in. the canopy closed and the metal became transparent when she pressed the button with her finger. She grabbed the hand controls and the docking clamps released the ship.

She turned on the engines and flew out the hangar, then proceeded to docked with a fuel pod to be transported into battle.

"Welcome back to the fight Saiin, I hope you're still good at piloting one of these." She said.

"Oh I'll do fine. So what's this enemy anyway?"

"Some kind of salvager. It just dragged a missile destroyer away through a blue hyperspace gate that didn't close."

"How can that be?"

"No one knows."

The fuel pods got to the ships that were holding up a wall of defence a couple kilometers out.

"The enemy has been sighted." One of the pilots said.

The ship was codenamed the Junkyard Dog. It was yellow and had two sets of pincers in the front and a green ion trail. It repaired in hyperspace which was similar to the Needleships. Or perhaps it was completely different. All they knew is that three missile destroyers did nothing to it. The enemy came closer and closer, the swarmers attacked. A barrage of gunfire was sent in, but it had no effect. They went to aggressive tactics and just followed it and fired continuously until they needed to cool down their weapons. No damage.

"What's this thing made of!" she yelled. There was no destroying this thing. The destroyers fired on it, but it was still too strong, and it took another destroyer and vanished through the gate.

"What is this thing?" Saiin said.

The multi-beam frigates were sent to assist with some standard destroyers. The assault frigates set up a wall formation also.

It came back, and the swarmers again fired all they could at it with no effect. Instead of grabbing a third missile destroyer, it went for a fuel pod. It must have registered that the enemy was approaching. It took the nearest significant ship and ran to the portal.

"Now it's taking our own units with it!" one of the fuel pod captains said.

"We're coming in to assist, don't worry." said one of the Kushan destroyer captains.

The Dog came. The swarmers fired. Then the multi-beam frigates sped forward and opened fire on it as well in their signature sphere of rotating beams. The swarmers kept firing also, though Arazis noticed they had to dodge beams just to get a shot off which wasn't easy even for a swarmer, so they weren't doing much.

The Kushan ships came and fired their own crimson beams through to the enemy. The Dog didn't give up. It kept its pursuit. It attached itself to a Kushan destroyer and they had to stop firing and aim not to hit it. The destroyer was dragged off through the portal, but upon close observation, she saw something.

"I report damage to the enemy! Repeat the enemy is finally been damaged. We just need to get more concentrated shots." She said.

"I propose we aim for the weak points in the clamps. Then at least it can't take anyone else." A Kadeshi captain said.

"I agree. Aim for the clamps." Another said.

She was sweating over this. As if this one corvette-sized ship could withstand the entire bombardment of the fleet! The carrier had launched bombers to assist them.

This time, the Dog came, and all their weapons fired on one of the clamps. Then the frigates fired on them, and then all the ships fired on the two clamps at the four connection points. The clamps could be seen incandescently glowing in the front. It opened its clamps to grab the carrier, but in doing so, they fused to the hull open and when it tried to close the clamps on the carrier, the metal shattered. The ship immediately sped away through the gate, and didn't come back again.

"We did it!" she yelled. They celebrated, but then went to dock with their respective carrier ships. The Kadeshi stayed to guard the carrier. The fuel pods left with the destroyers.

"I think we're done with that thing." Saiin said.

No one knew what the ship was or why it was made so strong. Later, the official report said it to be the keeper of these derelicts, to keep them from drifting apart over time. The Kadeshi engineers said it was different from the Needleships that repaired in hyperspace by morphing excess hull from areas not needed onto the ship in damaged areas, because even over time it did not take damage. It would remain an unsolved mystery.

## MARK

The salvage corvette docked with the *Mothership* and we disembarked onto the hangar deck. There was another one set up to take us to the carrier. This corvette would stay here making sure the data isn't corrupt and transmitting it to Karan.

"I really hope the carrier is in better of a condition." Triikor said. I can't imagine seeing all the bodies. I looked around and the one marine who was in a panic earlier didn't come with us on the next corvette.

"Hey! It's been a while!" I said as I stepped aboard the particular ship.

"I wouldn't call a month a while anymore but I requested us to be your guides on this one." He said.

"So how's home base this time of year?" I asked.

"Well, the training programs are intense that's for sure. They're training them to be agile by shooting at them with paintballs. Let me tell you those things hurt. A lot!"

"We're also testing a drug that improves the combat awareness of new pilots so we can maybe get some of them out of defenders and into interceptors or even Spectres if they're good

enough around the equipment.” My uncle added. I hadn’t seen him in a while. We still didn’t talk much. There really wasn’t much to say to each other anyway.

“Is it safe?” Triikor asked.

“We don’t know. We’re only testing it on those who volunteer for it. They know the risks.”

“It still seems a bit . . .”

“What, dangerous? Have you noticed our mission lately? They’d gladly give their lives if it means helping us attain our goal. But yes, there are risks. We think we have the final formula ready. Three have been hospitalized lately, but they’ve recovered.” He said.

“So where’s Brad?” I asked.

“He stayed behind. He’s one of the ones hospitalized. He’s under a coma now so he can recover.”

“What happened?”

“Well, his intestines couldn’t handle the bad mix. Lots of his lower organs have tissue damage.” Jay said.

“It sounds bad. On the *Ifriit* we have some Kadeshi who know a thing or two about their sleeper tubes and its liquid healing stuff. It’s incredibly regenerative.” Triikor added.

“Well, for the time being, he’s safe from the chaos.” Rob said.

The ship was loaded and we departed. We didn’t know what to expect to find, but the more we learn the better.

“Rotate and take position just at the edge of the carrier’s fighter bay.” Rob said.

We got out of the corvette and stepped onto the hangar bay. It was one large open area sliced out of the hull to both sides. We were upside down in relation to the rest of the ship. It seemed it was designed this way. The first thing I noticed was the junk everywhere. It seemed like there were explosions on the floor, and there were ships floating in the hangar at random, and in other areas the ships were perfectly preserved.

“Let’s cover the whole area. Split into groups of two.” The leader said.

Triikor came with me. We went to the nearest fighter that was still in its docked state. The hull was rusted away, but I could still make out the shape of that Hiigaran wing crest out of the worn out white paint.

“It looks like it could still fly!” she said. I thought it was ridiculous to think that, but there were no forces of nature here. Sure it was rusted in a lot of areas, but the ship was still in nearly perfect condition otherwise.

“Let’s check it out.” I said. The ship had wings, so it was meant for air travel too. “Perfect. I might be able to figure some of this out if I know what buttons do what.” I said.

I got on the ship carefully, and helped her up after me. We walked to the cockpit and saw that the glass was still intact. I wiped the dust off with my hand. The inside was one seat and a dashboard in front with two hand grips, very simple in design.

“I found the hatch.” She pulled on something and the glass lifted up. I got in and sat in the chair. The buttons were very few, and the grips were fairly self-explanatory, a trigger and the throttle.

“You’re the expert, what does what?” I asked.

She leaned her head in and looked at the buttons. “Well there’s the communications control with the same symbol from earlier, and this whole side is the atmospheric controls so don’t bother with those. You really just have to know how to turn on the power, which is the symbol of the Gaalsien as odd as that may be.”

“Very.”

“Here let me get in there it’ll be easier.” She said. I got out and she went to work on the controls. I had no clue what she was doing but she seemed to know. “There’s no fuel in it. I doubt we’ll be getting it out of here.” She said.

I jumped off the ship and looked on the hangar deck. I found what I was looking for. I grabbed the handle and lifted up from the floor a long tube. “Found it!” I said. I found the compatible socket on the ship’s bottom and hooked it in place.

I heard a humming noise. “It’s working. It looks like there’s some fuel in the lines. Couldn’t tell you how much or how stable it is so I’m just going to fill it so we have enough to get to the *Mothership*.”

“That’s fine.” I said.

The other teams were getting data on the damages and the other mechanisms of the hangar like repair tools and air replenishing tanks that they found were the cause of the explosions. Time got the best of some of them.

When we were done on the fighter deck, we moved on to that large opening we guessed to be a frigate bay. It didn’t seem like a very good one because of the lack of hull as a defence against a ship under construction, but there was equipment to build it there all throughout the decks.

There wasn’t much interesting here so we moved on to the bridge. The halls of the ship were rusted and torn. Some areas were bent in and other areas had hull breaches that could be seen made by who knows what.

As soon as we turned a corner, there was a skeleton. It made a few of us jump, but we got over it.

“Well I guess they weren’t all in the bridge.” I said.

“And it looks like life support lasted a lot longer looking at the amount of rust and decay. I checked the cruiser’s log files. The life support across the ship was disabled until we breached the hull. Something recognized that and started turning the ship back on very slowly wherever it could.”

“Oh . . . then what about the water?”

“I’m guessing it was liquid nitrogen by the temperature the ship was actually at when we walked by it. This ship had life support until everything shut down. Eventually it breached the hull and the air escaped it.”

“Leaves you to wonder if they died of suffocation or starvation first.” The commander commented.

“Let’s not find out.” I said. We kept moving. The closer we got to the bridge the more bodies we found, one, then another, then two, then a half which disturbed us a lot. Then we came to a room that was very gut wrenching. It was a mass grave. The place was filled with bones and

frozen remnants of whatever was leftover at the time of the air leaving.

No one said anything. We just moved on. We found a mess of wiring and boards put together by hand. "It looks like someone was trying to signal home." She said earlier that the communications were destroyed on all these ships. They could have tried to build their own.

"I wonder why these ships lasted no time and the exile ships lasted for ages with no aid." One of the marines said.

"That's easy. The exile barges were made to last. These were made to fight. Life support was priority on the barges. Here it wasn't. People tried to make it so it was, and that didn't end too well." The commander said.

We got to the bridge after a lot of walking through halls with bodies everywhere. We looked out into the graveyard. We could see the missile destroyers killing off autoguns one by one off to the distance.

"Are you guys almost done in there?" Rob asked.

"We've just reached the bridge. There's nothing here. We're leaving." The commander answered.

None of us wanted to stay here either. We made it back to the hangar, and I examined some of the stuff around the place quickly then told them I was taking one of these old fighters out. They didn't really care all that much. They just wanted to be done with this job. The history of these ships was too much for them as it seemed.

I got in the ship, and pressed the right controls that I remembered. The ship turned on, and it lifted up off the hangar deck. I went forward, and tried to get used to the ship and then made my way out the hangar.

To my right there was a ramp-like thing that could have been a magnetic rail like what Arazis tells me the Needleships use, but there was no power in this floating hulk anyway. So I made my way out trying not to hit anything in the process, which was hard considering the amount of debris around me.

I got out into space, and saw the corvette. I waved and they flashed a light. The canopy was too far for me to see them. They had equipment. I think the ship had some, but I wasn't chancing using anything strange. I moved forward as fast as I could to see how the ship held up. Rather well actually. It was even faster than an interceptor.

I got to the *Mothership* first. Someone must have contacted them because I wasn't fired on.

I docked in the utility bay so that tests could be done on the ship.

I got out and opened my visor. I waved over a support group. "Clean this ship up a bit, will you? It's older than anyone in the history of Kharak, so be careful."

I saw them come over with hoses to wash it down, removing a huge amount of dust and rust. I had nothing to do but wait, so I watched for a while.

## JOHN

They moved farther into the chaos. They came across another portal. One of the destroyers was there.

"Friendly missile destroyer detected captain! It's one of our own!"

“Status?” John asked.

“Hold on a moment . . . yes we’re detecting heat sources onboard but all power has turned off to the ship. It could get very cold very quickly.”

“Thank the maker they’re alright. Send a salvage team to pick them up.” He picked up his radio. “Carrier *Khuntala*, send out the bomber teams to scout out the other areas. We can’t afford to wait too long now. The captured ships have survivors and they’re still in Karos.”

“Launching bombers now.” The captain responded.

He sent the assault frigates on ahead to clear the way faster. He was becoming impatient. They had been in this place for hours now.

“Captain, we’re happy to inform you that the corvette has safely docked with the *Mother-ship*.” Paul said.

“Good.”

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Shining Hinterlands

MARK

“You actually flew this thing here? You’re just as crazy as ever I see.” Jay said.

“So what do you think she looks like?” I asked. It had a body that acted as wings and pointed in the front, and had a single engine in the back with a teal coloured engine trail.

“It looks kind of like a squashed dart but curvier.” He was referring to how the wings curved down when docked, though they flatten out when in flight.

“I called the research division. I think they’re gonna have fun with this that’s for sure. On top of that they have the data from the cruiser.”

“Don’t forget Elson’s details on the Empire.” He added.

“Come on they’ve finished the first heavy cruiser.” I said and started heading to the back of the hangar. He followed me to the passageway to the capital bay where we saw it.

“Whoa . . . what do they call this thing? Those guns are huge!”

“The Avatar-class.” I said. “The first thing they sifted out of the giant mess of that cruiser was the weapons. And they’ve thrown them onto this. Now we actually have a rival to the Qwaar-Jets. Now we’re ready to win this war.” I said confidently.

We watched the fuelling cables detach and move out of the hangar.

“So . . . about your uncle.” He started. “He’s getting worse. It might not seem like it right now but he’s in horrible pain.” He said. “Or at least that’s what the doctors said.”

“I haven’t been paying enough attention to be honest.” I said.

“He does respect you. More than he did your father.” Of course I already knew this, but I guess he was closer to my uncle than I was.

ERIC

He had been watching the whole event on the observation deck along with a few other people.

“So Eric, you jealous Mark gets to go and you don’t? They do meet up late at night some nights in the halls you know.” Someone said to annoy him.

“Someone’s gotta stay here.”

“Well it didn’t need to be you specifically. Why didn’t Mark stay?”

“Because he wanted to go. Why do I care I’d rather not go on one of those things anyway.” He was already walking away so the conversation dropped.

He knew that she was seeing him. They were talking about what would happen after the war if the exiles won. She was worried for her people. Not all of them were bad. Even the ones that sided with the imperials didn’t know any better.

Eric couldn’t stay up late anyway. She was the opposite. She couldn’t sleep. Insomnia was

just normal to her. Mark couldn't sleep because of the stress put on him. They talked about it sometimes.

Eric told him that if he was on the *Mothership* it would probably be better at this point, since there aren't as many of the original crew there anymore. Mark's response was that he hated the sleepers. They hadn't suffered what the original crew has and it showed in their personality. Some of them hadn't even accepted that the Genocide actually happened.

He sighed in relief that he didn't have to lead anything yet. As time moved on he was more and more glad that they chose Mark over him for the squadron captains.

As the ship kept moving forward, he eventually saw a reddish half destroyed hull of a ship. The carrier stopped.

"We've received a transmission from Captain Elson that this ship is the relay station. We're sending an interceptor to access the station to give control over to Elson." The captain's voice said.

The room became too loud for him, so he left to wander the halls and eventually end up in the hangar bay.

## P'TEER

He waited patiently by the *Mothership*'s side for control of the relay station to be given to him. He explained to the pilot what to do as soon as the fighter docked.

"It's doing something." The pilot said. He waited. It would take some time to start up the subspace transmitter.

"Sir, we're getting a signal from it. We've got control of the ship," his communications officer said.

"Good work," he said and prepared for what he had to say. "This is Captain Elson of the *Kapella*. The time has come. Initiate phase three of the plan. Take arms against your imperial captors and revolt. The Exiles are nearing their homeworld and this is the time to strike. Fight for your freedom while the Emperor and his guards are distracted. I ask as many planets in the empire as possible to aid us in this goal. The Emperor will have nowhere to flee. We have already chosen our path by joining this rebellion. There's no turning back now." He took a deep breath, and sat back in his chair. Many thoughts were running through his head at once. Most notably was the situation on Hiigara. Jarred knew to wait until the *Mothership* jumped into orbit to take the assault on the imperial palace. Was he ready? It was the most important of all the battles. Taking the palace meant that control over Hiigara was almost guaranteed.

