

Summary of Volume 2

Princess Lafiel and Jinto managed to escape the territory of the Baron of Febdash, but they were not able to reach the Marquessate of Sfagnoff ahead of the enemy (United Mankind) fleet. When the communications vessel they were on reached normal space, the enemy fleet had already conquered the system. Lafiel lands on the planet to escape the enemy. In order to hide from the enemy until the arrival of the Imperial fleet, Jinto pretends to be a resident of the planet, and tries to protect the princess since she is helpless on the planet. However, a suspicious group of activists calling themselves the

Characters

Jinto	Son of the president of planet Martine
Lafiel	A flyer trainee in the Star Force of the Abh Empire. Grand-daughter of the Empress
Entryua	Chief inspector from the Lume Biga city police criminal investigation division
Kite	Captain of the United Mankind Peace Keeping Force
Marka	
Ming	
Bill	Comrades of the Anti-Imperial Krasbyul Rebels
Daswani	
Undertaker	
Admiral Trife	Admiral of the Imperial Expeditionary Fleet
Admiral Sporh	Admiral of an Imperial Reconnaissance division of Fleet

Translator's note: Titles and territory.

Last time, I referred to the lord of Sfagnoff as a Marquis, unfortunately Marquis is French. So for this novel, I will be using the English counterpart, the Marquess, and the female counterpart, the Marchioness, the territory of a Marquess is no longer a Marquisdom (made up word) but a Marquessate (proper word).

For previous Crest/Battleflag translations that I have done, I have used dukedom to refer to the territory of a duke. This is correct, but I think duchy sounds cooler, so I will be using duchy from now on. I will also be using Barony and Viscounty for the domain of a Baron and a Viscount.

Before, I have not really distinguished sexes with titles, but I will do so from now on. Since a female form of 'Earl' does not exist, a female Earl will be referred to as a Countess since a Count is an equivalent rank as Earl.

Stars

Please heed the wish of your short-lived kin

Our wish,

That is

To end our lives amongst you

-- From the national anthem of the Empire of Mankind by the Abh

"It's not?"

"No. Have you heard of the Sylezia-Republic?"

"No, unfortunately not."

"I see..." Kite crossed his arms and stared out the window.

Entryua grew impatient because Kite remained silent despite his expectations of being explained what the Sylezia Republic is. "And what about that Sylezia Republic?"

"The Sylezia Republic," Kite quietly began, "is the name of a nation that caused the war of Sylezia and collapsed 120 years ago. Right now, fortunately it is a part of the United Mankind. Before then, it was only a republic in name, and was actually a military dictatorship. A thousand families comprised the hereditary military, and controlled all of society. These military families manipulated their offsprings genetically. But no where near to the degree that the Abh did, they didn't change hair color or make new organs appear. The manipulations simply made it so that they do not age."

"And you are one of those offsprings..." Entryua muttered.

"To be precise, it was my grandparents who received the genetic manipulations."

"But..." Entryua angled his head, "then why do they not want you to get the credit? It happened three generations ago."

"How long ago it happened doesn't matter. I'm registered as being a member of 'The Unaging Sylezians'."

"Why?"

"It becomes an issue at marriage. We have strict restrictions concerning marriage. It can't be helped. Any child born from someone with the unaging manipulation and a normal person becomes aborted in the fetal stage."

"Why not genetically manipulate them then?" Entryua pointed out. "Then your children would be able to lead normal lives."

"Genetic manipulation is illegal no matter what it's for."

"Even if it's a genetic birth defect?"

"Yes. Genetic evaluation of any infants at the Zygotic stage is illegal. So by the time the defect is discovered, it is impossible to make any type of genetic corrections. But for the most part anyone born with a birth defect can be treated with other means."

"That's ridiculous." The inspector was disgusted. *They have to be sick to detest genetic manipulation this much.*

"So, I am still single. The Unaging Sylezians will probably die out with my generation."

"That's a horrifying story." Entryua muttered. "Wait a second. I don't understand. How does this lead to their not letting you get the credit for the case?"

"Please forget that I brought this up." Kite shook his head, "I let slip something I should not have."

"You can't do that once you've told me this much." Entryua realized that Kite had been intentionally shifting the topic away.

"It does not concern you."

"How does it not? You invaded our world. What's wrong with wanting to learn more about our rulers? Isn't this that 'right to know' crap you've been spewing about?"

"We are not your rulers. We are simply here to help you establish a democracy. We are your friends."

"All the more reason to know then. I want to know about my new friends."

"You got me there." Kite gave up. "They do not trust me. The Unaging Sylezians are considered to be genetically incapable of understanding what democracy is..."

He finally understood exactly how unfortunate Kite was, and why. It was racism. Now that he thought back, he realized that there were many signs of it. The fact that Kite had no subordinates, the fact that high command paid little heed to Kite's reports. *Poor Aizan. I'm sure he'd be delighted to know that the person he was kissing up to is clumsily walking along a path of life that leads far from success.* But there was still something he did not understand.

"That's strange."

"What?"

"How can you be so motivated for your work despite all of this? I would never be able to bring myself to do work that was unappreciated. Aizan doesn't value my work at all, but the citizens of the city do. That's why I can continue being a cop. But, with you... why?"

"You're very fortunate." Kite sounded very sincere. "On my homeworld there are few policemen who are appreciated by the citizens."

"You're not answering my question."

"I believe in democracy. Is that not reason enough?"

"Really? But they don't trust you."

"I'm loyal to my own conscience."

"I see." Entryua chimed in. "But are you satisfied with that?" He knew that there was no point in asking that question, but Entryua could not contain it.

"Of course." Kite said strongly. But the strength of his response seemed awkward.

"Excuse me for interrupting, inspector." Entryua heard the voice of his head patrolman through the communicator. "It's head patrolman Kyua."

"Okay." Entryua glanced across the screen. Kyua Squad was in charge of investigating the Hotel Linzel."

"Patch him through."

"Inspector, we found two suspicious people." Kyua reported.

"There's no need to tell it all to me, dump it all into the thought crystals."

"But it seems they've left already."

"They got away?" There were a few things Entryua could not stand for incapable subordinates topped that list.

"No." Kyua said in a fluster. "They were already gone when we arrived."

"Why do you think that they're suspicious then?"

"There was a man and a woman, and they were both using fake names. We tracked the names they used, but we couldn't find any records of them anywhere."

"I see." Entryua was hardly interested. It was true that they were after a man and a woman. However, for some reason that only god can possibly know, throughout history most trips that you wish to keep a secret from your family and acquaintances are usually taken by a man and a woman.

"The fake names were 'Sai Jinto' and 'Sai Lina'."

"I don't care about their names. What kind of people were they?"

"A few of the staff testified that they were very young, and that they were very strange."

"What do you mean by strange?"

"They were in their room most of the time. The woman did not seem to step out of the room at all."

"I don't find that altogether strange. Don't you think that a man and a woman have lots of things they can do together in a room? Well, not lots, just one."

"That's not all. According to the worker who showed us the room, the woman wore a hat, a man's hat at that."

"Ahh." Entryua looked at Kite. Kite was listening carefully. *A woman wearing a hat, exactly what those three told us.*

"What did the girl look like?"

"Her eyes and hair were black. Her skin was a bright wheat color. She was thinly built, and was supposedly astoundingly beautiful."

"Astoundingly beautiful, eh?"

"And, they didn't leave any tip."

"Tip? I see." Entryua nodded. *That is strange. If they wanted to be kept secret, it's common to leave a lot of tip, as a suggestion to the staff to keep quiet. If they didn't leave any, then they must be really backwards, or really cheap.*

"Pass me the visual recordings of the two of them."

"Well..." Kyua seemed at a loss for words. "They say there aren't any left. They disposed of them."

"None left? What did the manager say?"

"They dispose of them if there aren't any problems after the guests leave."

"Does he know what the law states? They're legally obligated to keep them for a year..." Entryua cut himself off. There was no point in saying that to Kyua. "What did the receptionist say? If they were coped up in their room the whole time, the receptionist probably got the best look at them."

"The manager was the receptionist at the time, but his statement is completely different. He says that it was two middle-aged men. That they looked very normal, and that he doesn't remember them."

"The manager seems suspicious." Kite stated. "Perhaps he's harboring the Abh."

"That is a possibility. Kyua, give me the manager's name and citizenship number."

"Yes, sir."

Information flowed into the command car's thought crystals from Kyua's communicator. Entryua punched in his passcode and connected to the information. He displayed the information regarding the manager of the Linzel hotel.

"He's..." Entryua stared at the screen. "That's unexpected. The manager is a member of the independence party, he's supposed to be a dedicated supporter of the radical movement in that party."

"Independence party? What is that?" Asked Kite.

"Just as the name suggests. It's a political party that demands the departure of the lord, and independence from the Empire."

"A secret organization, I see."

"Nope. They have a well advertised headquarter, and they have seats in congress, too."

"A political party like that!?" Kite was astounded.

"Oh, you didn't know? I thought you guys would have rallied them under your cause by now."

"No. We were not aware of them. You're saying it's legal to have an anti-imperial political party?"

"It's not like it's a crime to be opposed to imperial rule. It's just that you can't become the subject representative, the lord won't recognize you."

"How ridiculous." Kite made a proud smile. "So they can only operate within the bounds that the Empire sets. It sounds to me as if what they do is completely worthless."

"There are a lot of people who think so. That's why the independence party can't win during elections. And there was even a group within the independence party who believed that nothing could be accomplished through peaceful means. They left the party and formed the radical movement. They have a few sects, the manager here was a part of the anti-Imperial Krasbyul Rebels..." Entryua pulled up information on the Anti-Imperial Krasbyul Rebels from the police records. "Damn. We barely have any information on them. They plotted to take over the orbital facility twenty years ago. Most of them were arrested them, and they seem to have been in hibernation ever since."

"What exactly do the radicals do?"

"Nothing big." *Compared to what you people have done.* Entryua muttered silently to himself. "They set fire to the Marquis' garden, they planted bombs in the Star Force recruitment facility. Of course those are crimes, so we arrest them. We do keep an eye on members and sympathizers of the radicals of the independence party. But not to a degree that it becomes unfair."

"But..." Kite shook his head. "The Empire knows that a group like that exists, and yet they..."

"I'm not sure if the Empire knows about them or not."

"What? But they managed to plant a bomb in the Star Force recruitment facility, right?"

"That was a long time ago. It was before I joined the police. We did tell the Star Forces who was behind the bombing, but I wouldn't put it past them to have forgotten about it the very next day. To the best of my knowledge, the Empire's done nothing for or against the independence party or their radicals."

"That can't be... You just don't know what they've been doing."

"Really? I guess anything's possible. But it is true that the independence party exists."

"But..."

Just as Kite was about to say something, Kyua seemed to run out of patience. "Inspector, what should we do now?"

"Sorry, I forgot." Entryua scratched his head. "Put a restraining order on the manager."

"Should we bring him there?"

"No, there's no need for that. We can't arrest him on just violating the hotel record keeping laws. You guys keep an eye on the manager. Kindly ask for his cooperation by telling him not to go anywhere. I'll go over there. Wait, the manager hasn't contacted anyone, has he?"

"No, he hasn't. We've been keeping an eye on him."

"Good. Don't let him near any communicators. Tell him that the invading army will pay for any losses that the hotel incurs as a result of it."

"Can we?" Kyua laughed.

"Yeah, even if they don't, they're the ones that are going to get the blame."

"Understood."

"End transmission."

Entryua tapped on the head patrolman's shoulder. "Linzel hotel was it? Take the car there, and tell anyone headed here to meet us there."

"Understood." The command car drove off.

"About your orders." Entryua said, staring at the flowing scenery outside the window. "You were given the order not to arrest them, it has nothing to do with us. I just wanted to make that clear, we're out here to arrest a carjacker."

"Yes." Kite's eyes opened wide. "I don't believe I received an order to stop you."

"Anyways, let's have a chat with the manager."

"Is it possible that the manager is harboring the Abh?"

"Who knows."

"If he is a member of the independence party, there is no way he would harbor the Abh, correct?"

"Not necessarily."

"Do you think perhaps that the independence party is just a camouflage?"

"Camouflage for what?" Entryua asked.

"For an underground organization to aid the escape of any Abhs in a situation like this." Kite seemed excited about his idea, "I wouldn't be surprised if they had such an organization in place in case of a rebellion."

"I would. That doesn't sound very likely." Entryua said coldly.

"But as you said, anything is possible."

"I guess." Entryua shrugged.

"If you don't think that it's a camouflage, why do you think that the independence party may harbor an Abh?" Kite questioned.

"We subjects have a warped mind concerning the Abh. If someone is really warped, they join the independence party, and if someone is hopelessly warped, they joined the radical faction. One of the radical factions I looked into in the past was complaining that the Abhs weren't out to get them."

"That's ridiculous!"

"It does sound ridiculous. But I can understand. The Empire doesn't care at all what we do on our world, they're a very dissatisfying target to rebel against." *The radical faction may be the people who are most excited about this little invasion.* Entryua thought to himself. *I'm sure they're a much more satisfying group to rebel against than the Empire.*

"But if the Empire cares so little about planetary societies, why do they have such a strong urge to conquer them?"

"It's obvious, it's because they don't want us flying through space."

"Is that really it?" Kite asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, what else could it be?"

"I have a hard time believing that. But now is not the time to be debating the issue." Kite took the communicator off his waist. It had an appendage to read Imperial data crystals.

"Please give me the data crystal with our findings thus far." He asked the head patrolman.

"Okay." The head patrolman reluctantly gave Kite the data crystal.

"Yes, let's leak the information that the independence party is a camouflage for an Abh organization." Kite grinned, as if he had just had the best idea in the world.

"But there's very little chance of that." Entryua pointed out.

"All the more reason to do so."

"Why?" Entryua could not understand what Kite was thinking.

"The Army has a great deal of man power, but they know very little about this planet. They must want a target to go at very badly. If we give them this information, they'll be engrossed with investigating independence party related facilities for a while. We can catch the Abh in the meanwhile."

Entryua's mood darkened when he saw Kite's smirk. *What did I just do... I just increased enrollment for their democracy schools...*

2. On The Run

"Please, come on in. It's a squalid place, but I hope you can make yourself at home." Said Marka.

"Excuse me for making it squalid." The undertaker said unhappily. "I happen to like it."

"This is your house, undertaker?" Asked Jinto.

"Yeah." The undertaker nodded.

The undertaker's house was on the third floor of a building-tree about ten blocks from the Linzel hotel. Jinto followed Marka and the undertaker into the house. Lafiel followed immediately after him, and Ming, Bill, and Daswani fortified the rear.

"You two are so trusting." The undertaker sneered. "You would have been defenseless just now had we tried anything. Your back's wide open."

"Oh, yeah." Jinto nodded sincerely since the thought had not even occurred to him to guard the rear. *Maybe we should have been walking in the very back.*

"What kind of a bodyguard are you?" Bill joined in the ridiculing.

Jinto shrugged silently. He was not Lafiel's bodyguard, in fact the truth was closer to Lafiel being Jinto's bodyguard, but he did not feel like explaining.

Lafiel behaved confidently, as if the undertaker's house was her own. She went straight for the most comfortable looking chair without being offered it.

"Hey, that's my chair. It's the chair for the master of the house." The undertaker pointed at Lafiel in a vexed manner. Lafiel stared at the undertaker, but did not respond.

"Abh, you're our hostage. You can't complain even if we were to tie you up and throw you on the floor. Consider that for a moment and..."

Lafiel listened intently. But her attitude resembled more like that of a scientist researching a peculiar organism, rather than that of a dedicated student.

"Yeah, I know what you're about to say. You want to say that you came here on your own free will, and that you're armed too, right? But we will treat you as hostages. Of course your guns are very powerful, and you're very good at using them. So much so that we don't stand a chance against you, but I..." The undertaker's voice grew weaker with every word he said. "I'm glad that you've taken a liking to that chair."

Jinto was worried that the undertaker was going to cry when he dejectedly dropped himself on the couch. He felt relief when he saw that the undertaker was not going to cry. So instead Jinto began to inspect the room they were in. Marka said it was "Squalid" but that was not true. It seemed fairly spacious because of the lack of furniture. There was no table, just a few chairs and couches. There was a painting on the wall. The painting was rather impressionable; it looked like a painting of flames shooting down.

"Did you draw this, undertaker?" Jinto asked.

"Yeah. Isn't it great?" The undertaker broke out in a smile for a second, but immediately turned it back into a frown and began shouting. "Really! Don't you two know the position you're in!? You're our hostages! Hostages! We're not here to celebrate your birthday! Stop acting as if you're a guest!"

"Jinto, please sit. It's fun to confuse the undertaker, but we're growing tired of it." Said Marka.

"That's not what I was trying to do." Jinto rebutted. "I just thought this was an interesting painting..."

"You see, a hostage is supposed to be too busy worrying about the safety of their own life to show interest in the arts." Undertaker pointed out.

"Though it is debatable whether that painting could be considered art or not." Ming commented. Jinto sat himself down next to Lafiel while Undertaker was busy dealing with Ming.

"What do we do now?" Jinto looked towards Marka.

"We'll take you to a place outside the city in a freight truck, tomorrow morning."

"I drive freight trucks." Bill added in. "I ship meat from a cloning range in a city called Di Segon to here every day. So I know what their checkpoints are like. I'm good friends with the guys in the invading army now. They don't even bother to check what I'm shipping anymore."