He looked at the communications officer that gave back a slight nod. It was done. Their fate was sealed. Whether they make it out alive or not, they will have to go to arrive above the skies of their homeworld. As he looked out at the *Mothership*, he felt relieved that they were strong enough to go through with it, knowing how ludicrous the plan was.

He took the transmitter and said, "Kushan fleet, it is time for our departure. I have transmitted plans you must follow at all costs. Everything you'll need to reach your homeworld is within these plans. Farewell and good luck," and engaged the hyperdrive. The *Kapella* was once again on its way to battle.

## MARK

I insisted on staying aboard the *Mothership* for this jump. Though it was only for a week or possibly even less with Elson's improvements to our hyperdrive systems, I still felt it was enough time. My mind was not in the right place. I needed time in solitude to get away from my present life. Battle will be hard. Chances are that I will have friends that will die. Friends I've made on-board this journey. You'd think that I'd be so accustomed to loss at this point, but in reality it made each person I know just that much more valuable to me. To think about losing someone as close to me as Jay, Isel, Eric, the Taiidan or even Arazis, I don't know if I would be in the right mindset to fight if I was around them all the time.

It's the first rule of being a pilot, above all else, and I blew it. Just like my father did. But it formed bonds, and made the teams as a whole stronger together. I can't imagine what it must have felt like to my father when his wife's fighter was shot down. I didn't want to go through that again, so I'm taking time to prepare for the worst. It's also worth mentioning it might be my last chance to say goodbye to my uncle, the only family I have left.

## ARAZIS

He was gone. Only for a little while, but it felt different to her. Saiin was back to his normal self with a bit of artistic talent to go along with that, but she wondered if she'd ever be able to go back to being the person she was onboard the *Amun*.

She's seen too much for that now. All the lonely nights leaves lots of time to think. She still had trouble sleeping, they made medication for that, but she preferred not to take it. Many nights she doesn't sleep at all. Just reflects on current events and her past, the future she prefers not to wonder about, because all she sees is more war.

The ships captured by the junkyard ship have been all salvaged. It was a close call. The life support systems were turned off, so the air was thinning and the ship was cooling to freezing. All were safe now, however. They were preparing the fleet to enter hyperspace and leave this place.

Karos, a huge graveyard of once was, preludes the battles ahead. New ships have been constructed in the meantime, destroyers, frigates, the new heavy cruisers that were monsters compared to the Kadeshi ships she was used to.

The enormous void of space seemed flooded with the light of the galaxy's core. The monstrous ring structures cast shadows across lightyears of space in contrast. What other marvels would she see in her lifetime? She hoped her ancient homeworld was one of them.

## JARRED

Time was running out. But the rebels were prepared. They would never assemble in the same area, it would be too risky. So knowing the amount of people within the assault force was hard. There were five thousand rebels ready to attack on his command. Most of them had gathered within the last few weeks alone. They waited until the last minute to say they would fight. It was safer that way anyway. They knew his ties to Elson, and they had great respect for the rebel leader. Elson trusted him, so these rebels did also. They would not question anything he said.

He was at a mandatory Taiidan military assembly. Even if he was off duty he was on call. He

wanted them to have as little suspicion for him as possible. The assembly had two thousand people. He looked around him. There were so many. And his rebel army had more than twice that.

“You will be expected to come to battle at a moment’s notice. No questions asked. If we call for you, you must go to battle for the Emperor. His highness’s flagship is in transit on its way to Hiigara at this moment.” the officer said. No one commented. But the looks on the faces of the people around him gave him just the confidence he needed. None looked happy about this. Why should they be? They had families here. The Exiles would be merciless to them if they decided to fight.

Many of these people might be his rebels. Many with military background detest the actions of their Emperor. He is a coward. And genocide was not in their nature. They spared the Exiles. That he knew. Records were erased, but they returned. Everyone now knows about the actions of the Emperor in response. The Rebel media was helping the situation. Many of the civilians now disagree with the Emperor. But they are too afraid to call themselves rebels. He couldn’t blame them.

The assembly continued for a good thirty minutes until they were dismissed. While walking around he got a few nods and winks. Very subtle gestures, but all the more reassuring that they were on his side.

It was just before sunset in the city’s centre. Children had just gotten out of school and were running home joyously, blissfully unaware of the upcoming horror. But why would he expect any more from them? The streets were empty due to the latest traffic curfew. The sun reflected its warm orange light off the tall silver skyscrapers.

He walked alone down the bricked roads of his apartment block. The raunchy smell of gasoline was no longer in the air, so walking became bearable in the more run down parts of the city.

He unlocked his door on the second floor and closed it behind him. He collapsed on his bed and wondered how it would all turn out. Then his mind went to his cousin. He was a confused young individual. He was infatuated by the daughter of the emperor. He didn’t know what to do about it. Surely the rebels wouldn’t care about Caleb that much to spare the bloodline. Maybe he could guilt them into not shooting her. Allowing him time to run and hide. However the situation might be out of his hands if Elson takes complete command like he planned. He had big ideas for the future of the Taiidan. Would the girl be considered a wanted criminal just because of her blood? He guessed he’d just have to wait and find out. He hated waiting.

The phone rang just as he was about to pass out. He picked it up. “Hello?”

“Is this a private line?” her voice said. She hadn’t heard it in years.

“No.” he answered.

“Meet me at the place we used to go,” she said and hung up. He knew where she meant and got ready. He put on some heavy clothes. It would get wet and cold where he was going.

He had taken his electric bike to cross most of the city. It was allowed for small non-polluting vehicles to travel until midnight. But chances are he would not be home before then.

He stopped the bike on the outskirts of the city. He took it on the curb and into the marshy woods below the raised roadway.

He leaned it up against a tree and began walking into the swamp forest. The fog was cold and smelled bad, but it was more bearable than the old smell of the city centre.

He got to an old wooden bridge and saw her standing there in the middle. He walked up to

her and stood beside her. It had been years. Before he entered the military was the last time he saw her. They just stood there for a few minutes not wanting to break the silence.

“So is it true then?” she asked.

“Is what true?” he said.

“That you’re a rebel leader now,” she said. The situation got complicated. He didn’t know what to answer.

He answered the only way he could. “Yes.”

She pulled out a gun, but her arm was shaking. Then tears could be seen falling to the wooden ground. “I can’t do it,” she said, and she threw the gun into the swamp waters.

“Who told you this Natalia?” he asked.

“It’s just a rumour that’s been going around due to your reluctance to engage in military stuff and your meetings that haven’t been ignored. No one could hear anything from them, but still. I’m only one of the spies told to watch you.”

“So why did they send you to do this?” he asked.

“Because of our history. And also it might be some sick joke on their part.”

“I saw you arguing with Caleb. Please don’t tell me he’s in this too.”

“He is. It was his own choice. You know what happened to his parents.”

“And I also saw him with the Emperor’s daughter. What was her name again? I think it was Amelia or something?”

“I’m worried about her to be honest,” he said.

“Then I guess you’re in a bind. But at least now we know the rebels aren’t resorting to killing children,” she said.

“That’s the thing, I don’t know about the others. And for your information, I already knew I was being spied on. The rebels . . . well let’s just say that we are many.” Even though they used to be friends, he couldn’t trust her.

“I guess there isn’t much information I can get out of you. You’re just lucky they sent me alone.” she said.

“When this is all over . . . if you’re still up for that kiss I promised you . . .”

She had to laugh at that. “Yeah. When this is all over I think I’m going to go on permanent vacation.”

“You have no idea how hard it is for us . . . But we’re fairly confident we’ll win. I won’t give out any numbers, but we’ve got enough that would make you scared. We’ve got people everywhere you can think of. Your own commander might be a rebel and you wouldn’t know it. That’s a rough example of what I mean. I don’t know why you serve this filthy empire still, but just know that when the time comes, I’m sure the rebels will be much more merciful on you than the emperor would be to us.”

“I’m not sure if I should be relieved by that.”

“Then there’s my answer,” he said. “It means that you don’t think you can stop us. That’s all I needed to hear.” She stayed silent. “At this point I don’t really care about the numbers that die. All I care about is the numbers that I know as people stay alive. It might seem wrong on a moral level, but the death toll is just so high already, a few thousand more wouldn’t matter. The people left alive that I know I can count on my hands. I don’t want to lose any of them. I fight for the people, but really I fight for a safe future that I can be proud of. The Empire doesn’t promise that for us. So why do you serve it?”

“Because I have to. It’s my duty. I made a promise when I joined. I can’t go back now. It seems though, that you already have. I can’t just run away. I’m too involved now. The next time I

“speak to you, I hope it won’t be in a prison awaiting execution,” she said and walked into the woods.

He wanted her to be safe. He wondered if that was even possible now. From the killing he’s seen, when they find out she had lied to them, they’d shoot her for sure. And he’d only have himself to blame. That night, he swore to himself that Caleb would survive. He would make sure.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Transit

MARK

I woke up in a room just like the one I had been in at the beginning of this journey. “It’s been two days already.” I said to myself. The ship was quiet. I got a place away from everyone else, near the middle of the ship. I did come here for solitude after all. The red emergency lights were easier on the eyes anyway. There was nothing but the low hum of the ship’s power conduits. That and the mice that made it aboard. It seems that there were many stray animals running about in the ship.

The fighter that I got from the derelict carrier happened to be in great shape considering its age. The researchers now know that it was an interceptor craft, but far more powerful than anything we have. The ancient Hiigarans seem to have better technology that we do thousands of years later. It’s weaponry seems to be the same as the Taiidan ships that we’ve captured. It’s maximum speed is nearly as fast as a scout, and it is a lot more fuel efficient than our current tanks. They’ve started researching the next generation fighter drives with the information gathered from it.

The data from the heavy cruiser’s database helped a lot more. We’ve learned lots of military advancements and even modelled our own heavy cruisers after it. They were the bulk of the Hiigaran navy along with the carriers. Other ships existed also, like destroyers and frigates of many sizes, but none seem to have been in the area we scouted. Their flagship was an incredible goliath of a vessel simply named *Sajuuk’s Wrath*. It was even larger than our *Mothership*.

From historic files, we’ve also found out that Hiigara was home to just over six billion people before its fall. All of them were sent into exile.

But enough dwelling on the past, the future is what matters at the moment. My uncle is having a surgery done to see if they can fix him. The Kadeshi doctors are helping too. It seems that trained pilots are a minority of the many enemies we faced. Swarm tactics made it not matter how much training they got anyway.

The sleeper tubes on their ships don’t have the power to suppress a disease of this severity. So the Kadeshi have trained scientists in the field to deal with any foreign contaminants entering the Garden onboard all Needleships. Unfortunately they also required pilot training too.

They have some spray chemicals that they think could work if they get the right mix, but they’ll need a lot of it, and he’ll need to be conscious when it’s applied. The thought of it alone is horribly painful.

ARAZIS

She stared out the back viewport at the command bridge of the *Mothership* along with Isel. She was feeling a bit emotional about him not coming back. “Why didn’t he even tell me? Doesn’t he trust me?” she kept saying.

“He probably just wants some time alone to think. I’ve learned just to avoid him at times like

that. And it's only for a few days." Isel replied. "If I know him he's not going to stay.

"I just wish he told me he was leaving." if he wants to be alone he just needs to say so." she said.

"He's just like that. He'll abandon everything to focus on what matters the most to him."

"So then . . . I don't matter?"

"Oh wait no that's not what I meant."

"Just forget it. I know what you mean. I'm just over-thinking things. I'm sure he's got too much on his mind right now." she said.

"Don't we all." But she did understand. He needs to focus on his one goal. The only one that matters above all else. A goal he has killed for, and will kill again for, a goal he would die for. Hiigara. She wondered if she was willing to do the same.

The past few days she was mostly either alone or with Saiin, who was making money in sketch drawings he's been able to sell. He was having fun with it, and it gave him something to do. She enjoyed watching him draw. She remembers some of the drawings. Some of them were memories they shared. When he worked with colours he took his time to get it right.

She went to another Kadeshi meeting. She had become popular apparently much to her surprise. The meetings were the same as usual. After the first few, a lot of the newcomers stopped coming to the meetings, only the ones who actually cared to, showed up. Triikor came with her a lot of the time as she still couldn't sleep, as usual. When she did they usually stayed in the balconies not to attract attention. A lot of them still fear the Taiidan. That and a lot of them just have a general dislike for Taiidan.

She found it strange how they could tell so easily who was and wasn't a Taiidan. She assumed it was the skin. Kadeshi mining crews or ship crews in general are all pasty white, and the Kushan are darker with dark hair and brown eyes because they were desert dwellers and had an intense heat overhead from their aging sun.

Though that night, she had gone with her, and they sat in the main area. She had commented on how incredible it looked lit up from their angle. Others around them moved away. It seemed to her that the taiidan girl had gotten used to stuff like this happening. She didn't even notice it anymore.

"We have departed from the graveyard and now are to emerge to a new battle. One that may shape our future," someone said in the meeting. "We are entering an area far into the enemy's control zone. Are any of you afraid?"

"I sure am." Triikor said under her breath. Only Arazis heard her. She wondered a lot about her. Her family, her home, she worried for them that was for sure. She was the only one who knew just how powerful the enemy was. The thought was so frightening, that it kept her awake at night. At least that's what she had said.

"That's what I thought. Our leader and saviour, Mark Soban has the same opinion." Although what they didn't know that she did, is that he was so distressed about this that he had to leave to get his mind straight. She saw him for who he was. Just a normal person. Scared just as much as anyone. But it was good for them to feel like they're invincible. They'll fight better. Or would they get too full of themselves and be sloppy? She didn't know what to think about it. She was no strategist.

"So what does miss Arazis say about this situation?" another said. She was the closest to Mark of any Kadeshi, so they asked her many things.

People looked in their direction. They were whispering about her being with the Taiidan and many things she paid little attention to.

“Me, I think this is going to be hard. And each battle will keep getting harder until the battle for the homeworld becomes nearly impossible. The enemy is a force to be reckoned with. They’re not a minor threat as some of you think. We’ve only been able to get this far this safely because of the Rebels. This is an armada of ships that controls a quarter of the galaxy. In comparison, Kadesh is but a speck. We need to fight harder and harder each time we launch our swarms. Each time we need to get better. And yes, many of us will die. But the cause of these battles is a great one. Hiigara is worth dying for ten times over. They have nowhere left to go. We have a nebula to retreat to if we please, but they do not.”

“Can I just say something here?” Triikor said. Some were hesitant but she was allowed to speak. It was an area completely open to discussion. Everyone had the right to speak as long as no one else was. “How long will that last? How long will they fear you for your stealth? The Kushan have escaped the nebula unharmed. If they are defeated, the Taiidan will no longer fear your people. And you know what happens next.” There were gasps in the room. “We fight not only for them, and your ancestral homeworld, but we fight for the seven colonies. For your families and friends, so that they will be safe and hidden forever. And for the last time, you say you are fearless towards the Taiidan, but even now, as I stand here, you refrain from being anywhere near me. Mark is my friend. He isn’t afraid of me in any way. If you can’t overcome the fear or hatred towards me, then you are lying to yourselves if you think you stand a chance against the Elite Guard of the core worlds.” Then she sat down.

They knew what she meant. She was right. They knew it. Arazis saw them shamefully lowering their heads. “Maybe that’ll get them thinking,” she said.

“I hope so. Or this journey won’t have a very happy ending.”

## MARK

It was late in the afternoon. Jay, Bradley and I were sitting in the waiting room of the hospital. My uncle was going through the surgery soon.

“How painful did they say it would be?” Bradley asked.