"But wouldn't you use a refrigerated truck to ship meat?"

"Yup. But don't worry, I leave the city with an empty load, so I turn the coolers off."

"I'm glad. I don't enjoy being frozen very much."

Jinto pondered. *It's a good idea to leave the city in a freight truck. Lafiel gathers a lot of attention when she's in a passenger seat. Even though we dyed her hair, there's no way we can hide her spatial sensory organ without the hat. But can we trust them? If we're hiding in the freight compartment, it will be harder for them to find us. But how will we know where we're being taken? It's very possible that United Mankind soldiers will be pointing guns at us when we come out.*

"No. I'm sorry, but we can't trust you that much."

"What do you mean you can't trust us? Are you afraid that we'll hand you over to the invaders?" Said

Marka.

"Didn't you say that we're hostages? How can you gain the trust of your hostages?"

"Exactly!" Undertaker nodded greatly, glad that they finally saw things from his perspective.

Marka hit herself in the head. "We won't cooperate with the invaders if that's what you're worried about."

"Why? I've been wondering about that for awhile, why don't you cooperate with the invaders?"

"We're fighting for the independence of our world from the Empire. Independence."

"All the more reasons then..."

"Yes. I was very hopeful when we were invaded. But they said that they have no intentions of giving us independence. Why would we help someone like that?"

"Man, these guys are worse than the Abh." Said Bill. "At least the Abh left us alone."

"That's not all." Ming replied emotionally. "They shaved my head, just because I dyed it blue. I was not looking up to the Abh! It was only because it fit in well with my hair!" He rubbed his head, which now had a bald streak between a swath of red and a swath of yellow.

"My business is ruined, too." Undertaker threw his arms up in disgust.

"Your business?" *What did they dislike about funeral services?* Before Jinto could voice his question, Marka began speaking.

"So... we have no good will towards the invaders at all. Besides, they were caught by surprise this time, but I highly doubt the Abh would lose in space. So there's nothing to gain by cooperating with them."

"You believe in the Empire then."

"In the military might of the Empire." Marka corrected.

"Now I'm starting to doubt exactly how serious you are about all of this." Jinto crossed his arms. "Do you really think you can gain independence from such an Empire?"

"We have to." Ming replied. "The Empire doesn't seem very interested on planets right now. But we don't know how long this will last; in fact chances are it won't last very long. How can we oppose when the Empire makes unreasonable demands on us? The Abh can rain antimatter warheads down upon any planet they wish."

That's strange. Jinto thought to himself. *If they wanted to rain antimatter warheads down upon the surface of Krasbyul, the easiest way to do it would be by fighting for independence. I'm sure that the Empire would show a great deal of interest then.*

"You seem to think that we're being paranoid." Ming said, mistaking the expression on Jinto's face."

"No, not at all."

"Then, what?"

"I just wanted to say that, you're behaving like a child who runs away from home for no reason just because he's afraid his parents are going to punish him. If you do run away from home, there's always a chance that your parents are going to drag you back and punish you a great deal."

Ming glared at Jinto. "I've never been so insulted before in my life."

"I didn't mean to insult you. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

"I'll accept your apology. But I'm not changing my opinion."

"Sure. I have no intentions of trying to make you change your mind." Jinto tried to calm him down.

"Good then. Watch what you say in the future."

"Alright."

"Anyways." Marka cut in. "What will you do then? You're going to have to stay here for the mean while if you can't accept our plan. It's too dangerous to try to leave the city through their checkpoints any other way."

"Yes. I know that."

"You've got to be kidding!" Undertaker jumped up. "You want me to let them stay here!?"

"That'll have to do. You have an extra room right? What problems could there be?"

"They're not very good guests. Especially this one." He pointed at Lafiel. "I think she's confusing me for a servant or something!"

"That can't be helped." Marka switched to the Krasbyul tongue. "You're the only one who's single out of all of us. How am I supposed to explain them to my husband and daughter?"

"Tell them that they're your long lost brother and sister or something." Undertaker replied, also in the Krasbyul language.

"I can't lie to my husband."

"You haven't told him that you're a member of the radical faction!"

"I didn't lie to him. I never said that I wasn't a member of the radicals."

Jinto got the impression that they were a very small organization. It seemed like the five of them were

the only members of the Anti-Imperial Krasbyul Rebels, despite their fancy name.

“Undertaker is worried.” Ming said heavily. “Who knows what the invaders will do to him if they catch him harboring an Abh in his home.”

“No, I’m not.” Undertaker said, but it was obvious that he didn’t mean it.

Jinto suddenly realized that he didn’t ask an important question. “Are you going to ride in the freight compartment with us?”

“We have to.” Said Bill. “They’d be suspicious if all five of us were sitting in the driver and passenger seats at the front.”

“Oh, you should have told us earlier.” Jinto smiled. “We’ll trust you then. We’ll make sure that we can fire our guns at any time while we’re in the freight compartment, but don’t read too deeply into it.”

“Now I’m starting to forget who’s the hostage.” Undertaker complained.

“When shall we be departing?” Lafiel, who was silent until then, asked.

Marka looked at her watch. “Three hours and seventeen minutes from now.”

“I have not slept enough.” Lafiel said to the Undertaker. “Is this not your house? Is your guest room clean? You shall take me there for I require sleep.”

“I request your patience for a few minutes, I will go change the sheets immediately.” Undertaker said with an expression of doom on his face.

3. Battle of Sfagnoff Gate

A group of menacing bright dots gathered in the High-Density region between the fleet and the Sfagnoff gate.

"What is this?" Admiral Trife pointed to the group of dots on the planar space diagram with his control rod.

"There is a .9997 probability that it is the enemy fleet." Kilocommander Kahyurec replied calmly.

"I know that!" Trife shouted. "Did we not proceed this way showing them how much force we had?"

"Yes. That is exactly what we did." The head advisor nodded.

"The enemy should know the might of our fleet, should they not?"

"If they do not know already, then we would need to send a communications vessel to tell them."

"They have no chance of winning. Right?"

"Any rational commander would have no choice but to come to that conclusion."

"Then!" Trife made a dramatic pause. "Why are they still wasting time here!?" He suddenly came upon another question, and asked his head advisor.

"Wait, you said that there's a .9997 probability that it's the enemy fleet?"

"Yes."

"What else could the other .003 be?"

"Misinformation, malfunction of our sensors, unknown natural phenomenon, perhaps a group of unknown intelligence, or maybe..."

"Do you seriously think that any of those is possible?" Trife asked in disgust.

"There is a very small probability of it being any of the above. But, when you add those probabilities together..."

"Fine, enough. Forget about my question." The commander paced around the fleet command bridge with a hand on his forehead.

"I was under the impression that Your Grace wished for a conflict." Kahyurec asked, when he saw that Trife was unhappy.

"I do." Trife admitted. "But I don't like fighting with doubt. Why do you think they are here, Kahyurec?"

"There are three possibilities." Kahyurec immediately replied. "First is the possibility that the enemy believes that they can win."

"They can win? When we have such a material advantage? Why?"

"This possibility further splits into two. First, that the combat capability of each of their fleets is far greater than our estimates."

"So we may have failed to anticipate the technology of a possible enemy correctly." Trife was not happy to hear the report that the Empire may have fallen behind technologically to another interstellar nation.

"What can you expect from cat feeders?" Kahyurec responded emotionlessly.

"That's right!" Trife hit the palm of his hand. "Intelligence was perfectly suited to feed cats, how could I have forgotten?"

Communications officer Nasotryua remained silent, with an expression of abandonment.

"Of course, I think just a little higher of Intelligence, so the chances of this happening are probably very low. Therefore, if the enemy believes that they can win they must either think very little of the Star Forces, or their commander may need to have his mental health evaluated."

"It is hardly elegant to fight a lunatic."

"The second possibility... is that this is a trap." Kahyurec continued, ignoring his commander's comment.

"What kind of a trap?"

"Perhaps they have a large fleet in normal space, ready to come through a nearby gate. Then they could use a small force to fight us, and then have that force run into that gate."

"How is that a trap?" Trife was agape.

"If we chase after the enemy fleet in such a fervor that we don't scout the other side of the gate, they could wipe us out."

"What?" Trife began to feel sorry for himself. There is no chance that a flyer, who is so stupid that he would pass through a gate without scouting the other side first, would receive command of a fleet. "So they think I'm that stupid."

"They have no way of knowing that Your Grace is the commander of this fleet, so it would not be personal. It would simply be their general impression of the Imperial Star Force. There is always a possibility that they believe in that old but well-known reputation of ours."

“The Abh, they are reckless and arrogant.” Trife said. It was a saying famous enough for even the Abh to recognize immediately with just the words ‘that old reputation’. “We may be somewhat arrogant, but we are not reckless.”

“Exactly. History shows that clearly. If they researched history at all, there would be no way that they would make such an uncertain plan.”

“If it is the trap that you think it is, we should capture the enemy commander alive.” Trife decided. “We need to scold him, and tell him to relearn the basics of tactics.”

“That is a wonderful idea.” Kahyurec responded indifferently. “In any case, there is no way we would fall for such a trap, so there is no need for us to prepare for such an event.”

“Yes.” Trife agreed.

“The third, and most probable reason is...”

“A bad habit of yours.” Trife thought highly of Kahyurec, but he disliked the way he stalled to his point. “Why didn’t you tell me about the most probable one first?”

“I apologize.” Kahyurec apologized banally, and continued. “They are, or at least most of them are, from the United Mankind. Their military high command is known to give somewhat inflexible orders. Perhaps the enemy commander has been ordered to defend the Sfagnoff Marquessate to the last man with what forces he has. If we assume that he has received such an order, the best action he could take would be to assemble his forces here.”

“So you think that possibility is the most probable?” Trife crossed his arms.

“Yes.”

Trife began pacing again. The more he thought about it, the more probable it sounded to him. There is no hidden meaning behind the enemy action. They are simply trying to fight with what they have. Just like Trife himself was sent out with what he could gather. Trife had the liberty to retreat, but the enemy doesn’t. That was the only difference.

There still remains the question of why they only sent this small force for their full-scale invasion of the Empire. It is probably just a distraction. But it was Imperial Star Force high command’s job to determine that, and not Trife’s. He was unhappy that this was not the main battlefield, but he was happy that he had a fleet that he could freely command.

“Yes, that has to be it.” Trife raised his fist. “My doubt has just burnt out like a meteor that has entered an atmosphere, there is not even a speck of it left. My heart has left the harbor of doubt and reached certainty of victory. I know when to be thankful, and now is the time. Kilocommander Kahyurec, I thank you!”

“I am honored.” Kahyurec calmly accepted his commander’s thanks.

“But” Trife stopped and gazed at the planar space diagram. “I feel sorry for them.”

“This is not the time to be feeling sorry for our enemy.” The head advisor quietly pointed out.

“That’s absolutely right. We already warned them, there’s no need to hold back.” Trife pulled his command rod out and declared. “We’ll make a flanking assault!”

“I disagree.” Kahyurec said with no hesitation.

“Why?” Trife’s shoulders dropped with his spirits at the sudden remark.

“We are too close to the enemy. The enemy can see what we do clearly. If we make a flanking attack now, not only will it be ineffective, it will also allow them to divide and conquer. Even if we don’t lose, we will still suffer unnecessary losses.”

“Shreel?” Trife asked his tactical advisor for an opinion.

“Unfortunately. I agree with the head advisor.” Hectocommander Shreel seemed genuinely disappointed.

“I see.” Trife was disappointed, too. But an advisor’s opinion should be valued. Even as Trife was combating a daily enemy – one that he was not freed of even during battles – his advisors had been running simulation after simulation. If they decided that a certain scenario would only bring about unnecessary losses, it must be right.

“I guess we have no choice but to attack them head on.” Trife said dejectedly.

“Yes, I believe that is a very sensible plan.” Kahyurec gave his guarantee.

“Display the battle plan.”

The planar space diagram disappeared, and was replaced with a virtual representation of the suggested battle formations.

The average assault division of fleet in the Star Force was composed of three assault squadrons, one escort squadron, one bombardment squadron, one supply squadron, the three cruisers assigned to the commander, and several thousand communications vessels.

Right now, Trife had four assault divisions of fleet. Those four were lined side-by-side, facing the enemy. Each escort squadron was placed at the front of the assault divisions to protect the division from enemy

torpedoes.

The bombardment squadrons lay behind them. These squadrons, composed primarily of ships-of-the-line, are bows to shoot torpedoes with. The bombardment division Bask Gamryuf was laid on its side reinforcing the bombardment capability of each of the assault divisions. The commander's cruisers and the assault squadrons were behind these.

The fearful spear that would pierce the enemy in the end, the reconnaissance division Ftune was split in three and placed between them. It was an unpretentious and normal formation.

"Fine. Reorganize our fleet into these formations immediately." Trife gave his approval.

"Yes, sir." Kahyurec saluted.

Several communications vessels left the space-time bubble that the flagship Keirhdysh, and went through the chain of command relaying the order. Small mass space-time bubbles could also be seen flying through the enemy fleet, probably doing the very same thing.

"Enemy space-time bubbles have split!" The sensory advisor shouted to gain Trife's attention.

Numerous small mass space-time bubbles had split, from the space-time bubble fleet at the center of the high-density region, and now headed towards Trife's fleet.

"There is a .99996 probability that..." Kahyurec began.

"Enough with the probabilities." Trife shouted.

"It's an enemy torpedo barrage." Kahyurec calmly finished, as if he had not even heard his commander's scolding.

"I know." Trife barked, but immediately changed his expression to a smile. "It's begun."

"Yes."

The first real battle of this great war – The Battle of Sfagnoff – began.

"Deploy torpedoes as counter measures." Trife ordered.

One torpedo was launched from the flagship Keirhdysh, and taking that as a sign, the ships-of-the-line under its command all launched their torpedoes.

There is a great difference between launching torpedoes from a high-density region, and launching into a high-density region. The enemy torpedoes would most likely reach the Trife fleet, but they were unable to shoot at the enemy fleet from here. The target for their torpedo barrage was the enemy torpedo barrage. The two barrages of torpedoes quickly approached each other.

"Space-time bubble fleets have intercepted each other at bearing 305, distance 65. Interception region is growing. The sensory advisor reported.

The red dots representing the enemy torpedoes, and the blue dots representing their torpedoes, met each other. The friendly torpedoes, obeying the orders sent to them by the thought crystals, tried to space-time merge with the enemy torpedoes, but the enemy torpedoes try to escape. There was no meaning in space-time merging with torpedoes who would self-destruct before reaching the fleet.

But they were chased down or blocked, and great deals of enemy torpedoes were forced to space-time merge despite their will. The space-time bubbles that merged immediately disintegrated in a flurry of space-time particles. Local areas of high space-time particles formed and disappeared.

Waves formed through planar space, and the large circular waves that formed from the distinguished space-time bubbles rocked the stationary ones. Any torpedoes that passed through the counter measures flew ever closer to the Trife fleet. Their numbers were a great deal lower, but it was still a dangerous number. The escort squadrons greeted them.

The escort ships, with numerous small laser point cannons, formed one space-time bubble for each squad of six ships, and awaited the enemy fleet. The escort squad space-time bubbles chased after the enemy torpedo space-time bubbles. This time the torpedoes did not try to avoid them, instead they rushed in to space-time merge as well. The goal of the first wave of torpedoes was the destruction of the escort squadrons.

Any torpedoes that space-time merged were instantly greeted by fire of laser beams and anti-proton beams. Occasionally one of them would take an escort vessel along for the ride, but most of them were unable to do anything more than to increase the mass of the escort squadron space-time bubbles.

The distance between the two fleets lessened within the turmoil.

"Distance to the enemy, 142. The forward most enemy fleets have entered range." The sensory advisor reported.

"Okay, change the target of our torpedoes to the forward most enemy fleets." Trife ordered.

The newly launched torpedoes paid little heed to their counterparts, and flew straight towards the enemy fleet. The enemy torpedoes, suddenly freed of impediment, flew ever more menacingly towards the escort squadrons. Eventually the damage to the escort fleets grew to such an extent that torpedoes were starting to reach the bombardment squadrons.

“Distance to the enemy, 100.”

“It’s about time.” Trife looked towards Kahyurec. “Let the Ftune at them.”

The high commander of the reconnaissance division Fturfe, is Sub-Admiral Sporh Aron Sekpat, the Grand Duchess of Letpanyu, Penejue.

The Sporh was a great clan, they held the fact that they were next only to the royal family Abrial, and there were more than five hundred amongst their rank who held a title. The Grand Duchy of Letpanyu was exceptional even for the Sporh. The Grand Duchy of Letpanyu was a system with three habitable planets, and they were proud of the fact that they were the wealthiest of the territories within the Empire.

In other words, she was the head of the wealthiest and most historic noble clan in all of the Empire. *So, why doesn't she retire from the Star Force already and enjoy her life as a great noble?* The head advisor of Ftune, hectocommander Kfadis often thought to himself. *I understand why she entered the Star Force. It's because it's her duty as a noble.* But he could not understand why she chose to remain after she was freed from her duty. He tried to convince himself that it was “responsibility” or perhaps “destiny”, but the words like “caprice” and “fun” kept entering his mind when he considered the way his high commander usually behaved.