“They have some nerve numbing chemicals that can get rid of a lot of the physical pain but it’s more the psychological pain they’re worried about. They don’t know if he’ll be fit for duty when he’s out.”

“Oh. So you’re going in with him?”

“I’m the only family he’s got left.” I said. But I knew that didn’t matter. Jay knew him much more than I did anyway.

A few minutes went by. I hate the smell of hospitals. It makes my stomach hurt. More specifically the bullet wound from many months ago. Then the doctors came out and told me to go with them. They led me through the hall to a room where they were getting ready. The Kadeshi were standing to the side with the chemical they produced.

“Hey kid, haven’t seen you in a while,” he said before coughing. He was very weak. He probably hated it a lot.

“Well, aren’t you looking just great.” I said.

“Funny,” he said. “I never thought this could be the way it ends. And I’m hoping it isn’t,” he said. “It just seems like a cruel joke that a Sobani should die of disease instead of combat don’t

you think?" he said smiling.

"You're not dead yet so I'd keep looking forward to that battle."

"So are we ready to get started? You know of course that this has never been tested yet, it's all theoretical," the doctor said.

"Yeah, yeah Sjet just cut me open already will you?" he said handing him the scalpel. The doctor sighed and took it.

"So why can't it be injected again?" I asked. It seems rather ridiculous that they have to go through all of this trouble to spray him with this stuff.

"Oh we're not just spraying it inside him, we're also transplanting a few major organs." he said.

"From where?" I asked.

"Well . . . There's a large number of suicides . . . and given the circumstances I think that it'd be wise to at least let them help in some way." he said. It was disturbing, but he was right.

"Now then, we've injected you with some painkillers, but we can't put you out. So you'll be awake the whole time. We're going to do both procedures at the same time."

"Yeah I've read the report just get this over with," he said.

"Remember Rob, don't look down. Just focus on me or the ceiling." I said. He rolled his eyes and stared at the metal roof. "I hate metal. I hate it so much. I can't wait to see a sky again." he said. I could tell he was tired. Whether it be physical or mental, it didn't matter. He was tired of everything. It seems we have more in common than I thought.

They made the first incision. I couldn't watch. Seconds turned into minutes, and time passed by as the doctors went to work. I did learn one thing, tumours look horrible. They removed many parts from him that I thought were pretty important, but I wasn't the doctor.

Rob's breathing sped up. He was panicking. He must have seen something being removed. He was being restrained, but I could see him trying to get out. He looked at me, and his breathing slowed down. And his eyes closed.

"He's passing out! You! Keep him awake!" one of them told me.

"Hey! Don't you dare do that!" I said opening his eyelids. "Stay awake!" I ordered. He shook his head and became conscious again. "Markus?" he said. Then realized it was just me. He laid his head back and the process continued.

The first stage lasted an hour. It was weird seeing him change expressions all the time. I've known him as some anger-filled warrior with a hatred for his brother, not caring about anyone, and then he becomes someone I've never met before. Someone from the past maybe.

"You look so much like him from back then. When we still talked." he said. "Sometimes I miss those days. Then other times I want to kill him myself. I've called him a disgrace to our kiithid. But I might have just been jealous of him. He had it all. My parents cared more about him than me, he always scored better than me in his courses, he's a better pilot than me, he even found love. Something I don't think will be possible for me now." It's odd he's telling this all to me now. But I assume it's because he feels death approaching. "I just need to tell someone before I die. And right now, there's not much else I can do but talk," he said.

"That's fine, as long as you stay awake."

"He had everything given to him. I worked hard at everything I did and now look at me. I'm a corvette captain with a bunch of kids. That's not much to take pride in. I'd rather have been defending Kharak to the death, but it seems that it was just never my destiny." His speech was starting to slur. The doctor had begun replacing organs and stuff. I still couldn't watch. "Destiny . . . You seem to have one of those don't you. Yes . . . You're already doing great things. Historic

things. But what is your destiny really? Are you to be a hero for life like your father, or a martyr for our cause?" he said.

"Truth be told, I haven't the slightest idea. But my thinking is that if I go into battle not expecting to make it out alive, I have nothing left to lose." He laughed under his breath at that.

"Just as reckless as he was. You *do* have something to lose kid. It's the same thing you lost when you fell to your knees upon seeing Kharak burning. It's not something you can run away from if that's really why you're here. Please. You don't really expect me to believe you're only here for me, your poor sick uncle, do you?" I hated how clearly he can see through me. Even in his current condition.

"You seem to know a lot about my friends then?"

"That observation deck is rarely empty just so you know. I'm always in there." I've only seen him a few times. Was he really there all those times? It never was very brightly lit so it is possible. "I know you're in love. You're the same as your father was with your mother. I hated him for it, and seeing it repeated now, I'm reminded of how stupid I was for feeling that way. It was selfish and I was wrong. If I could relive those days, believe me I would."

"It's funny you of all people should be the one to tell me to be more like my father."

"I know right? How strange. But I know I'm right with this. Don't run away. You do have friends and you do care for them. Preparing yourself for their deaths won't help. The code us pilots live by only applies to those we don't already know. It's useless to follow at this point. If they die they die. And we can mourn them after the fact. But don't insult them by pretending like they're already dead. My brother has been dead to me for years. And now that he is dead, there's only emptiness where he should have been." I thought I could see tears building in his eyes. But he wouldn't let them fall out.

The doctors stepped back from him. The Kadeshi came forward with their chemical. "This is going to sting. A lot," they said. It was horrible to watch. Every spray he screamed out in pain. I had no idea what was in this stuff they were using, but whatever it was, it was powerful. It lasted a minute. When it was over, he passed out. But not before telling me some last words.

"Mark, you already know everything else I need to tell you. Be a hero to yourself for a change."

"It's over. I'll stitch him back up. He can sleep now. You can leave if you want," he said. I took a few seconds. I saw his lungs inflate and it grossed me out so I left.

Back in the waiting room the three of us waited for a half hour longer. Bradley left then. "So my guess is that you're here to run away." Jay said. "I mean . . . You don't talk to your uncle much and you really didn't need to be here for anything else."

"What? I can't stop by to say hello to my old friend and possibly some farmers later?"

"I know you better than that," he said.

"Yeah. I guess you're right. I shouldn't be here. This is stupid. I should be there. With the military where I belong. With the one's I fight with."

"With her too."

Damn it Jay get out of my head. Am I really that easy to read? *Yes Mark, you really are.* I imagined him replying. The only problem is they're right. So this whole trip was a waste of time.

## P'TEER

The *Kapella* exited hyperspace in orbit of a jungle planet still outside of imperial space.

They had rebels down there, and supplies. There was a small fleet in orbit to guard him the rest of the way.

“Plot a course for the imperial base on the surface. We’ll resupply there and make further coordinations with other rebel factions across imperial space. Now that my message is out, I plan on showing up to deliver the promise. I think the traditionalist worlds should be the first to break off. It will distract the armada long enough for us to gather a fleet and for the Hiigarans to destroy the inhibitor station.”

“Sounds good sir, course plotted for the surface. Brace yourselves for turbulence. Securing all decks.”

“This is Captain Elson. All hands brace yourselves for landing procedures and afterwards prepare for a brief disembarking onto the surface if you wish. A little fresh air could do us all some good before we have to go to battle again.”

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Bridge Of Sighs

### TRIIKOR

She, Arazis, Eric, Saiin and Isel were together in the observation deck with a bunch of others. They were minutes away from exiting hyperspace. In only a week, they travelled what would have taken double that time. The data that Captain Elson provided had improvements to the hyperdrive, so their speed was more than doubled.

The voice of fleet intelligence came on the speaker. "According to the data we received from Captain Elson, the Homeworld system is surrounded by a network of hyperspace inhibitors. The inhibitors are all heavily shielded and do not show up on any sensors." Schematics of these inhibitors appeared on the screen above them. It was an array of multiple ships in a ring formation. "Elson has provided us with coordinates of the most vulnerable inhibitor station. Our goal is to destroy the station and create our own access point." Then the screen flashed off.

"Least guarded. Please. There's still going to be well over a hundred frigates guarding this thing," she said.

"A hundred!" Eric exclaimed. Others looked over as well.

"Yeah. They're all AI controlled though, so they're not too bright with tactics. When they see a target they'll only follow that one target, even if other ships come in to intercept them. But I bet Elson already gave those details. That doesn't mean this is going to be easy. Who knows what extra security they've put now that all this is happening."

The familiar blue door opened up, and they found themselves staring out at the yellow and orange backlit space. The arms of the galaxy stretching across the universe.

### MARK

I stood on the hangar deck getting my fighter ready for launch. "Doesn't it look beautiful?" I heard. I turned around and saw my uncle.

"You should be in a hospital bed." I said. It was only a few days after the surgery.

"Yeah right and miss something like this? This is our entrance to the Hiigaran system. There's no chance a few physical problems are gonna stop me," he said. I understood. And I wasn't going to argue. I disconnected the fuel line to my fighter when the tank hit full and went to see out the hangar door. My fighter was on the frigate deck along with a few salvagers. He stood at the edge of the hangar deck staring out. "This sight . . . I get a feeling it will be the last one I ever witness," he said.

"Nonsense, they just fixed you up, remember?"

"Not the cancer, it's just a feeling. Never mind it's nothing to worry about." I had a feeling too. It wasn't a good one either. He stood there, almost in a daze, then he left to the corvette.

"Now here's something I haven't seen in a while," Jay said. He was checking out the engines of the *Ferin Sha*. He helped me reconstruct them, after all. He saw I wasn't in a good mood.

"You scared?" he said.

“This time, more than usual. I have a sense that death is approaching. Rob is getting it too.” he became focused now. More serious, aside from his usual self.

“Who are you getting this around?” he asked.

“It’s hard to say for sure.” And that was the end of our conversation.

I helped him load additional supplies onto the corvette. This was going to be a long mission. It could last days. I headed for my fighter as I watched the salvage corvette fly out the hangar, hoping it would return safely once this is all over with.

Once getting into my cockpit I could see other interceptors launching from the higher decks. I sighed, turned on the power, and got the green light.

Isel was leading a squad of cloaked fighters ahead to scout out the area. It was just me, Eric and Triikor in my squad now, not counting the other two that I’ve never met. Arazis was with the rest of the Kadeshi swarmers.

“So how is everyone on the carrier?” I asked to them.

“Same as usual,” she said. “Ara’s a bit angry at you. Or at least she was.” And she had the right to be.

We got the mission plan sent to us in text on our data screen. They were sending three proximity sensors towards the enemy sphere of frigates to lure them out and capture them one by one. There were twenty or so salvagers standing by with repair corvettes to support them. Isel’s team also had a visual of the enemy inhibitor structure. They were scouting out the area to find the numbers we were dealing with. There was a carrier with a bunch of fighters on patrol and a cloak generator with a few destroyers. And half a dozen other frigates throughout the area.

Once the huge sphere of hundreds of frigates was no longer a threat, we could move in to attack the inhibitor and it’s guarding fleet. It could take a long while.

I could see the small sensor ships flying by overhead. Our many carriers also left to more strategic locations around the area. One was sent to the small dust cloud of resources to the left with the collectors and a guard of a dozen frigates and a destroyer, two including the *Ifriit* farther forward to quicken the salvaging process with a guard of two destroyers and a heavy cruiser, and the one with the bombers was sent to the right and was on standby until we were done with the frigates. The rest of the assault capital ships were put in formation and sent halfway between the two carriers and the *Mothership* as an extra precaution. The support frigates were to assist wherever they could.

We were ready for battle. A truly organized military force. Something I only dreamed I would see when we were fighting the first battle against the Taiidan. I had faith in our capability to win this battle. But it was by no means going to be easy, and I knew that. I hoped that everyone else did too.

## JARRED

The days passed by normally. But every week there was more and more evidence the people of Haalt-Nar were in support of the rebellion. He would walk around town and see huge graffiti paintings declaring their stance on the situation, exposing the corruption and appealing to the large audiences of the city. There were so many, that the government was having trouble covering them all up before more came along. And some hacktivists were taking the imperial advert-

isement network and sending out small but significant messages all across the empire.

The police were routinely checking people's homes and monitoring the global data net for anything harmful and blocking their servers from the public. One of the largest non-imperial video sharing services was taken out overnight, hundreds of millions of users had used it to share their content openly. The government was collapsing from the inside. The people were displaying a voice. And they did not like it.

On the other hand, there were still many loyal to the empire, and they had their own media distribution. They were still in the majority. It didn't matter, because he knew the rebellion already had over ten thousand supporters that were willing to help him in overthrowing the imperial palace, and hundreds of thousands others willing to step in once they succeeded. Because they knew that once the palace fell, Hiigara would be free.

He hadn't spoken to Caleb since that day when he told him what needed to be done with the emperor's daughter. He was still angry. It seems that they suspected him of being a rebel because of his past with the police and the murder of his parents, but she would not believe it and dismissed whoever said otherwise.

He had also not heard a thing from his old friend. She could be dead for not completing her mission, or she could have lied and they believed her, and she was still spying on him. So he still kept his guard up. He stopped going to fountain meetings. It was too risky now that he knew they were being watched and recorded there. The others already knew what needed to be done. It was only a matter of time. And that time was quickly approaching. Elson was rumoured to be amassing a fleet in the outer territories of the empire and heading to Traditionalist space. If they side with Elson, this war is already over. They are the essence of all that is Taiidan. Once they side with him, possibly billions will see that the empire is flawed. They had that much influence.

He heard an explosion on the upper levels of his building. He got his stuff ready, and ran outside. Someone had bombed the building on the level he was on two nights before. He changed his room every week to be safe, changed buildings every month.

Before he knew what was going on, he was knocked out and dragged away unconscious.

He woke up in a dark room with no light. He couldn't even see his hands in front of his face. He took a few seconds to recollect his thoughts.

"Hey! Where am I?" he yelled out not sure if anyone would answer. There was a pause, but his answer was a rectangle of light. He got up and walked to what he found out was a door. He stepped into a white hallway.

The floor had blue arrows so he followed them. After a few minutes of walking, he found another room. He went in, and found fifty or so people, in what looked like a control room of some sort.

"It's good to see you awake, Jarred Alaikiir. I'm sorry for the whole keeping you captive thing. You're safe here. This is a rebel base five kilometres underground. The only way the empire can hear anything that goes on here is if they tried really hard. And they don't have any reason to, because they don't know this place exists," one of them said. He assumed this guy was in charge of the facility.

"Huh? A rebel base? I thought Elson put me in charge of the capital."

"That he did, my leader. We are many. We are the hackers that release all the harmful data. We are the ones monitoring the government who is monitoring everyone else. The small fountain meet ups are no longer safe, so we thought this was the next best thing. There is not much time

until the revolt. This place should keep you safe in the meantime.”

“And do they think I’m dead?”

“No. We stated that we have you here with us, and that we got to you before the government did.”

“What exactly is this place?”

“An ancient stronghold of the Hiigarans. There are a thousand rebels living here being trained. There’s also something else you should see.” he said. Jarred followed him through the halls to another room, this one was an interrogation chamber.

“She was the one following you, was she not?” the man said.

“Natalia? They caught you. Are you alright?” he asked. She was tied down to a chair.

“They’ve been trying to get information out of me. I needed to know you were alive before I said anything.” she said.

“So it seems you two know each other then? Good it makes it that much easier for me. I have other things to attend to.” he said before leaving them. He still didn’t know his name.

“So are you gonna untie me, or what?”

## MARK

It had been nearly four hours since we captured the first frigate. All that was needed was to reprogram the AI to function on Karan’s command.

We had captured nearly a hundred of the frigates by luring them away from the sphere. But it came at a price. The pilots were exhausted. Many had docked and replacement crews were sent on to continue. Others said they weren’t giving up. They had caffeine pills onboard to counteract fatigue, but that would only last a short while. Everyone else in the fleet was resting up at the moment. The kadeshi were sleeping in their swarmers and we in our interceptors. But I couldn’t sleep. I just listened in on the other channels to see what was going on.