Kfadis had been transferred to the command center of the Ftune because his predecessor had taken leave for parenting due to an unintentional romance, and they could not find someone suitable within the fleet to promote to the position.

Less than a month had passed since. He still had trouble fitting into the atmosphere of the command center. *I have the most trouble getting used to that.* Kfadis thought to himself while gazing at the command chair.

The command chair had a gorgeous canopy, supported by four delicate white marble sculptures. The canopy itself was filled with intricately carved patterns. As hard to believe as it is, rumor was that it was made by hand. Just the work for the canopy would cost the equivalent of three years salary for a sub-admiral. Of course, a flyer with a territory received no salary.

Kfadis glanced behind the command chair. The Imperial standard, the Gaftnohec; the division standard, the Goddess of Dance (Ftune); and the Sporh family standard, the Gasarus formed a triangle. The Gasarus was on the lower rung, but it was a great deal wider than the others, as if trying to stress that it was the most important of them all.

He glanced at the command chair again. *It doesn't seem fitting...* Kfadis said to himself once more. The double winged headpiece of an imperially mandated flyer did not fit in with the pale blue hair, braided as though for a banquet in the palace. The uniform did not fit in with the stance she took, lying down on the gorgeous couch.

Of course, a lot of privileges were given to imperially mandated flyers. Decorating the command chair at your own expense was one of such privileges. But perhaps it was closer to selfishness than privilege when it came this far.

He once said, “Please act more like a commander, you’re lowering morale.” when he had first arrived. But she simply responded with a “I don’t want to.” *At least she doesn't have a handsome young waiter carrying a bottle of apple wine, chilling in a silver bowl.* Kfadis shivered, at a thought. *Or maybe she's expecting me, a knight of the second rank and advisor hectocommander Kfadis Uef Espiel Sespyec to fill that role!*

No, that's impossible. Kfadis shook the thought out of his head. *But I don't understand this commander...*

“Your Grace,” He tried to start a conversation out of a lack of better things to do.

“Yeees?” Her red pupils moved within her long eyes. It was the family trait of the Sporh, “The Red Pupil of the Sporh”. It was a deep red like that of a star at the end of its life cycle.

“Are you acquainted with the Marquess of Sfagnoff?”

“Yes. There are few people within the ranks of nobility.”

“What is he like?”

“Hardly pleasant.” Sporh evaluated him with but two words. “I can’t bare to think that my ships are going to get hurt trying to save someone like him.”

“Oh...” Kfadis was so disgusted he forgot to reprove her.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let my personal feelings get in the way of my job.”

You won't let your personal feelings get in the way of your job!? Kfadis thought to himself of the meaning behind the phrase “my ships” as he glanced at the canopy above the command chair. Doubt filled his heart and spilled out of his eyes.

“The expression on your face is fully deserving of a court martial.” Sporh responded immediately to the critical expression.

“My apologies.” He apologized unwillingly.

That was when they received their orders.

“Inter-bubble transmission from high command.” The communications advisor turned around from the control station.

“Read it to me.” Said Sporph.

“Yes, ma’am. ‘Crush them.’ Over.”

“Wow. This is my first time working with Admiral Trife, but what clear and concise orders he gives.” Sporph approved. “First through sixth squadrons, make single ship space time bubbles and enter fully mobile state! All squads enter line formation, and move in front of the fleet.

The Ftune was composed of six cruiser squadrons and a supply squadron in addition to its command squadron. The Star Forces had attached the number 607 to the official numbers of each of these squadrons. However that only serves to complicate their names, so the command squadron refers to each of the cruiser squadrons as squad 1 through squad 6, and referred to the supply squadron as squad 7. There are occasions where even the Abh emphasize practicality.

All of the space-time bubbles, which had been composed of three cruisers at the time, and cruising along the ships-of-the-line, split into single ship space-time bubbles. They now gained 1.73 times their former maximum speed, and cruised past the ships-of-the-line and the escort squadrons.

“Command squadron, come to full stop. Broadcast signal for them to gather to us, enter third closed formation.” Sporph did not panic even though the enemy was immediately before them. She calmly gave her orders.

The three cruisers forming the command squadron were in a triangle. It goes without saying that the flagship Herrzbyulsh was at the forward tip. Five rows formed behind that triangle.

“Fourth squadron is falling behind.” Kfadis noted. All of the other squadrons were now moving horizontally in front of the escort squadrons, but the fourth squadron was still lingering around the ships-of-the-line.

“I don’t like slowpokes.” Sporph said. “I’m sure they’ll catch up eventually. Let’s go in with the other five squadrons.”

“But...” Kfadis thought about reproving her decision, but changed his mind. *Her decision is a wise one. If we sit around waiting for fourth squadron to join us, it would give the enemy a chance to respond to us. To make things worse we’re completely open to enemy torpedoes right now, without even the protection of the escort squadrons. We really do need to make haste.* But Kfadis was unable to say with confidence that his commander had not come to the decision out of taste.

“The five squadrons, excluding the fourth, have completed the formation.” Kfadis reported.

“Tell the captains to go to fully mobile state towards bearing 310. Continually broadcast the signal ‘Follow Me’.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kfadis relayed the commander’s order to the communications advisor.

The reconnaissance division of fleet Ftune began moving again. The forward most fleets of the enemy, which lay spread out before them. The enemy began to concentrate their torpedoes at the Ftune.

Kfadis switched his headpiece to receive external signals, and immediately grimaced. An enemy torpedo was trying to enter their space-time bubble once every five seconds. The Herrzbyulsh’s point cannons were shooting them down as best they could. But if even one were to hit their target, it would cripple the cruiser despite its heavy armor.”

Just like most of the soldiers in the Star Force, Kfadis had no experience in real combat. He had just experienced his first taste ever of fear of death. Cold sweat beads dripped down from the back of his headpiece down his eyebrows.

He glanced at the commander. *What a woman, she’s humming! Does she understand what situation we’re in? Doesn’t she realize that we’re in the middle of a heavy barrage of enemy torpedoes!?*

“Your Grace, should we not deploy counter measures?” Kfadis said, unable to contain his dissatisfaction.

“Where were you last stationed?” Sporph asked while toying around with her command rod.

What does that have to do with this? Kfadis was slightly angry, but answered anyways.

“I was the head advisor in the 184th bombardment squadron.”

“Oh, then you probably didn’t know. Listen, cruisers don’t carry ANY torpedoes to use for defense. The few torpedoes that cruisers do have are for destroying enemy ships. Remember that.”

“But...”

“No Buts. What good does it do for cruisers to be getting scared over a few torpedoes? We are the Ftune!”

“Gh...” Kfadis was at a loss of words when he suddenly realized that Sporph’s headpiece was also set to receive external signals.

Damn, she's trying to bluff. Kfadis considered switching back to his personal sensors, but he decided, *over my dead body.*

"Inter-bubble transmission from the cruiser Kyubyulsh of the first squadron." The transmission advisor reported.

"We have been heavily damaged. Rail guns and forward point cannons have been disabled, we are retreating."

Sporh was unmoved even by this report. She simply nodded gently to show that she was listening, she did not even stop humming.

The enemy forward most fleet was starting to move to the side. They were opening a path for the Ftune. It was a very wise decision. The enemy forward fleet was likely to be have been composed of escort squadrons. They stood no chance against cruisers.

Kfadis suddenly had a mischievous idea. *Let's test exactly how calm and rational this sub-admiral is.* "Forward most enemy fleets are trying to evade us, shall we pursue?"

"Are you an idiot?" Sporh made a slashing comment. "Or are you just pretending to be an idiot?"

"Excuse me." Kfadis was astounded by the condemning tone of his commander's voice.

"I asked you a question. Which one are you?" Sporh was unrelenting.

"Umm... I was pretending to be an idiot."

"And why were you doing that?"

"That's, umm..." Kfadis was at a loss for words, because he could not tell her that he was testing her.

"So you were trying to test to see if your commanding officer is an idiot or not." Sporh hit it right on the mark.

"No, umm..."

"Then what?"

"I'm sorry!" Kfadis gave up. "Your Grace is absolutely correct."

"Then I will forgive you, this time." Sporh was surprisingly benevolent. "But never do it again, I'll pick on you if you do it again."

"I'll make sure not to."

"Hold our bearing. Our target is the enemy ships-of-the-line. Save the unimportant escort ships for the people behind us."

The Ftune passed through the crevice in the forward most enemy fleet smoothly. The rearmost fourth squadron made it through as well. But several space-time bubbles rushed towards the Ftune from the port side.

"Judging from the mass, they're assault ship class single ship space-time bubbles!"

"Head advisor, remember this. Now is the time for cruisers to use their torpedoes." Sporh swung her command rod up. "Launch torpedoes to the port!"

The numerous ships in the Ftune space-time separated their torpedoes. The swarm of torpedoes rushed towards the enemy assault ships. The red dots representing the enemy ships disappeared one at a time.