It was another half hour before I heard a warning alarm. I checked the data being sent, and there was a static hyperspace window by the resourcing team, just like in Karos. And ships were coming through it.

“Red squad to battle stations! Let’s go get these bastards!” I said leading the five of us over to the area they were spotted in. The enemy was being fought by the resource operation’s guarding frigates and the Kadeshi swarmers. We showed up to help too. Once the first wave was destroyed, more came through.

“All ion frigates fire on the open gate! We need to destabilize it so no more can come through next time,” the carrier’s captain said.

I kept firing on enemy bombers, seeing their fuel tanks explode ripping their ships apart. The swarmers dealt with the enemy interceptors.

A destroyer came through the gate before it got an energy spike and collapsed in on itself creating a singularity for a few milliseconds, it was enough to rip half the destroyer into nothing. The ion frigates put the destroyer’s remaining crew out of their misery.

“Damn that’s intense. Keeping away from collapsing gate. Good idea.” Eric said. Good thinking.

At this time enemy frigates from the remainder of the sphere took notice of us, so the

swarmers and interceptors left the area after docking for repairs. The carrier headed back to the *Mothership* too and the capital ship assault force was sent in.

Cloaked fighters scouting out the area revealed that there were two other gates like this one, with ships already pouring out of them. The battle was about to get much harder. I took a caffeine pill, and hoped for the best.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Blood and Steel

### ARAZIS

She could see his ship from where she was. Its black hull stood out easily against the brightly lit yellow sky all around them. She wondered how he was doing. It was only a few days since she last saw him, but it felt longer than that.

“So did that wake you up?” Saiin asked. They had been called into battle.

“Sure did. It’s about time we get something to do,” she replied.

They were docked with a fuel pod as they were being brought to the enemy. The multi-beam frigates were also with them. The Kadeshi fleet was again a single group. It worked better this way. There were Kushan repair corvettes with them to help out.

The enemy came into view. There were two support frigates, fighters, and corvettes. Swarmers were detaching and setting into a swarm formation, so she kicked down on the release pedal and her swarmer was released from the fuel pod to join them.

The battle started almost immediately. There were five Kushan squadrons, two interceptors and three of cloaked fighters. There was also the Kadeshi swarm of twenty or so ships. The enemy had fifteen corvettes and around the same number of fighters.

She followed the rest, breaking off after firing and turning around to fire again. Their interceptors went down, but not without a fight. Ships fell on both sides.

Even though the swarmers were significantly tougher in hull strength, these enemy ships were trained pilots from the inner territories of the galaxy. To compare, swarmer pilots have significantly less training. They know the basics of how to pilot it, but most aren’t very good, and aren’t trained well. They rarely have flights and when they do it’s against asteroid fields where the targets are usually easier to hit and don’t fire back.

It’s not all bad, however, some of the more trained pilots have given further lessons on how to improve their tactics, and the ones that wanted to succeed above all else even joined some of the Kushan training sessions on the *Mothership* in which they could fly a ship around the capital hangar, mostly in a defender, whose specs were a complete opposite to a swarmer. They also only trained with laser targeting to avoid causing actual damage. On rare occasions there were swarmers that were put to the test in there, but not too often because of the difficulties replacing pilots due to the fluid that surrounds them.

It got them ready to fight, but it would only be a matter of time to see if it all payed off. Trained military professionals against rookies in better ships.

Minutes were like hours to her. She only felt tiny pings on the hull, not much to concern with. Others, on the other hand, got a slug from a heavy corvette and cracked open. She could tell by the ice from the fluid reflecting light. It looked like snow. But she knew the pilot would be dead. Their body suits prevent heat from leaving but don’t do much if you’re body is in a shell of ice.

Another difficulty was dodging ion beams. The multi-beam frigates were firing on corvettes because they could track them easily, and could destroy them with one hit. It just meant there were dozens of blue beams spinning in every direction. It was best to break off and find new tar-

gets.

She found Saiin's ship within the swarm. They joined up in the centre, spun around each other's ships and then broke off in opposite directions when the swarm went to fight. They turned around and fired on an interceptor. One shot broke the large cannon off and the rest just pumelled it into pieces.

"Nice shooting," he said. The fight continued. In the end, they had won. Many interceptors were lost, including two of Mark's wingmen, the two new joiners, as there was a Taiidan ship among them and the grey interceptor had a white Gaalsien crest on it, as if to represent that his clan also had a strong hand in the fight. She knew many people hated his clan for their actions on Kharak. He told her he hoped to change the way they were seen by people.

The other interceptor pilots set into formation behind them. There weren't many left. The cloaked fighters uncloaked to recharge. There were two squads of them left. Isel was probably still there. She was a good pilot. The gate was destroyed a while ago. They went to the last one.

She docked her swarmer with a fuel pod to be carried over there. However the sensors revealed some heavy reinforcements around it. All classes of ships as it seemed. Even a heavy cruiser was there.

"This is going to be a long day," she said.

## MARK

Instead of charging into battle, us fighters had stayed behind to wait for the capital ships to arrive. It was mostly just the drone ion frigates being sent in being closer. The main assault force with our heavy cruisers was slowly starting to move forward to the inhibitor. The bombers came in to join us. There were twenty five of them.

The ion cannons fired, and we all went into battle. The frigates were concentrating on the missile destroyer first, as it was a threat to us. The bombers took care of the support frigates in the meantime.

The pilots of their interceptors were obviously well trained, but not well enough compared to our numbers. The swarmers were everywhere, and the Spectres appeared, fired a bunch of shots, and vanished leaving the enemy confused and scared. But the surprise of it only lasted briefly. Once they got the hint, they waited for them to uncloak and fire repeatedly on them ignoring all the other ships. In response, the cloaklers went into evasive tactics and only fired when they felt it safe.

We were then hit by a hail of bullets from above. We broke away fast and regrouped behind the enemy. One of the fighters that joined in my squad before this fight exploded. We fired on the seven interceptors and managed to get a few before the swarmers sent a massive wave of fire sideways destroying them all.

The frigates had finished off the missile destroyer and the heavy cruiser just blew up too. The multi-beam frigates tore open the hull of two destroyers and practically ripped them to pieces. They all now fired on the gate. The bombers helped too. The rest of the fighters were finished off quickly. We went to dock for fuel and repairs. The bombers made sure to break away as soon as the gate sent out energy spikes.

"The last hyperspace gate has been destroyed. Continue to the main objective and destroy the field generator," Intel said.

## P'TEER

The *Kapella* left hyperspace once more. They were greeted by a fleet of ships with traditionalist symbols instead of imperial ones. They had used a local slipgate to get there faster.

"It is an honour to see you, captain," the commander of the fleet said.

"Likewise. You know what must be done already. There is no point in repeating. I have a fleet standing by. I also know of many within the imperial elite guard who are prepared to rebel and join us," he said.

"Then it is settled. We revolt now. We will send the message across to the others. Concentrate on preparing for the invasion. I have others here who wish to assist you in any way possible."

Hyperspace gates opened up. A heavy cruiser, three missile destroyers and many frigates appeared. "They came to us hoping we were rebel supporters. They will be of more use to you than us. Farewell, captain Elson, and good luck." and the carrier and its escorts entered hyperspace.

"We will use the slipgate to launch an assault on the inner territories. Signal the others to follow us to Outpost Four." He hoped that it would attract attention to the rebels and away from the exiles.

His fleet grouped together near the outpost after a little over an hour of transit.

"This is Outpost Four command. Identify yourselves."

There was a pause, and said with a smirk across his face, "This is Captain Elson of the Taidid-an Rebellion. Prepare to be taken over," he said.

"You will fail. Elite Guards should be here within minutes."

*Good,* He thought.

Sure enough, the black hulled ships arrived and the battle began.

Elson's fleet had five heavy cruisers and several other destroyers, and many frigates along with two carriers with squadrons of fighters and corvettes. All of them trained, a lot of them to the level of the Elite Guard.

The fight began. He moved his destroyer in with the others. "Fire on the heavy cruisers first!" he ordered. "If possible, aim for weapons points and other vital areas of the ships." The *Kapella's* starboard ion cannon shot directly under them and hit a heavy cruiser ion cannon turret, welding it in place reducing its range of fire.

He saw bombers appear and could hear explosions across the hull. The carriers launched their ships. Interceptors painted completely in the teal and cerulean colours of the rebellion had the bombers running away.

"How are we in hacking into the broadcasting network?" he asked.

"Almost there. It's harder than it looks you know. The imperial channels are hard to get into." There were people in the comm room of the ship working on that and reporting their progress to one of the bridge officers. "We're through. We're sending the recorded message now."

"Tune in to see if it works," he said.

A small screen appeared on the viewport and showed Elson standing in front of the rebellion badge. "This is a message to all who can see through the lies of this empire. I'm just a man. One

man. One man leading many into battle, always taking the first shot. I am the first into battle and the last one out. That is the way a general should lead its army. Not from behind a bulletproof sphere within a goliath of a flagship. The time to rebel is now. This is the sign you have been waiting for. At this very moment I am fighting imperial guard near one of the imperial outposts broadcasting this across the colonies to you. How the end of this turns out is completely up to you. You must do your part to bring freedom.

At this very moment the Exiles are through the inhibitor network and are on their way to reclaim their home. Fear not, for they will spare all those who serve the rebellion. All others, that has yet to be decided. The empire has committed nearly complete genocide against these people. Hundreds of millions dead. A once thriving technological society gone at the hands of a few military brutes. They are here to take their revenge on the emperor. Do not underestimate them, for they are many. I have seen their fleet. I have spoken with their leaders. They saved me and my crew from being destroyed. They have mercy. Do not fear them unless you plan to oppose them.

This is Captain Elson signing off.”

“How many did it get out to?”

“The entire network sir. Everyone who was watching a television and anyone using a tablet has heard the message.”

The battle continued. A few of the ships stood down, others started firing on each other. Others were still firing on the rebels. Many of the fighter pilots stopped in their tracks. The rebels were letting them surrender and signalling them to go dock with the carrier.

“Sir! We’re retrieving data from the outpost. It looks like over a dozen of the traditionalist worlds have rebelled! Others have followed suit too. There’s no way the empire can stay standing now.”

“Don’t get too excited yet. They have enough atmosphere deprivation weapons to sterilize the entire galaxy if they so pleaded. The leader must die and their capital must be overrun before we can start celebrating.”

The battle seemed to be over until more ships came out of hyperspace.

“Damn it Elson, now look at the mess you’ve made!” the captain of a carrier said. He knew that one. They were in training together many years ago. They were friends once. But he hasn’t spoken to him since he was placed as captain of his ship.

“Good, it’s about time things change around here. I don’t want to fight you. But if I must, there will be no mercy.”

“It’s too late for that now... and even if I would, I’ve been put on a new ship. I’ve been suspected highly of eventually committing treason because of our history. Thank you for that.”

“Well, before we begin, I just thought you should know that he killed her. That’s why my ship’s named as it is. And even worse, he tried to make me do it.” His expression was hard to read.

“It was said she committed treason herself and was punished for it. Why you weren’t remains a mystery to me.”

Elson started to laugh. “Treason... that term can be interpreted so broadly in this government can’t it. She refused to kill billions and was punished. Is that the type of government you want to serve under? My punishment was watching it happen, and being forced to serve him as an Elite Guard.”

“And why bother telling me this?” he asked.

“Because I’d like for one of my friends to know what happened before he dies. The emperor will die. Surrender or we will open fire,” he said.

“You know I can’t. I’m sorry Elson. Maybe if we had crossed paths earlier before I was re-assigned. But this crew doesn’t care what I think. That’s Why I was put here. To make you need to kill your own friends to get revenge. But I forgive you. I once loved her too, you know. I’m also going to guess that this whole thing is just a distraction. I know you well enough for that. So we came. Now what? Can you handle this fleet? This is half of the elite guard. Do your worst.”

“What? Is this guy really admitting to be a rebel?” he heard one of the people on the other ship say.

“Shut up. It doesn’t matter anyway. We’re all about to die. If you want to execute me, then you’re only helping him more. There’s a reason I was placed in charge around here. There are plenty captains higher in rank than me. This is all about him. But I refuse to be used as a tool in his game. Shoot me. At least that way I’ll be remembered as a rebel rather than the captain of the fleet that almost stopped them.”

“But we outnumber them ten to one! You’re not serious,” another said.

“Elson, how many ships would you say the exile fleet has?”

“They have hundreds. They’re also very big on salvaging. I gave them coordinates for an inhibitor node with a hundred and sixty frigates around it. They’re also big on salvaging. Oh and another thing. The Kadeshi people are helping them. They are the ones we feared so much. The ghosts of the Great Nebula. From what I have learned from them, they are also descendants of the original Hiigarans. And they are powerful. I’ve seen their tactics. They will tear open a ship’s hull in seconds. They have frigates with four ion cannons.” he heard gasps. “Two races now stand together to bring your empire down. No, make that three. We are also helping. If you’ve seen the news lately, the traditionalist worlds have rebelled. Over two dozen worlds now support our cause. You’ve been lured here to die. Activate the field generator!” he said.

“What? You’ve trapped us all here?”

“Permanently. The station’s inhibitor is set to self destruct the entire complex should anyone attempt to turn it off. Even if we should die here, all of us, half the Elite Guard will be stranded here to do nothing but watch as your precious leader falls and your empire destroyed. And even you don’t have the heart to take the thousands of innocent lives of the station’s residents. But in the name of rebellion, sacrifices must be made. I on the other hand, am willing to kill thousands to free billions. Checkmate.”

“Well, played, my friend. Very well played.”

“What now? It doesn’t matter if we fight them or not, we’re still stuck here and the Exiles are too strong for the local hiigaran defences, and the rest of the Imperial and Elite Guards will be held up with the traditionalist revolts,” someone said.

“Like he said, checkmate. Sometimes battles aren’t always won by numbers and strength. You’re dealing with the finest of the finest. Elson was a Class A student in everything. Some of our professors thought it was scary the intelligence he had and his strategic mind.”

“Why thank you,” he replied.

“So does that mean we won?” one of his crew asked.

“No, it just means that we allowed for the Kushan to be able to win. I’m more than satisfied with giving up my want for revenge to win a war. It doesn’t really matter in the end how he dies, it just matters that he does die.”

“Damnit!” someone on the carrier yelled. He ended the transmission.

“So how is it going with the ship IDs?” he asked. The hacker team was working on setting their ships’ IDs to be exempt from the field. They had a few Kadeshi to help out. They had a rather evident distaste for the Taiidan, but they pushed it aside to get the job done.

“We have half the ships ready to go. Give us about a half hour and we will be all set.”

## MARK

The proximity sensors were flying around trying to find the cloak generator. We knew there were a couple of destroyers and a heavy cruiser left. The main assault force was moving in for the assault on the station. Two of the inhibitor modules were destroyed. Debris hit the two resource controllers placed in the centre of the spinning ring. The Kadeshi were going to work on the carrier and its few frigate escorts. The drone ion frigates captured were holding back the rest of the frigates that were now heading in to fight us. They were told to defend the node, and it was being destroyed. They broke formation and started coming in for attack. The salvagers were still capturing enemy ships. We have not lost a single one yet.

“Damn cowards. Show yourselves!” Triikor yelled. Most of our forces docked. The bombers were helping the frigates with the inhibitor, but the Spectres and other interceptor squads docked. All the rest were busy on the inhibitor.