"Now from the starboard! Three cruiser class single ship space-time bubbles!"

Sporh tapped her forehead with the command rod for a second as she pondered what to do.

"Let the fourth take care of it. They're in the perfect position to do so."

The fourth squadron smoothly responded to the order, as if trying to make up for their initial blunder. Their line moved forward, blocking the enemy ships. For the next while, no enemy ships threw themselves at the Ftune. But the torpedo bombardment increased in severity, and the space-time bubble that the Herrzbyulsh was in became filled with debris and charged particles. A warhead that was shot down by a point cannon a little too close to the ship, spread its antimatter cargo across the space, vaporizing nearby debris.

So this is war... Kfadis shivered at the thought.

"How boring. Don't you agree, head advisor?" Said Sporh.

"What?" Kfadis pondered for a second whether he was hearing correctly.

"I said I was bored." Sporh repeated herself, "Every day I had to deal with boring old paperwork, then we finally enter combat but there's nothing to do. Why did I become an imperially mandated flyer? I'm sure a Captain would be having much more fun."

"Do you think so?" All of the Captains were probably feverishly trying to stay alive what with the addition of assault ships to the torpedo barrage. Kfadis had experience working on a bridge, and had no trouble picturing the tense atmosphere that must have been in them right now. *It's tense enough for you to forget to breathe even in a mock battle, and this is the real thing...*

"It was originally my dream to become the Captain of a cruiser and fight the enemy. But there was no war when I became a Captain, and now that we are in the middle of a war, all I have to do is this boring old job. I can't even leave the force until the war is over now. What horrible luck I have."

So she is doing this for fun and caprice. Kfadis sighed heavily in his heart.

"I thought I told you that that expression is worthy of a court martial." Sporh glared.

More enemies came at them. A single assault ship space-time merged with the Herrzbyulsh. A short alarm rang on the bridge, and then the shockwave of a rail-gun blast echoed through the bridge. The assault ship detonated in an instant, and a wave of charge particles, far greater than that from a torpedo, rained upon the sensors of the Herrzbyulsh. It was as if they were in the middle of a solar wind.

Even as Kfadis grimaced from the shock, Sporh yawned behind the back of her hand, complaining. "Oh, this is so boring."

"Well done, Admiral Sporh!" Trife gave his compliments.

Not only was the forward enemy fleet split in two, the rest of the enemy were thrown into confusion. The Ftune was in a close order formation in the middle of that chaos, moving forward inch by inch.

"Throw all the torpedoes we can here." Trife pointed at the crevice in the forward enemy fleet. "Don't let them close again. We can't abandon the Ftune."

"300 enemy space-time bubbles bearing 010, distance 30. They will intercept us."

A group of space-time bubbles that appeared from behind the enemy ships-of-the-line were trying to pummel the Ftune.

"I believe it's the main enemy force." Kfadis felt the blood drain from his body. "They have sent all of their fighting power at us. We must engage in evasive maneuvers!"

"Head advisor, please don't shout on my bridge." Sporh pointed at the back of the planar space diagram with her command rod. "Calculate it, will they make it in time?"

Numerous blue dots rushed towards them. These were the friendly torpedoes.

"Yes, ma'am." *I was not shouting!* Kfadis typed the calculation into the thought crystal, despite his irritation. Red lines appeared from the enemy fleet, as blue lines appeared from the torpedoes. They intersected to the starboard, and a little ahead of Ftune's predicted location.

"Keep our course." Sporh ordered.

"Yes, ma'am." Kfadis nodded, but he was still worried.

The friendly torpedoes rushed past the Ftune from the right, and crashed into the enemy. The front starboard side of the Ftune immediately became a stage upon which the torpedoes, trying to space-time merge with the enemy, and the enemy, trying to avoid the torpedoes, danced together. The enemy lines were thrown into disarray. The corpses of space-time bubbles, a local region of high space-time particle density, appeared in countless places.

We're saved.

Kfadis sighed in relief. Only then did he realize exactly how tense he had been. Any enemy ships that managed to leave the dance stage, to come after the Ftune once more were dispatched one after another. The center of the high-density region was near, the enemy ships-of-the-line were immediately before them.

"Enemy ship-off-the-line squadrons are completely absorbed in trying to stop the Ftune. They pose very little threat to the main fleet." Kahyurec analyzed the situation.

"Good, all ships prepare to assault the enemy." Trife decided. "Lokerr destroy the starboard forward enemy fleet. Wakaperr, destroy the port. Byuldef and Ktyrr, follow me. Hurry up or the Ftune will take all the tasty parts before we get there."

The enemy ship-of-the-line squadrons began to back up.

"Too late." Sporh whispered, as if mourning for them, and stood up. "Let's assault those ships in half squadron space-time bubbles. Head advisor!"

"Yes, ma'am." Kfadis took a step forward.

"I don't like to worry about the details. Give each squadron their targets."

"Yes, ma'am." *If you're bored, why don't you do it yourself?* Kfadis thought, but didn't voice. Instead he began dividing up the enemy ship-of-the-line squadrons amongst the squads.

"Oh yes, don't save any for us." Said Sporh.

"Understood." Kfadis finished the task he was assigned, and relayed the orders to the communications advisor. He then turned to ask. "Are we going to hold ourselves in reserve?"

"No. I'm going to take that." She pointed at the planar space diagram, straight at the space-time bubble designated 661. It was situated far behind the battlefield.

Kfadis reviewed the battle, and determined that space-time bubble 661 had not launched a single torpedo. "I believe this is a large transport of some sort. Why don't we ignore them?"

"It may be the enemy reserve force pretending to be a large transport. It might be pretending to be

y to strike at us in the very end. That would be annoying, so I'd like to strike at it first, s, ma'am." *That is possible.* Kfadis thought to himself.

"All squadrons have confirmed their targets." The communications advisor reported.

"Good." Sporh nodded, and swung her command rod up happily. "All ships dispatch! This is where we die a fiery sacrifice. We are the goddess of dance (Ftune), let's show them exactly how well we can dance!"

The rectangle that was the Ftune disintegrated. The three-cruiser space-time bubbles all headed toward their respective targets, making all the possible formations that three ships could make. Inter-bubble communication was ineffective over large distances. From now on, the Ftune could only fight as the command cruiser and its two companion cruisers.

"Message to the captain. Changing bearing to 015, maintaining fully mobile state."

The cruiser Herrzbyulsh lead the two companion cruisers in a straight run from the high density region to the low density region that space-time bubble 661 was at.

"Shall we take an assault formation?" Kfadis asked.

"No. Just run straight at them." Sporh tapped her own cheek lightly with the command rod.

After a moment, the navigation advisor reported. "Ten minutes until space-time merging with the enemy."

"Prepare for normal space combat." Sporh ordered, as if talking to herself, and then glanced at Kfadis.

"Well?"

"What?" Kfadis asked, confused.

"The enemy hasn't surrendered yet. A large transport would have dispatched a signal of surrender by now. I must have been right."

"But they still have not launched torpedoes. How do you explain that?"

"I don't know." Sporh dismissed casually. "I'm sure they have their own reasons for not doing so."

"Space-time bubble 661 has space-time separated!" The navigational advisor shouted.

"See, here they come." Sporh smiled.

"Six assault ship sized space-time bubbles, bearing 345, distance 16. They're coming straight at us. Relative velocity 375 cedlairh." The navigational advisor continued.

"What!?" Sporh's smile disappeared. "They're not torpedoes!?"

"No, ma'am."

Sporh bit on her lips, unhappy. "Armory advisor, how many torpedoes do we have left?"

"We have four left, Borgbyulsh has 4, Hassunbyulsh has five, for a total of thirteen."

"I can do the math! Launch torpedoes at them. Launch all of them. Swat them down!"

Thirteen torpedoes space-time separated from the three cruisers. Thirteen on Six. The enemy ships were outnumbered by more than two to one. The enemy assault ship sized space-time bubbles stood no chance. Assault ships are especially vulnerable to torpedoes. The three cruisers sailed calmly by.

"Head advisor." Sporh called.

"What is it?"

"What do you think is the greatest crime that a Flyer can commit?"

"Being impudent to his or her superior?" Kfadis kicked himself for returning a flattering response.

"No. It's being an idiot." Said Sporh, unexpectedly. "It's useless to be responsible, or obedient to your orders if you're an idiot. What kind of an idiot would send six assault ships against three cruisers?"

"I see." Kfadis nodded, finally understanding why his commander was unhappy.

"I may not take this very seriously, but I am not an idiot. I would not let my subordinates die meaningless deaths."

"Yes, ma'am." *Who would?* Kfadis thought to himself. "Of course your command was very well done. He had needed to do very little of his job as a head advisor, even though the fact that he was new to cruisers.