The proximity sensor found them after a few more minutes of searching. Then the ships opened fire. They destroyed the proximity sensor and disappeared again. A few seconds later they were firing on a few frigates from above. Three frigates were lost. They started on a destroyer, and it too fell. A few of the ships were now pointing in the general direction of the enemy. A second proximity sensor arrived, and our ships destroyed the cloak generator. The two enemy destroyers were killed off, and the heavy cruiser was left to be salvaged.

The battle seemed to be over, so the three of us flew around the heavy cruiser to watch it all. “Jay, Rob, Brad? Are you three still out here? How long have you been at it?”

“The whole time.” My uncle responded as their ship got closer and closer to the enemy.

“It’s been going on six hours now! You guys should really take a break.” I said.

“Alright, fine. After this ship the battle’s over anyway.” Jay said. “And then we’ll all have a good time before we finally see our blue homeworld. Hey Mark. We should see about having a party at the Paktu farm. They do have the space after all. You know what day it’ll be tomorrow.” he said. Yeah, I sure did.

“Hey, shouldn’t there be a repair corvette?” Eric asked.

“Oh. Well, the enemy was not paying any attention to us earlier so they all docked.”

“What? This one isn’t AI though!” Triikor said.

“What?” he said. The cruiser’s gun turned, and destroyed one of the salvagers on the other side. “Oh shit! Salvagers retreat!” Rob said.

“Damn it!” I yelled and led my squad to fire on the heavy guns. Knowing it wouldn’t have much of an effect. We hit it and managed to damage the gun barrel. We were coming back around when my world collapsed. There’s no other way I can describe it. The cruiser’s heavy ion cannons fired right through Jay’s corvette. There were screams, and then the ship blew up.

I stopped breathing. My body froze up. I wouldn’t accept the reality in front of me. When I did manage to get a thought into my brain, it was immediately one of anger. I sent the ship forward as fast as possible, and I even pressed the button for the boosters.

“Mark? Mark no!” Eric yelled. I turned off my communications so he couldn’t hear me screaming.

No mere words can describe what I was feeling in that instant, as my ship sped closer and closer to the enemy cruiser’s command bridge. The only words coming out of my mouth was a

constant stream of various swears. “You fucking bastards!” My fingers had a death grip on the trigger. I smashed the windows in many areas. I watched as bodies flew out into the cold vacuum to die. They killed my best friend. The person I knew as a kid growing up. The only one I thought knew more about me than I did. Along with my uncle, the only family I had left. I never talked to him much, but now that it’s all done, I wish I had. This must be a bit like how he felt about hearing of my father’s death.

I screamed more, as my fighter plunged into the command bridge of the cruiser still firing. The last thing I saw was blood splatter across my viewport and passed out as the guns were still firing.

## ARAZIS

Her heart sank. She sped over to the scene with Saiin following closely behind. The cruiser had since been disabled, but the only thing she cared about was whether he was still alive. She started draining the fluid into space.

“Ara, what are you doing?” he said.

“Going in to get him.”

“What? That’s crazy! And dangerous!”

“So is crashing a fighter into the command bridge of a freaking cruiser, Saiin! I don’t care!”

He sighed. “Alright. Just make sure not to tear the suit on anything of you’ll die too.”

The fluid was drained, and she released the hatch. She ejected herself with a small backpack with a booster in it. She got closer and closer to the wrecked hull. The fighter split almost in half on a beam, but only sheared off the port-side spike. She could see muzzle flashes inside that gave away where he was. She could see metal and glass with mangled bodies floating everywhere. She could only imagine his anger for what happened. The flashes stopped, meaning the guns stopped firing.

She went closer in. She pushed away a big sheet of metal and steadily made her way into the destroyed bridge. The closer she got, the more unlikely it seemed that he survived. One of the boosters overheated and exploded, bending the beams near it. She could see bullet casings littering the room. There were thousands of them. The darkness made her need to turn on her light. She carefully walked along the floor as she could now sense the artificial gravity. She walked to the right of the crashed ship to avoid the large mess of sharp metal.

She got to the front, and saw a dead body in uniform, for lack of a better term, splattered all over the ship. Red stained the whole front end. She climbed up the steps and onto the ship. She turned the release hatch and the viewport opened up. The sight was horrifyingly reassuring. She could see him, still in one piece. She pulled him out of the seat onto the top of the ship and saw blood through his visor. She could feel his heart beating and he was breathing. That was all she needed. She took a deep breath in relief.

She took his body to the end of the fighter, in the area where the artificial gravity didn’t affect her as much, and picked him up. He weighed a lot more than her, so under normal gravity she would definitely not be able to drag him out of this mess.

Getting back out of the ship, she looked back into the room, completely wrecked. She felt no pity for the bodies floating around.

There was a salvage corvette there with her swarmer being towed. The door to the cargo bay was open, and there was a man waving her over. She headed there. She slowed down when ap-

proaching, and was pulled in by the man. The door shut, and the room pressurized. She took off their helmets.

“Pass me a cloth or something,” she said. He did, and she wiped the blood from his face. It was just a cut on the forehead. She wiped the put the cloth there to keep pressure on it. He coughed and opened his eyes briefly.

“Ara . . . Jay . . .” he whispered.

“I thought you were dead. It’s all over now,” she said and kissed him. She stopped herself from crying. She couldn’t cry if he couldn’t. Now, he truly has lost everything in his past. She could never feel what he has felt. She lost her crew and the captain of the *Amun*, but that still wasn’t everyone she ever knew. And Jay was his best friend. She could only remember vaguely what it felt like believing Saiin was dead. But at the same time, everyone else was, and her mind wasn’t really in the right place. She hoped he never had to feel it again.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Eulogy

MARK

My head hurt. Hurt? I can feel again? I opened my eyes. I was in the hospital section of the *Mothership*. I looked around the room. Arazis was sleeping in one of the chairs. I laid back in the bed. It really happened. I still didn't want to accept the reality of it, but I guess I had to now.

"You're awake," she said. I couldn't think of anything to say. She probably saved my life. But I don't know exactly what happened.

"I don't remember much of after the crash."

"I took you out of the mess myself. After that I brought you onboard a salvage corvette and . . ."

"And what?"

"Never mind it's not important. Then we docked with the *Mothership* and brought you here. You've been out for hours. Anyway, the fleet is going to stay here overnight and build up and organize for when we get to Hiigara."

"So he really is dead?"

She paused. "Yes. They are." I took a deep breath, and sat up.

"Is there even going to be a funeral ceremony?"

"A large one for everyone that died. It starts soon. To get it out of the way before we battle," she said.

"I guess it doesn't really matter, but what about my ship?"

"It's not going to be recovered. The cruiser itself isn't worth salvaging now because of the damage. We're just leaving it here. Someone will eventually find them. I saw the wreck. Half of the fighter was sheared off completely."

"Oh. No matter then. It was my fault. Either way . . . I think if I ever tried using those boosters again they would just bring back sad memories. And I don't need that in battle. I need to get out of here. The lights are giving me a headache." I took off the health monitors. She brought me a shirt and some pants. She turned around as I got dressed.

P'TEER

"The fleet is ready to jump, captain. By the time they get past the viruses we've placed on the station, the battle will already be over."

"Good. Initiate hyperdrive." he opened a communications window with the enemy carrier. "I'm sorry my friend, but I have other business to attend to. After the exiles take their home and crush the empire, someone is going to be needed to pick up the pieces and open negotiations with them. The empire's fate has been sealed. Now it's time to plan on what comes next for the Taiidan." he said and the blue door opened.

"What? But how!" was the last he heard before his fleet was in transit.

"Alright fleet, take some time off. It'll be at least a day and a half before we reach Hiigara."

the bridge crew put their systems on standby and got up to stretch. Many of them hadn't moved in hours.

"Let's go eat," he suggested as they headed for the halls.

He sat at the table with a few of the others from the bridge crew. They were silent and didn't speak. He had a few guesses as to why, but if they didn't ask, he didn't feel the need to relive his past again.

"So, how excited are you all?" he said in a more cheery tone than he felt around him. They stopped eating.

"If by excited you mean terrified, then very."

"Good! That's the spirit! We're bringing down an interstellar empire you know, it won't be easy. But now that half the Elite Guard are trapped in an inhibitor field, it makes things about even."

"What about the ground assault?"

"Oh I've got that covered. It's in quite capable hands."

## JARRED

He was on a stage in a room in front of many rebels. There were the same number of them in this room as he had seen at the military meeting a week ago. He was to make a speech. He was the leader, after all. It was going to be the call to arms. They were invading the palace at nightfall.

"We're live in five-seconds," he heard in his earpiece. He stood behind a podium with a paper that had a speech written down, but he had his own prepared.

The broadcast would be streamed live to the entire city. It would be enough. Not everyone needed to know what was about to come. They had spies on the emperor's flagship ready to hide information that could be harmful to their plan. A red light on the camera turned on to indicate it was recording.

"My name is Jarred Alaikiir. You may have heard rumours of me, surely there is one being spread about my affiliation with the rebellion. I am here to say that I am in fact a leader. Chosen by Elson himself. You may also have heard rumours spread by the imperials of my death. Their plans failed. They nearly killed hundreds to get me. Luckily the casualties were minimal.

I'm here to call you to action. Tonight is the time the empire falls. They fear us. We are many. We have spies within their high ranks that they don't even know about. They were foolish to try and conceal truth from its own people. As you are all aware, a desert planet called Kharak, home to over three hundred million people, had its atmosphere lit on fire and its surface turned to glass. There were no survivors. Well, nearly none.

The Exiles are within the Hiigaran solar system at this very moment. One of the inhibitor nodes has been taken offline. They are on their way here, and they are prepared for war. Supporters of the rebellion will be spared. All others, well, that's for them to decide. We have many warriors prepared to fight." The cameras turned to the soldiers for a few seconds before returning to him.

"Tonight, at nightfall, we march to the palace gates, and we tear ourselves inside. The royal house must be eliminated for us to be free. The palace can provide areal support for a whole

army. Luckily for us, it is only guarded by a couple hundred soldiers. We have thousands. And something more important than numbers. We have a cause. A noble cause to free ourselves and to free our children. To free all future Taiidan from imperial rule. Those who wish to fight will be rewarded greatly. Those who die in combat will be honoured as heroes. Once the palace is ours, we will announce our victory to the entire empire! Stand together! Fight for what you know to be right!” there was a thunderous cheering from the rebels. The sound was music to his ears. They were prepared to die following him. He was prepared to die leading them. The cameras turned off.

“That was incredible. It was even better than the script!” the director said. “We’ve been seen on over ten million homes. We must now get ready.”

He followed the man to a room with a dozen of the “generals” of their army. They had a holographic model of the palace on a table with mission plans.

“We know what we need to do,” one of them said. They had already planned for this. They spent the entire night refining the plan. They each led a battalion of a thousand trained soldiers, and they were certain more would come to their aid. Three of the groups were to stand at the entrances and keep guard as six others charged to the main entrances stretched out sparsely so that grenades and bombs will only affect a few as opposed to the whole battalion. The defence at the gates would double as sniper teams taking out enemies in the windows. There would also be two cannons on each entrance to shoot down enemy ships and blast a hole through the palace walls to form an entrance. Two of the other groups would be medical teams and damage control once the battle has subsided. The last group, only of a hundred, was under Jarred’s control. They would be the stealth force. They had tunnels under the palace. Once the guards were occupied they would have an ion cannon standing by to melt a hole up into the basement where they would one by one eliminate the royal house and other guards that stand in their way. They also had three squads of seven interceptors to assist in areal support.

“Are you all ready for this?” one of them asked as if it mattered. “Good. Let’s move out then,” he said. The others left. Elson took the holographic plans with him. He would be needing them.

“Are you sure you want to come along on this?” he asked.

“I’m an elite member of the imperial stealth force. You’re gonna want my advice,” she said.

“You know this makes you a rebel now,” he said.

“I know. And I’m glad I am. My sister, as it turns out, was suspected of treason because she wouldn’t kill an equal ranked officer on a frigate. So they were both killed. I found out thirteen days before we spoke in the swamp. I’m on your side.”

“I have no doubt in that. You did help us after all.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Well, how does a member of an elite spy team end up getting captured by a group of relatively untrained rebels?”

“You think that highly of me, do you? Well, you’re right in any case. I let myself get caught. I heard them in the apartment complex, but at that point I didn’t care. After we met, I was having serious trust issues with everyone. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Let’s save the talking for when we have time,” he said. They both met up with the hundred people. They walked through the tunnel that was on a much higher level, about ten meters below the palace. They would wait for nightfall. All of them, and the defence teams, had infrared contact lenses. It would help them see. The cannon would melt the rock above them to a molten state, and then they would be elevated inside by a crane after the lava poured down into a ditch

that was dug. They were ready. The clock ticked, and the sun got lower and lower on the horizon. It was still a few hours from sunset. They hoped it would be enough time.

On the surface, the thousands of people would walk around town, or simply wait underground until it was time. The snipers would set up on the roofs or high floors of any nearby skyscrapers. The rebels were organized, far more organized than the fractured imperial navy.

## MARK

I stood there with my friends for what felt like hours. The ceremony was incredibly impersonal, and was more of a mass ceremony. They mentioned the names of the deceased, and had certain prayers for certain people. I did the Sobanii ritual with my uncle, but it was rushed compared to my father's. And he had a lot less fans. I didn't want to cry, but I gave in eventually. No one cared anyway.

It was over, and most people left. The Paktus had come for a little bit also. They kept in touch with my uncle during the voyage. I learned that he had been in the south on Kharak, so they knew each other well. He occasionally helped on the farm for a decent meal. He chose to live a life of minimalism. Which I found odd as he envied everything my dad had.

"He already knows what we want to say." Karu said. Them being both crew for corvettes, they must spend a lot of time together. They usually tried to stick together in the line of duty, so he must be feeling responsible in one way or another for this. No one blamed him, and no one should. But I could see it in his eyes.

"Come on. We should get going." Isel said. Arazis left too. The tree of them walked away slowly.

John had come aboard for this too. He nodded at me and then left quietly. Saiin followed him out. I assumed they had the same shuttle.

Eric was more concerned with coordinating the final assault. He left early with everyone else to the hangar deck. He decided to take control for now as I was not exactly in the ideal mental state for battle.

Jay had no family. I was the closest thing to a family he had. No, my uncle was. And now they're both gone, as well as Bradley. We only talked a few times on this journey. There wasn't much to say. I didn't really get a chance to know him all that well.

I walked out of the ceremony room last. But I headed for the garden of tombstones. That cemetery place that just kept filling up.

I went and found his. Just a regular rectangle like all the others. Nothing special about it. I was alone. "Damn it, Jay. I hate that I have to lose you too." I said as I started to cry again. "Don't worry though. I'll get us to Hiigara. I promise you. I promise all of you!" I yelled. All I got back was an echo. The lights were dimmed to nearly off. Most of the lights came from the small blue ones on the top of the gravestones. It gave it a spooky feel to the place.

I stood there for a few more minutes. There was nothing I could say that he didn't already know. He knew me better than I did, after all. What could I tell him now. He was a good person. He enjoyed laughing. He made light of any situation with humour. He didn't make anyone angry unless it was a prank like in the past, and I was the one behind all of the stuff that usually got us in trouble anyway. He didn't see any reason to hate. He hated circumstance, but so do we all. He tried to make the best of the situation. He sees every end as a new beginning like you can only believe. We all say these things, but he actually acted upon it. After the genocide, he saw it as a

new unity for the clans. They would once again be one people. And sure enough, he was right.

I met him early in training. We were both outcasts. For different reasons, of course, but outcasts just the same. He had no family. He was an orphan who lived off of the military, as he had to serve his entire life there in return for the services they provided him. I was seen as a cheat to the system. My father was a world famous pilot. Most common people saw me as a semi-celebrity of sorts. The other pilots didn't. Not the good ones anyway. And in a way, they're right. I got it all handed to me in the beginning. But that didn't mean I didn't get where I am today because of my father. I worked my ass off to prove myself. My sole goal in life was to become a better pilot than my father. And now, I'm a rank nine. He was the only rank ten to ever exist.

No one ever spoke to Jay. He was a lonely person. He didn't mind that. He told me later on that he believed if no one wanted to know him, they didn't need to. We became friends after the first week I enrolled in training. We helped each other. He taught me the basics that I had missed, being a late joiner and all, and he got a family. He came to my house for holidays, and stayed there a lot of the weekends too. Years went by, I advanced further in the ranks than him, but we still stayed in touch all the time.

Then, a few years ago, I became a rank seven from the stunt on the island. He then dropped the fighter pilot training and became a corvette pilot instead. Not a very significant job, and not one worth much mention either. He was transferred to the *Scaffold* two years ago, and only visited a few times a year, once for my birthday, once for his, and once for the new year. They were pretty evenly spaced out.

He chose to go on the voyage with the *Mothership* as it was a chance to meet his uncle, who was on the *Khar-Selim*. But it was destroyed. His second reason was that it would be a new start. He could live a new life, meet new people, and possibly start over. He wanted to reach Hiigara so that for once, he could live the life he wanted, not the one of a military hound. It wasn't too much to ask. And now his fate is to have died getting us to the front gate.

This is the person I knew as Ja-Siid Nabaal. Not many people knew him, but the ones who did were the luckiest ones alive. And as long as I'm still alive, he'll never be forgotten.

"He was pure," she said. I turned and saw her. "It's what we call it when some priests free themselves from the regular burdens of society. He had no hate in him. Why must so much good be suddenly silenced?" she asked rhetorically.

"Perhaps a sacrifice to Sajuuk, so that we gather the strength necessary to have victory." I said. I took a deep breath, and put a smile on my face. If he was still here, he'd want that. I could almost hear his ghost's voice saying: "*Ah cheer up buddy, at least I don't need to eat anymore, and look! Flying!*" I laughed a bit to that.

I walked to the large monument-like stone sticking out among the rest. The brown Soban crest was still there, stained on the steel plate for eternity. "Well, it's time to fight back. I've got the heart of a warrior now. I think I'd do pretty well against yourself in a fight, even. Maybe I'd even win." I said to my dead father.

"So this is where he lies," she said.

"It's all in the past now. I've come to terms with his death. He was at peace with his maker the moment I moved out of his mansion. After Jay, I think he was the only other person you'd call "pure". He's taught me everything I need to know. There's nothing more he can tell me. I used to think I needed his strength. Not anymore. You hear that old man, no need to worry about me anymore. I can handle it now." It was a bit much to take in, but now, after this, I felt like I

could. I had no more fear.

We talked for a while longer, about family and friends, the stuff that usually comes up when in a graveyard, so most notably there were deaths in the conversation. After that, we left.

We got to my room, where I said goodnight. I got to my bed exhausted. I thought she left until I turned and saw her facing the hall in my doorway. "Mark, I . . . uh . . . never mind," she said. She was walking out the door when I stopped her.

"Wait. Just say it. There's nothing to hide between us anymore. You know that."

"It's just that . . . well, I'm scared. I still don't know if I'll survive the night. We're so close. So much can go wrong. I'm not a warrior like you, Mark. I'm just a girl who's got issues with her family, and is only in the military as a punishment. You said I had skills, but that doesn't mean my emotions can handle it all the time. I nearly went insane in Kadesh fighting you. I've still got mental instabilities. I get nightmares so they tell me. The point is I guess . . . I don't want to sleep alone anymore." Somehow, this didn't really come as a shock to me.

"Alright."

That night, we fell asleep in each others' arms.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Chapel Perilous

MARK

I nearly fell out of my bed. The whole ship started shaking. I held onto her until it stopped, then we got up and were running down the halls faster than I ever had.

“Hyperspace interrupted.” Karan said.

We met with Eric and Triikor first, then Isel later. Karu was headed to the corvette bay already. We got to the hangar quickly and found our ships, and the light was green. Arazis and I had to go to the utility bay where the swarmers and my new fighter were docked. “Don’t you dare die on me,” she said.

“Don’t plan on it.” I replied. Her ship left the hangar, and I ran to mine. I got inside, and turned the power on. The fuel was full and I was ready to fly. I looked at the ancient dashboard quickly to get a good look at where things were. The scientists replaced the old buttons with new ones that were labeled in Kushan’la so I could read.

I saw a green light, and I flew the ship out the hangar without any problems. I joined my squad, which was a claw formation of several squadrons put together. We were in some kind of asteroid field.

“Shutting down the inhibitor field has alerted the Taiidan to our presence.” Intel said. “We are on a collision course with a very large object. It appears to have escorts. It must be destroyed before it impacts the *Mothership*.” the HUD circled an object in front of us. It was a large asteroid, mothership-mass by the statistics listed beside it. It could break the *Mothership* in half if it hit, killing all the colonists in the process.

The reprogrammed ion frigates were headed straight for the asteroid and the others had to handle the escorts, or we’d be dead anyway. Us fighters, well, we had quite a few interceptors and defenders to deal with nearly fifty by the looks of it. The missile destroyers would handle the corvettes. The *Rancor* lead the assault force into battle, and the kadeshi guarded it closely. This was all or nothing. We were prepared for something like this, and now we can prove if the extra training was worth it, or if we were just waisting our time. Either way, if we lost, it wouldn’t matter anyway.

JARRED

From underground in the tunnel, they heard the sirens sound. It was the only signal they needed to hear at that moment. Nightfall had come, though it made no difference to them there in the tunnel. They were all holding their breath, this would be their last minute as slaves of the Empire.

Jarred looked around for his cousin. He wasn’t there, and he could guess where he was, but it was uncertain. Now that they know that he’s related to a rebel leader, the imperial guards probably wouldn’t let him near her. *Good*. He thought, he would only get in the way.

On the surface, they had taken all three gates and people were rushing in as fast as they

could. They got far more support from the people than they expected. They hadn't, however, expected the land mines. Rows and rows of people fell, but they kept moving anyway.

There were snipers on top of buildings near the palace taking out guards from afar and examining the battlefield for anything strange. The guards in the towers were eliminated, so they had to open the palace doors. When they did, guards poured out in seemingly endless numbers.

In the air, police fighters were sent in by the dozens to deal with the problem, but the rebels had other plans. Three doors opened from the ground, and interceptors painted in the teal colour of the rebellion shot out from nowhere. The black and white scouts didn't stand a chance. Fighters exploded into flaming debris piles and damaged everything in their path. Some even smashed into buildings.

Gradually, the guards at the gates were thinned out enough that they retreated into the building and the doors closed locking them out. The teams guarding the gates fired their two cannons into the walls blasting their own doors into the building. People screamed victory and charged into the holes in the hundreds, no police force would stand a chance against the sheer numbers.

"Any second thoughts?" he asked. "Good." The ion cannon fired up into the cave ceiling. It only took ten-seconds, and then it turned off. They had cut through to the basement. Step one was complete. They took the main levels by storming the building. But their job was far more crucial. The main level was not connected to the upper ones. It was a defence tactic in case anyone tried this. The basement on the other hand, was connected to the upper levels. The designers just never suspected they'd be coming in from underneath.

They were elevated into the building in groups of ten. They put in their infrared contacts and looked around. It was completely black, but they'd at least be able to see if there was anyone guarding, which they doubted as the guards were more than likely all busy. Natalia took the lead, she had more experience. Jarred followed behind.

She signalled him to wait as she looked around the corner of a wall. She backed up and held up three fingers. Jarred and another soldier hid behind boxes and took aim. They picked their targets and fired. The blasts from their guns briefly lit up the entire room too bright for their contacts so they closed their eyes. They opened them again, and the coast was clear. They moved on.

They cleared out the small number of guards in the other rooms, and waited until everyone was in the building until advancing. They found a staircase to another basement level above them and it was all clear. Which meant they still didn't know they were inside. At the top, three teams of five were sent to scout out the floor and take out any guards. The rest of them found a service shaft in the walls by removing a plate. There were lights, so they removed their contacts. All eighty five of them had to get inside one after the other and make their way up.

Once at the top, they opened another panel carefully revealing a white hall. They were in the upper levels. They quickly got teams at each end of the hall to keep guard and allow the rest of them to get out. It took fifteen minutes to get everyone into the hall. They made their way through more white halls. It was so disorienting. Everything looked the same. Each hall they sent five to go sweep the area. They made it past that floor easily. The staircase led up to the second level.

They were spotted. A guard saw them and signalled the alarm before they could shoot him down. "Shit!" Natalia said. "So much for stealth. Quick, we need to find cover." They ran across the hall they found, this time sending ten people down the two halls they came across. She took a small mirror from her belt and poked it around the corner. "We've got company. Twenty of them."

"Twenty!"

“Hey, it’s a big building. Why else do you think I suggested a hundred people for a stealth mission?” she had a point.

A black case was opened and a strange cylinder device was taken out. She pressed a button and carefully rolled it out into the other hall.

“Cover your ears and eyes.” He knew what it was. He turned away and cupped his ears. There was a loud explosion sound, screaming, then silence. A blue beam of light burned the walls and everything in its path.

“I hope you have more of those,” he said as they were running.

“Only one left. I felt we needed it. Now that they know we have them they’ll probably avoid sending large groups of guards after us.”

There were now only sixty people in the group, all the others were sent to other areas of the building. There was a large open area, and they all stopped. It was like a mall. “Snipers.” They were taking aim from higher levels. This was the central sort of town square for the royals. There were trees and fountains and benches. But it was completely deserted. They were probably assembled at the top levels, attempting to escape, but the interceptors wouldn’t allow it if they tried.

There were people who had snipers with them, and they found somewhere. They took escorts down other halls to make their way around the area. Then the shots began firing. It wasn’t like a battlefield, it was more like dozens of single shots seconds from each other. He saw two guns fall from high up.

It took a half hour to clear the area. In that time, they were nearly overrun by guards, but they had their own little armoury on the go, so the imperials thought twice before randomly charging after them. They had lost thirteen people, but had eliminated the snipers. They ran out into the open area to the elevators. This would lead them to where the royals were being held. There were three towers, and the three elevators would lead them to where they needed to go. The three connected in a single room near the top, and that is where they needed to go.

Twenty stayed behind to guard the area. The snipers also stayed as they would be of little use beyond this point. They again went up in groups of ten.

“Jarred. About what happens next. I know you don’t want to do it, but we have to,” she said. The rest stared at him. They didn’t understand what she meant, but he did. The kid.

“I’m just not that heartless,” he said.

The doors opened, and they were immediately caught in a barrage of fire, three of them were killed. They took cover in the elevator beside the door. He took two small rods, connected them and twisted until there was a crack sound, then threw it out. There was a green cloud of toxic gas that killed them, then it dissolved in the air and they could go.

They didn’t wait for the others, they charged ahead to cover as much ground as possible. The room was only a few minutes away. “Leader we have a problem, the elevator isn’t coming back down. We suspect they’ve all been killed. We can’t make it past the lobby. We’re joining group three. They’re being held up in a stalemate. It looks like you’ll be on your own,” he heard over the communicator.

“Roger that, just keep them busy we’ll send more help when we’re done cleaning up the place. We’re almost to the destination. Contact you then.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“We’re on our own. Group two’s first squad is presumed KIA and the rest are going to help group three in a stalemate. Looks like it’s the seven of us.”

Two of the others nodded. They kept running. They got to the doors and placed explosives,

and hid in a room to set them off. They saw a dozen guards. They managed to take them all out, but two of them were killed cutting them down to five. The rest of their group caught up and began helping out, but there were grenades, and eventually they were back down to eight. They kept firing at the guards until no more shots were fired. As they were walking in, one of the royals with unsteady hands shot Jarred, but he missed and it hit Natalia in the chest. She screamed and fell. The rebels gunned the twenty of them down without emotion. They had the power to oppose the Emperor if they wished, but they were being so well taken care of that no one dared to. They allowed genocide and murder to go by. They knew every detail of it, and still they did nothing. Their judgement was brought to them.

One was still alive but barely. After seeing Natalia would be alright, he ran to him. "Where is the girl? Tell me now! Is he with her?"

"Th-they're i-in the observation deck above. T-tell me, do you think we all agreed to the decisions my cousin has taken?"

"No, but you didn't do anything about it. That's the same as pulling the trigger yourselves in our eyes."

"The girl, she has done nothing. She doesn't know any better. Please don't kill her!" he begged. Then he shot him in the head.

"The rest of you, head down to where group three is being held up and help out."

"No way." Natalia said.

"What?"

"We don't trust you'll go through with it," another rebel named Cody said. This was it. The one moment he feared more than the entire mission.

"No one lets off a single shot. If you do, it'll be the end of you. My cousin is in there with her and he's probably done more for this rebellion than any of you have. Understood?"

They nodded, and aside from two people helping Natalia with medical aid, they headed into the elevator.

The doors opened, and there was just the two of them. Caleb was standing in their way to protect her with a gun raised. "Caleb . . . It's time."

"No! I won't let you!"

"As long as she's alive, the bloodline is still intact. She must die."

"I don't give a shit who's blood she has! I've got your blood, don't I? Can you bring yourself to kill me?" he said. He had tears running down his face. Jarred could feel some creeping up on him as well.

She was crying too. She knew what was going on, but she didn't want to believe it. "You know I'm a better shot than you think . . . I . . ." he just stopped talking, raised his pistol, and aimed it t her face. She looked him in the eyes, and he couldn't bring himself to fire. Hi hand became shaky and he started to cry. "Caleb, it's not up to me. I'm not in charge anymore, they'll kill you both if I don't do it myself. I'm trying to save you!"

"You think that'll save me? Killing my only friend, the one I love? I'd rather die!" He moved the gun from his cousin to his own head.

"No don't!" she screamed and took it from him and pushed him aside. "If this is really what you've resorted to, then just kill me then. I'm tired of always being protected. I've never been able to live a real life, so just take it and save him!" she said.

He raised his gun. "I'll never forgive you!" his cousin yelled. "I'll hate you for as long as you live! I'll kill myself anyway!" he was trying to say anything he could to get him to stop, but the fact remained, he couldn't pull the trigger anyway. Again his hand became shaky. He lost fo-

cus. After all they've fought for, he couldn't pull the final trigger to end it. "I just can't. This isn't what we stand for."

"Ready weapons."

"Damn it Cody, she's just a child! Who's going to see you as a hero after this? The media? Does that really matter to you? If you can kill an innocent child while looking her in the eyes, you're just as twisted as Riesstiu himself!"

"Shut up or I'll shoot you and your cousin too," he said and took aim. A gun fired, and Cody fell to the ground dead. The others turned around to see Natalia leaning in the entrance.

"What would Elson do where he here . . ." she said half to herself. "Well, he picked Jarred for a reason, didn't he? He might as well be Elson himself. No one else in the room has ever seen him face to face. We're talking about our icon. When people think of the Rebellion, they think of the brave captain of a destroyer who went against all the odds for what was right, someone whose very presence turns world leaders. Someone, who most in the special ops know, is the one who killed the previous heir. Her brother," she said pointing to Amelia. "He hates the emperor more than anyone in the galaxy. I know why, others within my division know why. We've been trained to know everything we possibly could about the rebellion and about Elson. Why did I change sides, do you think? Without me this plan would be a complete failure. I changed sides because Jarred was and still is my friend. He convinced me what was right. Killing someone because of who they're related to won't solve anything. We've killed the ruling government, which she isn't a part of. There's no reason for her to die. It won't say much about us if we did. Put down your guns, we're done here."

To his relief, they listened and followed her into the elevator. She winked at him as the door closed.

Caleb ran to Amelia and they kissed. Then he turned and glared at him.