"I don't need idiots under my command either. The Grand Director chooses her playmates carefully. Though she can't always choose what she plays with."

Kfadis felt a cold bead of sweat drip down under the gaze of the red pupils of the Sporh. "I will do my best to be an intelligent playmate."

"You have potential." Sporh let a small smile appear.

"One minute to space-time merging!" Said the navigational advisor.

"They still have not sent a surrender signal." The communications advisor added.

"Navigational advisor!" Sporh looked away from Kfadis. "Make sure that all three ships space-time merge at the same time."

"Understood."

"To all ships. Fire your rail-guns as soon as we space-time merge." She already had her eyes closed,

and all senses tuned to her spatial senses in anticipation of normal space combat. Sub-Admiral S anticipation with her eyes closed. "Let's see what's in here. I'm so excited."

"Ten seconds to space-time merge. Eight... Seven... Six... Five..." The navigational a counting down. "Four! Three! Two! One! Space-time merging!"

An alarm blared across the bridge, signaling the fire of the rail-guns.

The range of Kfadis's spatial sensory organs increased suddenly. He could sense the er before him, it was large, but alone.

"They have just surrendered!" The communications advisor shouted. "They have sent an electromagnetic surrender signal..."

"Abort attack!" Sporh did not listen to the end. She opened her eyes and stood up from her seat. "To all ships, abort attack! It would shame the name Sporh if we were to fire on an enemy after they surrendered."

Couldn't she say a shame upon the Empire, or the Star Force, or at least upon the Abh, instead? Kfadis thought to himself.

Hassunbyulsh fired before the order could be given, but the nuclear fusion warhead self destructed before reaching the enemy ship.

"Why didn't they send an inter-bubble transmission? Did they think they could get away?" Sporh said. "Message the Borgbyulsh. Tell them to inspect the enemy ship and then accept their surrender. Tell the Hassunbyulsh to follow me."

Space-time bubble 661 was dominated by one large transport. After confirming that fact, both the Herrzbyulsh and the Hassunbyulsh space-time separated.

"Enemy ship-of-the-line squadrons have been decimated." Kfadis reported.

"Oh." Sporh casually dismissed it. But it was obvious that she was disappointed.

"Where shall we go?" Kfadis asked.

"Bearing 160, fully mobile state. Let's go back to where my ships are."

"Yes, ma'am." Kfadis relayed the order to the Captain.

He had a feeling that he had changed his opinion of the commander a second ago, but Kfadis decided that it must have been temporary insanity. There were two or three things he wished to say to the commander.

Sporh swung her command rod directly towards Kfadis. "I thought I told you that that expression is worthy of a court martial."

"Yes, ma'am." Kfadis decided that it would be best if he remained silent for now.

Sporh stood there thinking silently for a moment, until she noticed that inquisitive gazes were focusing on her. Feeling that she needed to make an excuse, she tossed her delicately braided light blue hair over her shoulder, and said. "My instincts can be wrong sometimes."

The battle was over. The only ships left on the battlefield were friendly ships, or ships that had surrendered.

"A communications vessel has arrived from the Ftune." Kilocommander Kahyurec reported.

"Hmm." Trife nodded. "And?"

"They seem to have taken the enemy bureaucrats as prisoners of war."

"Great. That's great news. But why did they have bureaucrats on the battlefield?"

"The United Mankind has a tradition of having news reporters and officials from the ministry of war present at battles. They seemed to have been on a large transport near the Sfagnoff gate."

"Hm." *The United Mankind certainly has peculiar habits.* Trife paced around the bridge, but realizing that thinking about it would do no good, he stopped. "Well anyways, we have won, have we not?"

"Yes. As expected."

"It came too easily to be interesting, but we should be thankful. Tell all ships to gather."

"Understood."

"Oh yes, we'll have the Ftune finish up another job. Have them go through the Sfagnoff gate as soon as they refuel. Have them take control of the Marquessate airspace if no enemy forces are on the other side. And, who did the least work in this battle?"

"Every division worked hard..."

"I know, I'm not going to punish them. Just tell me."

"Well..." Kahyurec tilted his head. "Byuldef had the least amount of kills"

"I see. Have the Byuldef clean up the battlefield."

"Understood."

The final losses suffered by the Trife fleet were as follows.

“What insolent children. How dare they point and laugh at Her Highness the Princess.”

“They were most likely laughing at you.”

“The amusement park seemed to be doing well despite the invasion. A sense of calm crept into their hearts. If there were this many normal subjects, and especially children, around, even the United Mankind would not do anything rash.

“Let’s go. If we’re lucky, we might even get new clothes.”

“Okay.”

The two of them tried to walk away, but suddenly...

“Halt.” A voice rang from above. “You have entered the park from a non-regular entrance. Security personnel will be arriving momentarily to question you, so please wait where you are. In the event that you disregard these instructions, we may contact the police.”

When Jinto looked up, he saw the head of a giraffe. His shoulders were of normal height, but the neck stressed the distinctness of the species.

“I’d rather not.” Jinto grabbed Lafiel and ran.

“Halt, halt, halt...” The giraffe chased after them, struggling to maintain its balance.

“Attention customers,” the amusement park intercom rang, “an emergency situation has occurred. An emergency situation has occurred. I am sorry to say that the Gzonu Fantasy Land will temporarily close immediately. We will return your entrance fee. Please leave in a single file line from the exits. We are in no danger if you remain calm. Please follow the instruction of our staff, and calmly leave the amusement park. We hope you come again. I repeat. An emergency situation...”

“What do they mean by ‘an emergency situation’?” Said Lafiel.

Jinto took a glance at the gun in his hand, and turned back towards their giraffe pursuer. “I can’t imagine any reason other than us.”

Back when the planet Krasbyul was first forming, there was a lake of magma here. Two rivers flowed out from the lake. One was wide and carried a great deal of boiling rock from the lake. The other was not as wide, and merged with another river of magma and ended up flowing into the wide one anyways.

When the planet was going through its adolescence, the flow of magma stopped, and the lake began to dry up. The magma either froze in the lake, or was carried off by the river. The magma that was carried off also froze solid somewhere, forming the crust of Krasbyul. All that was left was a deep depression, surrounded by steep cliffs.

People eventually came, built a city nearby, and began to wonder if they could take advantage of this depression somehow. They could make it a farm, but then they would need to build a road for the farming equipment to move through, and they could not expect yields that would justify the cost of that.

For some reason, an idea popped up to make it a zoo. They would be able to make a sealed environment by just putting a hemispheric top on the depression. They could split that in two, creating a rainforest and a savanna, and let any animals, that did not fit in the natural Krasbyul environment, live there.

The person who came up with the idea was widely praised, and it was decided that a zoo would be constructed there. A corporation was formed for the project, and funds were collected. Everyone thought that the project would be carried out smoothly.

But a problem arose after the roof was put over the depression. An old idea that it was inhumane to lock up animals arose from somewhere and spread amongst the population. There was a rebuttal that their cages were very large, but it was mostly ignored. Finally it was decided to place robots built like animals, instead of real animals. Any scholarly aspects of the enterprise were forgotten. Scholarly aspects tend to be the first thing forgotten in any event.

With the exception of a few biologists, the population was very satisfied with the new idea. A live animal could not do tricks, and making them conform to the wishes of men by teaching them tricks would be a crime, they could not tell stories to children either. They have an unpleasant odor, and they resort to violence at the slightest cause.

An artificial animal was a much safer playmate for children than a real one. The parents would then be able to focus on their work, or on adult entertainment, after they took their children to the amusement park. The Gzonu Fantasy Land was created with such thoughts behind it, and now prepared to meet its 70th anniversary.

“There they are! Just as we expected.” Inspector Entryua clapped his hands ecstatically in the operating room of the Gzonu Fantasy Land. “But that’s strange, there aren’t enough of them.”

“But the Abh is there.” Kite’s eyes glittered.

“I guess.”

“I think you’re going overboard, they’re still children.” The manager of Gzonu Fantasy Land, who had

to return the entrance fee to all his customers, looked at the screen unhappily. "Though they are too old to be customers here."

"Those children have brought many of our soldiers to their deaths." Captain Kite said with a cold gaze. "They are dangerous murderers."

"Oh..." The manager looked at Entryua questioningly.

"Don't worry about it, manager. I'm sure the invading army would pay for your losses."

"Really... I wonder exactly how long this invading army will be here. Even now..." The manager was about to say something, but was silenced by a glance from Kite.

"What?" Entryua became curious.

"The birds that we control remotely started acting up half an hour ago." The manager said, glancing at Kite. "Our technicians said that there was nothing wrong with them, it was caused by a jamming signal, when they examined them. And we can't use our wireless communicators anymore."

"And?"

"Inspector." Kite spoke up. "We don't have time, let's go make the arrest."