"I couldn't have done it anyway. You know that. You have no idea how much time I had to fear this moment. I saw you two together, and knew I couldn't destroy that. It would destroy me too. Hate me if you want, I'm just glad that this is all over and that you're not coming out of here in a body bag," he said and walked to the elevator.

"I forgive you," she said. That made him smile. "I've still got to kill your father. Can you still forgive me?"

"Caleb told me a few days ago that he was a rebel. I couldn't believe it, but then he told me why. And you know what? I agree with him. I haven't spoken to my father in person in years. If he cared about me he would have come down from his bulletproof bubble at least for my birthday. I don't think I'll care if he's dead after what he's done."

"There's another thing I wanted to talk about before you go." Caleb said.

"What's that?"

"My sister. Any news at all. I'm begging you. Even if she's dead, I'd rather know."

"And I wish I could answer you. All I know is that she was on the carrier that bombed Kharak, and from criminal records she's been tried with disobeying orders. I've searched as much as I possibly could for any more information than that. Anything else is a guess. But if she got out, the Exiles most likely would have let her live. But the odds are completely unknown. I guess we'll find out soon enough. But please, let me tell her the news. You don't need to if you can't handle it."

Hours later, when morning broke, they were all in the same room where the bodies had been cleaned out. They had set up the palace as their own base. At the breakfast table, they were all talking casually as if nothing had happened. They were happy, all of them. They didn't seem to

care that Amelia was the emperor's daughter, they just saw her as a kid. That was all the reassurance he needed. The soldiers were telling stories of their past to them, and the two of them seemed to be interested enough.

"I think this is the most beautiful the sun has ever been. Or maybe it's just me," she said. He was on the balcony with Natalia staring at the sunrise. It was a new day, the first day of their freedom.

"No, it's just all of us. But it's not over."

"When are you taking a team up?"

"When the Exiles show up we'll take interceptors and eject and enter manually. It'll draw less attention that way."

"Make him suffer."

"I promised to." Elson made him promise. He wanted revenge so bad, but the rebellion was far more important than his personal affairs. Having Jarred carry out his vengeance justly would have to do. He planned on bringing back his head.

## TRIIKOR

She knew what she was up against. They were far better pilots than she was. The entire time she was pushing herself to the limits. The fighters were useless against the massive swarm of defenders, which Kushan defenders countered until the corvettes arrived to clean up the mess. Mark's new ship was very strong. It often left the formation to draw fire to his own ship and get a head start. He liked to show off even in a serious battle. Eric was doing just fine too. The swarmers were helping with the enemy fighters also.

The *Rancor* led the main assault to the enemy while the drone ion frigates were firing straight to the asteroid. Bombers were launched but docked soon after because of the number of assault frigates. Dozens in a row and in an X formation to clear out any fighters that would wander too close. After the enemy fighters were gone, all the fighters docked, as they were useless against the number of assault frigates.

They didn't watch the battle finish, because it would all be over quickly anyway. The fighter pilots were called to the supply hangar for a meeting. Mark was giving a speech with the head of strike command. She would say a few things too. He had gotten his head back on straight after what happened with Jay.

The crowd gathered, and they were in front because they were there first. Mark didn't look even slightly nervous sitting next to her. He was more focused than she had ever seen him.

Cromell started first. "I won't start this meeting by saying that I'm proud of you all, and that you've all done exceptionally well so far, because words cannot be said that would justify how much everyone, not just of the pilots, has sacrificed for our being here. The original trained pilots are very few now, as you all know, so our performance is somewhat lacking in some areas, then again, we never had the best of the best in military combat to begin with. They didn't stand a chance against even the first Taiidan fleet. We, on the other hand, have. We're the best of the best, because we're all that's left. We are the ones that have travelled across the galaxy for our home. We've killed, we've died, we've suffered, the list goes on forever of the things that we have done to get this far. We're about to reach Hiigara. But just know, we are not done yet. Do

not get distracted by it, fight like you would normally or you will die. Now a few words from some people you might have already met,” he said. She and Mark took to the centre.

“Well, there’s no point introducing myself so let’s just get to it shall we,” he said. “This is a bit late for a speech, but I think some motivation might be needed, or maybe some kind of instructions since this battle might last an entire day, non-stop fighting. Cromell said it best, I think, we’ve given up everything for this. And yeah, a lot of it has been shitty. So what? I lost it a few times. I’m not perfect and I never claimed to be. You probably know of how my actions at the inhibitor node almost lead to my own death, well shit like that can’t happen this time.

“A lot of you see me as a hero, someone with the same recognition and skill as my father, some of you might hate the look on my face because I’m always in the news and no one will shut up about how great I am. I don’t really care, because none of this is about me, and none of this is about you. This is about us. All of us. And not just the Kushan, but the Kadeshi, and even the Taiidan, all depend on us now. I’m not here to lead you into battle like a general, I’m here to do my part in this war like I expect the rest of you to do also.” Then the conversation turned to her. “Triikor is a Taiidan. She’s also my friend. A lot of you probably still don’t trust her, but chances are she’s a better pilot than ninety percent of you. She knows more about the imperial Taiidan than we do, so she’ll explain a few things just to clear it all up.”

“We’ll be exiting hyperspace in low orbit at the exact coordinates Elson gave us. There are enemy fleets that will jump from two of the other planets in the system behind us on both sides, but we’ll be far enough from the Emperor’s flagship to deal with them. There will be a line of proximity sensors, so cloaks won’t work this time, so you can scratch those off the list unless you’re asking to get killed.

If Riesstiu is scared, which he should be at this point, he’ll have as many forces retreating back to him as he can. Meaning there will be many big ships to beat. Possibly a dozen heavy cruisers and maybe thirty destroyers with hundreds of frigates. I don’t know the exact numbers, I was only a pilot on an outer rim trade fleet that kept contact between the empire and the Turanics. It all depends on how much work Elson put into his efforts.

Before we attack the flagship directly, all the escorts need to be eliminated. The flagship has about as much firepower as the *Mothership*. So not much. It’s no threat. There will also be defence field frigates, they’ll deflect our weapons for a short time. It’d be better to get rid of those quickly.

The advantage you can get over their fighters, is they will not dare break formation. These are the exceptional pilots, the ones that have done nothing but train in figuring out the fastest and best ways to kill you. But they’re also very big on staying in formation. If you know where one is going to be, you know where the rest will be too. There’s no secret kill switch I can reveal to you if that’s what you were hoping for. And Mark seems to think I’m better than most of you, which I doubt, they’re all ten times better than I am.

When this is all over, it will be worth it. Hiigara is known across the galaxy for being the most hospitable environment. And don’t think all of us are just going to get up and leave for your sake. It’s my homeworld just as much if not more so as it is yours. I have a family there and I have a past there. I grew up there, and so have billions of us. You’re just going to have to work together to rebuild your civilization with us.”

The screens flashed on showing the asteroid shatter into pieces. “We’re ready to initiate final hyperspace jump. The *Mothership*’s main engines are now operational. Setting fleet to battle formation and initiating jump.” Fleet Command said.

# Chapter Thirty

## Hiigara

MARK

“Karan. You’ve taken one step too close to me,” an ominous voice said over the speakers. We dropped out of hyperspace in orbit of our prime destination.

“It can’t be.” Triikor said. “That voice. It’s the Emperor’s!” Cromell immediately called to Fleet Command, got no response and tried other areas of the bridge instead and began talking with people.

There were a few quiet minutes before we got the news. “We’ve lost Karan. Fleet Command is gone. Emergency biotech teams are working to keep her alive.” Intelligence said. There was a panic in the room.

“Everyone stay calm!” Cromell said. People began worrying even more.

“Enough!” I said loudly. I got their attention. “Karan got us here. She brought us to the other end of the galaxy safely. She’s done her part, now we need to do ours. We still have a mission to finish. We’ve trained for this. We may not be professionals by their standards, but we’re all that’s left of us. We’re the best there is because we’re all there is. Together we can win. We’re organized, we want vengeance, we’re ready. It’s time for us all, as Kushans, no . . . as Hiigarans, to fight like we’ve never fought before! We fight or we die! There are no other options now. There’s no going back. This is our destiny, let’s make it so.” And suddenly, a reassuring cheer broke out. No one had any second thoughts, no one was afraid. Finally the entirety of the crew understood.

Intelligence would double as command for now giving updates to those who needed them. Karan was the brain of the fleet. She made most of the decisions. Now, we need to make them ourselves.

Outside the hangar, the fleet was assembled for the last time. Right there before our eyes, just as I imagined it, was our homeworld. It truly was a sight like no other. Oceans across the entire globe, where on Kharak we knew only desert. This is what I’ve been waiting for, this is what I’ve been fighting for.

The fighters were in delta squadrons of seven each, the corvettes in claws of nine, the support frigates were scattered around the fleet as miniature command ships, the ion frigates all in walls of twenty-five, though with Karan gone they were rendered useless for now until they could get them back online with some modified drone frigates. The destroyers and the *Rancor* were in a wall behind them, and the heavy cruisers in a line behind those. The Kadeshi were in their usual cluster formation. This is what an army looks like, the same people who only a year ago were afraid of the Turanic Raiders and their messy barbaric tactics.

My squad was broken up completely. I remained as Red Leader, and someone even painted the ship the right colours at some point without me knowing. But I knew none of the six others that were following me into battle with the modified Mark-VI, what they called the last of the Blade series. Like my old Mark-V, they looked the same, but had more speed and control. They were as fast as our scouts but nearly twice as tough as its predecessor. Isel was leader of Clear

Squad, the cloaked fighters. Most had been retired, but they kept seven of them just in case. Eric was Green Leader with Triikor in his squad. Arazis, she's with Saiin and the other Kadeshi as she was the last few battles.

Karu had his corvette guard a squadron of heavy corvettes. The salvage corvettes were kept docked. The pilots needed the rest, and they weren't required at this point.

I thought about Jay for a second, and then became more focused than ever. "Incoming enemy ships." Cromell said.

"The collision asteroid must have served its purpose as a delay tactic. There is a large number of Taiidan ships located here." I saw a yellow pulse on the display. "A Mothership-class vessel is among them." The Emperor's Flagship.

The incoming ships were a group of ion frigates. The destroyer team took care of them instantly. Then, the real battle began. Imperial guard ships were behind them. They had frigates, destroyers, and a heavy cruiser.

"Uh . . . is anyone else noticing they're not even paying attention to us?" someone said. They were firing their cannons, but they weren't stopping to fight us. They were heading straight for the *Mothership*. The first destroyer shot off its ion cannons and melted the metal hull of the ship and deformed it. Then the Qwaar-Jet fired, with far more power, tearing a hole straight through the first layer of hull. Right where the cryotrays were being held. The Emperor must have stolen some of the ship's plans when he did what he did to Karan.

"Damn it!" someone yelled. For several minutes, bombers swarmed the heavy cruiser away from the assault frigates and all our ships were focused on the enemy. The enemy Qwaar fell first, as it was the biggest threat. Then, the *Rancor* fired its main cannons on a destroyer's already damaged bridge section and shut down the power. Our heavy cruisers took care of their destroyers, and their frigates were made quick work of after that.

We fighters had other issues to attend to in the meantime. Above us, an Elite Guard carrier launched a full compliment of fighters and corvettes, half heavy corvettes and half bombers. "Let's show them what we're made of!" I said and throttled up. The others followed, as did Green Squad, Blue Squad and Yellow Squad with our own heavy and multi-gun corvettes following closely behind.

"Isel here, We're going to sneak past the main group to their bombers before they can do too much damage. We've got a serious lack of assault frigates down there." We only had five. They seemed to be the ideal targets of the Taiidan from our previous encounters.

"Roger that." Cromell said. "We'll send in bombers to finish off that carrier once you're done."

They cloaked, and left for the bombers. We charged right in, and maneuvered our way back out of the mess of gunfire and ship debris that came afterwards. We pulled back around, and the enemy was already heading back for us, impressive speed for corvettes. We made sure to dodge serious fire and gave off volleys of our own to return the favour. By this time Clear Squad had started picking off bombers and watching their unstable reactors go up. It went on for about five minutes, and we had lost quite a few ships, five fighters and six corvettes. The last few enemies died and our bombers were on their way. We went and helped Isel's squad finish off the rest of the enemy. We then docked with the nearest carrier for repairs and fuel before getting back to work.

"They've destroyed our sensor's array. We're blinded but we still have the data. A new one is being constructed." Cromell said. That was bad, because now we didn't know if the next wave of fighters would be three or three hundred. Capital ships still left a mass signature but smaller ships

didn't.

"*Mothership* main engines online." Engineering reported. The Turanics must have finished working on them. The huge colony ship, for the first time since undocking with the *Scaffold*, fired the orange glowing engines and started to move. It has headed to the Emperor. It was better to keep the fleet condensed so we don't get separated and killed off.

When we arrived halfway to the asteroid belt, we heard a message that sent us speeding back. "Enemy units emerging from hyperspace." Intelligence said. The blip on the screen was behind us to the left. We sent a probe.

It was a large fleet of Taiidan and Turanic. They had a Raider carrier and ten ion array frigates, three Qwaar-Jets, five destroyers, and five taiidan frigates. The carrier launched Turanic and Taiidan ships.

"Alright people, let's get 'em!" I heard Eric say. We sped back for the *Mothership* and passed it continuing on to where the enemy was. We waited for the others as well. The Kadeshi cluster was heading out also, and at this point two modified drone frigates were done controlling a dozen each. We also waited for the destroyers to arrive before we made the attack run. At this time, the enemy was halfway to the *Mothership*. If they got there, the battle would be over. One ion cannon to the massive torch drive and the entire engineering division melts down, possibly ripping the ship apart.

We went in for our run at the same time as the Kadeshi did but from a different angle forcing them to split up. The Turanics headed for the Kadeshi, which was a big mistake on their part, them being the inferior ships and pilots. Or maybe they were forced to by the Taiidan. Who knew. We held the Taiidan fighters off for a while, but ships were being lost on both sides. The Turanic missile corvettes were no match for the multi-beam frigates, not lasting even all of three-seconds. The Kadeshi formed a large sphere around the destroyers and began ripping the hull of capital ships apart one by one.

The swarmers helped a lot in ending the fight, and the enemy had no more fighters to spare. The destroyers arrived, and shot their crimson beams at the heavy cruisers, though being far less powerful, they had more numbers on their side. The drone ion frigates started proving that the Taiidan technology was far superior to the Turanic ion technology. The Kadeshi frigates finished off a third destroyer, and then a fourth, and the last. The whole while the enemy had been concentrating fire on the destroyers and not them, for they were far too quick to keep up with.

We started firing on the carrier itself as bombers came to help out also, and saw one of our own destroyers kamikaze into a heavy cruiser just before its reactor went critical, destroying both. The swarmers stayed stationary shooting off as many shots as they could as fast as they could without overheating.

The enemy had destroyed one of the drone frigates making us need to leave the most damaged ion frigates behind.

Then, as if on cue, more ships emerged from hyperspace. They were still behind the *Mother-ship*, but we might not be able to get to them in time. The sensors array revealed it to be a completely Taiidan fleet this time, and it was far larger than the last one. About double in size. Half the heavy cruisers were turned back and the rest of the drone ion frigates were also sent in. There were defenders this time with defence fighters that could block incoming fire from plasma and ion weaponry.

It went the same as before, but the defence fighters were destroyed first. The missile destroyers would deal with the defenders, as they were designed for anti-interceptor combat. The ion frigates were taking most of the enemy fire. The enemy lasted maybe ten minutes against us. The

ion frigates stayed behind just in case, and the rest of us headed forward.

“Another fleet is coming out of hyperspace right on top of us. We are being overwhelmed!” Intelligence said. It was a fleet of Elite Guards, which were, of course, the best of the best. My heart nearly skipped a beat when I heard a voice, one that we all wanted to hear.

“This is Captain Elson. We have been battling reinforcement fleets to get here and have lost many ships already. The Emperor’s flagship is here. Together we can defeat him and the Taiidan fleet. I am placing squadrons Cor and Jesah under your command.” We had been given control over two groups of frigates and destroyers, which were set to guard the *Kapella*. Our ships were near him and were told to do the same. He was making a run for it, so we needed to go too. We made it to where the main fleet was in the asteroid field.

The Kadeshi were taking the lead and we followed closely behind. Elson and his guard were after that. Our main assault force was moving to the flagship but were much slower.

We ran into a carrier that launched multi-gun corvettes. The swarmers were not very effective against them, and many were lost. They retreated back, and we came in to clean up the mess. The multi-beam frigates tore the carrier’s hull to shreds in the meantime. We weren’t having much luck either against the enemy corvettes. Our heavy corvettes were still a few minutes behind.

I could hear large collisions against the hull of the ship, and wondered how long it could take it. I took another blow almost head on.

“Mark, are you alright?” Eric said.

“Yeah I’m just taking a lot of fire. Ah shit!” I said as a shot hit right on the windshield. The glass began to crack. I put down my visor and pulled down on the ejection lever. I hit my head hard on the way out. The next thing I knew, I was floating away.

## ERIC

He saw the ship get shot down, and also saw something get shot out of the ship, which he guessed was Mark using the ejection protocol. They continued for a few seconds before he ordered the retreat. “Fall back! Fall back! I repeat, retreat! There’s no use getting ourselves killed over a dozen corvettes,” he said. The others listened to him and did as he said.

They withdrew and docked with the nearest support frigates. “Damn it man, even Mark couldn’t survive that!” someone said on the line. He sounded panicked.

“Don’t kid yourself. He’s not dead I saw him eject. We need to keep it together. The assault frigates should clear up those few corvettes left and we’ll move on to the flagship.”

They were met with one final resistance. Three heavy cruisers guarded by three support frigates each. They seem to really enjoy doing things in threes.

The fighters were useless in this battle, so they docked with the *Rancor* to watch as the main assault force blasted away at the enemy. The Kadeshi cluster took aim at the support frigates while the rest, including the *Kapella*, picked their targets.

The Kushan had lost three destroyers and a few frigates, but it was a necessary loss. After that, they moved in to the flagship itself. There was a guard there, but they appeared to have surrendered, because none of them were firing back. Elson’s destroyer took the first shot, and then the *Rancor* fired its main cannons. Then everyone, every ship in the fleet that was able to fire was shooting at the Emperor’s flagship. All but the one swarmer that was leaving the battleground. He knew who it was. In one final act of support for their emperor, entire squadrons of fighters

launched and kamikazed on the *Kapella*. It caused heavy damage but was still not enough.

## JARRED

His shuttle docked with the flagship that was being bombarded. Several marines were with him. They knew it might end as a suicide mission, they had to make sure the emperor died. They headed immediately for the escape pods. Most of them had already gone. And crews were still fleeing in them to the planet below. They could hear explosions rippling across the hull. The ship wouldn't last too much longer.

"He's over here!" someone yelled. There he was, the embodiment of evil himself, limping and heading into an escape pod. He fell into the pod, but Jarred managed to get inside with him before the door closed and it launched from the flagship.

"Wh-where did you,"

"As a member of the Taiidan Rebellion and personal friend of Captain Elson of the destroyer *Kapella*, I am sentencing you to death by execution."

"You dare speak to me like this? I will have you killed for your insolence!"

"You're so pathetic. Your own daughter despises what you've become. You have no one left. The royal house has been exterminated and Haalt-Nar is under Rebel control."

He couldn't tell if he was choking or laughing. He stomped on his throat to stop him from having any sort of satisfaction. He made him watch as his flagship lit up the sky brighter than the sun, and then put a bullet between his eyes.

## MARK

I couldn't think clearly. Everything was a blur. Then I blinked, and it became focused. I was falling. Falling away from the fight. It was just like my dream. Then I looked down, and I could see Hiigara in all its beauty. After all this death and all the suffering we've been through, this was worth it. I thought I might fall right into it, then I remembered I couldn't be that close.

I looked back at the battle going on, could see many explosions on both sides, just like my dream. Then, there was an immense flash of light, which is usually when I wake up. But not this time. This was not a dream. It was so quiet, so peaceful. I was only partially conscious, but I could still think.

I looked away from the light because it was too bright, and saw the golden glow of the sun, which was much dimmer than that of Khar-Illume, the star that would blind any who stared at it for mere seconds. I could actually look at it. Then, I turned to see the Angelmoon from which the Guidestone was carved.

A few minutes passed, and I saw a ship moving closer. An irrational feeling of fear consumed me until it came closer, revealing it to be a swarmer. The canopy became transparent, and I could see her inside. She moved the ship closer and closer until I grabbed hold of it. She carried me all the way to the *Motehrship*. I felt gravity and fell to the hangar deck. She parked her ship and ran to me.

"Are you okay?" she asked after taking off my helmet.

"I think I knocked my head. I'll be fine."

"Fleet Command back online. The Emperor is gone." Karan said.

“Help me up.” I said. She helped me get on my feet.

“We have brought the Council. This war is over,” said the Bentusi’s voice. The screens showed two ships, one of them the tradeship, and many hyperspace windows opening, and then a dozen Mothership-class ships emerged from hyperspace.

“Is it finally over?” I asked.

“It looks like it,” she said. “I also wanted to ask, what did Jay mean by today being a special day?”

I had almost forgotten. “Today is my birthday.”

“Then happy birthday Mark.” she said, then kissed me.

# Chapter Thirty-One

## Landfall

MARK

It took a week to get all the colonists out of cryosleep, but it was done. They had room in the supercity that was called Haalt-Nar, the capital of the old empire. We were the last ones on the ship, and there was only the ambassador shuttle still docked. Crews would be sent back after everyone makes themselves feel at home.

I hadn't seen her in years before today, Karan, she said she'd be the last one to leave. Everyone was waiting for us inside the shuttle.

"I thank you, Mark, you're the one who led us here." she said. "I may have gotten us here, but I was merely serving as the brain. You led us here with your bravery." she said.

"Don't discredit yourself. You've sacrificed more than anyone. You wouldn't let anyone else volunteer because it meant the possibility of never coming out of the core alive. You're a hero. I'm just a pilot doing my job. I am curious, though. What does it feel like? To be the entire ship?"

"Indescribable."

I nodded, "We should go now." I said.

"And Mark, I do remember you from the south. I haven't forgotten, farm boy." I guess I have my answer for that now too.

She was the last one on the shuttle. I sat beside Arazis who was a bit shy, having the most important person of the fleet sitting right across from her. Needless to say, the ride down to the planet was a quiet one.

The rebel forces would keep guard on the situation as they've done all week.

We entered the atmosphere smoothly, and waited a few minutes for the smoke to clear. We were sailing through the blue skies of Hiigara, a sight that until now I thought I'd never see.

The shuttle landed, and the door opened. The first thing I noticed as the crew was getting out, were the sounds. Birds. Waves. Wind. The sounds of life, as opposed to the dead hum of a spaceship.

Arazis and I got out next, followed lastly by Karan herself. We were met with a huge crowd by the sea shore in a city that was far more massive than Tiir could ever compare to. We walked down the ramp and were in what was kind of a party. A celebration for a war well fought, and a war well worth winning. Karan was the last Kushan to set foot on Hiigara, and that was the end of it. Actually, it was just the beginning.

We saw the *Kapella* parked on a building in the distance, which I guess is how the Taiidan land their ships.

John, Eric, Triikor, Isel, Karu and Saiin all found us.

"Mark, I think there's something you need to be a part of in the palace. Karan should come too." Triikor said.

"What do you mean?" Karan asked.

"Well, There's a meeting between the Sas and the rebel leaders about the future of our people." John answered.

“But wait a minute . . . I’m not the Kiith’sa of the Soban. Am I?” I said.

“You’re next in line. After your father, the people have elected for you next. They asked Cromell if he’d fill in until you’re older but he said he has other things to deal with, so congratulations, you’re the youngest leader any of the Kiithid have ever seen.” Isel said.

In the town centre, there was a palace. We were brought inside and there was a table at the top where meetings were taking place. We walked in. Arazis came in too but the others stayed out. Karan took a seat at the head of the table and I sat down too.

“Nice of you two to finally join us.” Elson said. I could see some familiar faces from the fleet, others are sleepers who were brought here, others were Taiidan representatives. There were also some Kadeshi representatives too.

“Now of course we’re not expecting an evacuation of the Taiidan people, that would be ridiculous. But an area to call our own is a must.” The Kiith Nabaal’sa said.

“Yes, of course. We have plans to build a supercity right on the other side of the Great River, which is the large open water you could see to the city side. It’s able to house over a million people, so it should be enough for you to call home for a while until more Taiidan prefer to leave to start anew on our capital world which we still haven’t chosen,” another Taiidan replied.

“You will just have to stay in Haalt-Nar with us for now,” a child said. I later found out she was the last blood-heir of the emperor, but she was let live for various reasons.

“The Kadeshi will stay until this new city is finished, then we will either choose to stay with our home that we’ve fought for, or return to the Garden to our families. Possibly even be able to negotiate a treaty and talk some sense into our governing bodies, but know that it’s a theocracy and it’s become corrupt as well.” A Kadeshi representative said. Arazis liked that idea.

The conversation then shifted to the new government system. We eventually agreed on the basics of the New Daiamid. Each Kiith’sa would be voted on by their Kiith every five years. There would be one Sa of Sas to regulate the arguments that may arise between the Kiith clans among other things, Karan was chosen for this as she already had political importance. Laws would be made more towards the protection of all life, including criminals. They would be forced back into heavy military service depending on the severity of their crimes, but there was no death sentence. Besides, they doubted there would be too many major crimes in the beginning anyway. The Rebels added that they would be renaming themselves the new Taiidan Republic, and have a system of voting to change who is in charge, but for now Elson would remain at the head to guide them down the right path.

The meeting lasted hours. By the end of it, it was sunset.

## TRIIKOR

She was with Saiin, Eric, Isel and Karu. They walked around for a while taking in all there was to about Hiigara. She showed them around the town where there were less people. She brought them to her home only to be disappointed that it was abandoned. Then, she ran into someone that could answer all her questions, her cousin.

They met in a hug. “I worried about you,” he said. “There’s so much that’s been going on down here lately. You’ll never believe how your brother’s doing. Caleb’s helped me with a lot of my Rebel work. On another note, he’s actually been dating Amelia. But she’s on our side now.”

This surprised her. “And what about you? I have so much to ask. What about my parents? I was at the house but it looks like it’s been abandoned for a while,” she said.

“I’m one of the rebel leaders that Elson chose to be in charge of this city. I’m the one who led the team onto the Flagship. I killed the Emperor myself in his escape pod. The bastard almost got away. I’m glad I found you first and not your brother. There’s something you’re not going to like . . . well, your parents . . . they were discovered. You know what they did with discovered rebels.” It made her sick in the stomach, but she expected something like this might have happened.

“He knows, though, right? Of course he does. Well, lots of people have died in this fight, that’s for sure. I’m glad he’s alive. So where’s Caleb now?”

“In the meeting with the other leaders.”

“Funny I was just there. I guess I’ll have to see him later. By the way these are my friends.”

“And I’m her boyfriend.” Eric said.

“I’m her cousin. Nice to meet you all and welcome to Hiigara. I’m sure you’ll love it here.” He shook Eric’s hand. “Well, I’m off to the beach. I haven’t been able to in forever. And since there’s a party there, why not? Anyone up for it?”

“Sounds like fun, let’s go!” Isel said.

## MARK

The meeting finished, and I stayed until most left. There were just me, Arazis, Elson, the princess, another kid beside her, and another Kadeshi.

“Elson, I can’t thank you enough. No one can. Just know that.” I said.

“Thank you, Mark. I’ve been talking a lot with Cromell. I guess you could say we’ve become friends. I would have really wished I could meet your father, but it sounds to me like you’re just as wise. For a teen to inspire an entire fleet to achieve greatness or die trying . . . it’s unheard of.”

“Well, someone had to. It’s been such a long journey. We’ve seen so much of what this galaxy has to offer. I’m sure things will be better now. For everyone.”

“I like your optimism, kid. I think it’ll still be lots of hard work, but I agree. The war is over. And I’m glad.” He left, I went out onto the balcony to stare into the sunset. Arazis talked with the Kadeshi who was waiting to talk to her. He was a member of the *Amun*’s crew, so she had seen him before. He recognized her also. She then came and joined me.

“So, on a scale, do you think the homeworld is better than the Seven Colonies?” I asked.

“Definitely,” she said.

The other two people in the room came out too. “You’re Mark Soban right?” he asked. “I heard a lot about you. I wanted to ask if my sister was still alive. She was on the carrier that bombed your planet.”

“Is her name Triikor Alaikiir?” I asked. He smiled, and was almost crying. So I guessed it was. The two of them then ran off somewhere.

We could see people at the beach having fun and could see an emblem of the Taiidan Empire burning in the distance on a building top. I just listened to all the sounds of life that I’ve missed almost to the point of insanity. This world was far more alive than Kharak. I just wish everyone I ever knew, everyone from Kharak, the people from the fleet that gave their lives in battle, my dad, my uncle, Jay, could have seen this paradise that I could now call home.

# Epilogue

The Galactic Council recognized our claim to this world. The sacrifice of thousands has left a trail of destruction behind us like a path across the galaxy . . . to Hiigara, our homeworld.

So much destruction, so many lives lost, for this place. A place of wonder to those who knew only the sands of Kharak.

Our colonists were released from their long sleep.

All symbols of the old empire were destroyed. But the conflict will never be forgotten.

A celebration marked the beginning of a new time.

No longer Fleet Command, Karan Sjet survived extraction from the *Mothership's* core. She insisted that she would be the last person to disembark and set foot on the homeworld.

Our heroes go on to live and prosper for a long time to come. The new city was named Tiir Nova, and everyone helped in the construction.

John got married to his assistant Fiira which surprised no one as they hadn't really made a secret of their engagement months prior to Landfall. He remained a carrier captain for many years until his retirement.

Isel got to rank nine for leading the cloaked fighter squadron in the battle for Hiigara, and is still dating Karu, who had become involved in the medical field.

Triikor met up with her brother and was very happy to finally be at home. She chose to stay on Hiigara with her new friends instead of leaving with the Republic to their newly founded capital. Her brother Caleb stayed behind also as a consultant between the Republic and the Hiigarans.

Eric had helped create a library in the new city, and kept it organized. He also released a book covering the entire events of the Homeworld War, which sold incredible amounts of copies.

Saiin exercised his artistic talents even after landfall, and helped paint a mural above the meeting place of the New Daiamid with Mark's help showing the old city of Tiir in the middle of the desert and on the shore of a large lake. Everyone loved it. He became famous and his paintings sold for a lot.

Arazis led a group who tried bringing more Kadeshi technology into the new city such as sleeper tubes, which were now in hospitals and the newer ships were being built with them to reduce the space needed for housing crew. A lot was accomplished by the group.

Mark had become the Kiith'sa of the Soban. Something he never thought would happen, but they had voted on it, so he was. He, with Cromell, organized and continued the training program for pilots that started on the *Mothership* in order to make sure they could be prepared for another attack if one ever came.

There were thousands of suicide cases, but it was expected. The rest, the ones who knew they would have to remain strong for the future of the entire hiigaran race, knew better. They accepted that there were things that mattered more than themselves, and now, they felt truly united as a species instead of separated by their clans.

They found their homeworld from among the stars, and they fought for it. After a year, the Homeworld War was now over.

THE END