"Don't rush it. We can't go arrest them until the customers are all out of the park anyways. They are armed."

"What if they get away amidst the crowd!?"

"We have our eyes on them, and my subordinate are manning the exits. Manager, please do continue."

"There's not much more to say." The manager reluctantly continued. "The rest is just my guesses. Who's making this jamming signal? I can only come up with one possible answer. Why are they doing this? There's only one answer to that as well. Inspector, you must know something about it."

"No, I really don't. I was here the whole time. But now that you mention it, my subordinates haven't made their reports in a long time. But it hasn't been long enough to catch my attention."

"Well thanks to the jamming signal, all we can do is give vocal commands to the animals. Look." The manager tapped at the screen, "We can't even get video footage from this giraffe that's chasing after them."

The manager pressed a few controls and the screen became filled with snow.

"You seem to know something." Entryua turned his gaze to Kite. "Has something happened in space?"

"I don't know." Kite denied. "I was with you the whole time, inspector."

"But you glanced at your personal computer every now and then." Entryua pointed out. "Maybe you received reports on your personal computer, maybe notifying you of the jamming signal, and why it's there."

"They're communiqués within our army, they do not concern you, inspector." Kite's expression hardened.

"Really?" Entryua said gently, "I thought you had to report to your superiors about everything you found out concerning this case. But you haven't reported the appearance of the Abh. Why is that? Maybe it's because you can't report to them. Come on, Captain. I think that you know why that is. If you're hiding something from me, my subordinates and I might just happen to take our work less seriously."

"Are you extorting me!?" Blood rushed up into Kite's pale face.

"Yes, I am. Extortion is how we do business. Suspects usually aren't very cooperative."

"Fine." Kite said unhappily. "I did receive an order at 1155 military standard time. That would be 37 minutes earlier. It said that they would be broadcasting a jamming signal starting at 1200 military standard time. Therefore communications will be cut off for a period of time, but we are to continue our present duties."

"My question was, why is there a jamming signal?"

"I don't know. They really have not told us. You have to trust me on that."

"I see." Entryua thinned his eyes. *Kite doesn't look as if he's lying. He did grow up in a different culture, but I should be able to tell if he's lying.* Entryua was confident about that.

Entryua was disappointed. But he could guess at the reason even if Kite did not know it.

"The Abh's back." He said.

"Halt." The White rhinoceros said.

"Halt." The Emperor penguin said.

"Halt." The Puma said.

Jinto and Lafiel were completely and lovably surrounded by animals. It seemed as if they had nothing better to do now that the children were gone.

"You shall move." Lafiel stuck her laser pistol at the Beaver's head.

"Wait." The Beaver said, showing its cute front teeth.

"You are not sentient, are you?" Lafiel checked.

"No, we are not. We do not have a will of our own." The Beaver winked. "But keep this a secret from the children. You might ruin their fantasy."

"We have no choice Jinto, let us destroy it."

"What!?" Jinto shouted. "I'm reluctant to. It's so cute."

"I'm reluctant as well." Lafiel said as she shot the Beaver down. "But we have no choice. They will catch us if we do not hurry. Besides, you had no qualms about shooting people."

"Well they were shooting at me, too. Besides, they weren't very cute."

"Attention!" The animals raised their voices in unison. "We are property of the Gzonu Fantasy Land, and you will be charged with vandalism if you break us. You will also be charged with the cost of repairs. For your information, the average cost of one of us is..."

"Then go away before you are destroyed!" Lafiel said as she cut a Puma in half.

The robotic animals did not cower even after losing one of their kind. Instead, they tightened the circle.

"Sorry." Jinto shot a Hyena. It had the most villainous face of the bunch, so he felt the least amount of guilt for doing so.

"What are they doing!" The manager held his head in hysteria as he saw his precious property getting destroyed.

"See, are they not heinous!?" Kite took advantage of the situation.

The manager was not listening. "Get away from the intruders! Disable function 24!" He ordered the animals over the park intercom.

The animals turned their backs to the intruders. And the manager made a sigh of relief when he saw that the intruders were no longer shooting at the animals.

"Actually pull all the robotic animals out." Entryua said. "They'll only get in the way of the arrest."

"I can't do it with a voice command. The technicians will have to go there, or we'd have to send an electromagnetic signal. More importantly, inspector." The manager glared at Entryua. "What are you doing here? Go arrest them already!"

Entryua shrugged. "I asked you to let me place my subordinates around that emergency exit, but you wouldn't let me because it would hurt the Fantasy Land's image."

"Yes, I was wrong. I'll admit that. So..."

"I can't until the customers all evacuate. We are the beloved police force." Entryua pointed at one of the screens.

It was the display for the customer tracking thought crystal, and it still showed about 120 people in the Fantasy Land, and that number had not changed in a while. For some reason, 120 customers were refusing to leave.

"There aren't any in that area any more." The manager complained.

"Yes." Kite joined in. "Let us go arrest them immediately. We can't use communicators, so it will take that much longer to get in touch with everyone."

"And whose fault is it that we can't use communicators?" Entryua put the cigarette he was smoking out on an ashtray. "But, you do have a point. Let's go to make the arrest."

"Yes!" Kite nodded vigorously.

The other people had all disappeared while they were playing tag with the robotic animals. The robotic animals were still around, but Jinto did not approach them. But he did not go out of his way to avoid them either.

"Excuse me." Jinto apologized as he almost ran into a squirrel.

"My fault." The squirrel walked away as if nothing had happened.

The two of them were in a maze. The two sides of the road were filled with row after row of stores. There were many things on the shelves of these stores: writing utensils, clothes, and other things needed for daily life, all with pictures of animals drawn on. The stores were all manned by robotic animals.

Jinto stopped before a cloth store, took a glance at his dirty overalls, but gave up on the idea. They did not have time to be picking out clothes and changing. The road twisted and turned in intricate patterns, and they were unable to get onto the main road. Though they could tell that they were somewhere near the center by looking up at the ceiling, they had no idea which way the exits were.

The animals manning the stores looked at them curiously, but never tried to push their goods.

"Wait." Jinto said to Lafiel as she rushed ahead.

"What?"

"I have an idea, let's ask an animal how to get to the exit."

"That is a good idea." Lafiel approved.

Jinto approached an otter that was placing merchandise on the shelves.

"Welcome." The otter spread its short arms out in welcome.

Jinto noticed that despite the wide variety of merchandise, they all had the picture of an otter.

“What will you have?”

“Umm...” Jinto was at a lack for words.

“I understand, you don’t care what it is so long as it has a picture of me, right? Then let’s settle for this recommended item.” The otter placed a nail clipper on the palm of its hand. “It’s very affordable, and works very well. Nail clippers never get in the way no matter how many you have, they’re easy to lose, and...”

“That’s not it.” Jinto cut him off. “Can you tell me where the nearest exit is?”

“What!?” The otter cried out. “You’re going home already? Why not enjoy your stay for a little bit longer? At least long enough to look at this nail clipper. Are you in a hurry?”

“Didn’t you know? This place is temporarily closed.”

“You have to be kidding. The Gzonu Fantasy Land operates 24 hours a day...”

“That’s why it’s temporary. Are you going to tell us or aren’t you?”

“You’re no fun. Oh well. If you go straight down this road...” The otter told them the way to the exit. Jinto thanked him, and they left the store.

“That way.” Lafiel pointed towards the exit, and began running again.

Suddenly, they heard an explosion.

“Looks like they couldn’t find the emergency control panel.” Said Jinto.

“Which idiot did that!?” Entryua raised his voice furiously when he heard the explosion. He thought that an incautious subordinate of his had opened fire. But now that he thought about it, police officers did not carry explosive weapons. At least Entryua’s subordinates did not.

Was it the Abh then? Is the Abh trying to slaughter my subordinates since all they carry are dart guns? That had to be wrong, too. It came from the complete opposite direction as where the Abh was supposed to be. This was when Entryua finally remembered the group that was pursuing the Abh.

“Looks like your friends are here.” Entryua glanced at Kite.

“Really?” The Captain’s head drooped down.

Maybe we’ll stop now. Entryua thought to himself. *I didn’t feel too up to it to begin with, and I’m sure the invaders will catch them anyways. They’re just carjackers, I’m sure it won’t matter if...*

No! We can’t! We chased them down this far, well actually we just waited while the invaders chased them down, but anyways I can’t let someone else get the credit when the criminal is right there.

“Hurry.” The chief inspector poked at the driver.

“I can’t help it, inspector.” The young policeman complained. “These cute little animals don’t seem to know the rules of the road!”

He narrowly avoided crashing into a happy little raccoon.

“I guess this isn’t a road.” Entryua dropped back on his seat. “I should have brought an aircraft if I knew this was going to happen.”

“Shall we call for backup?”

“Idiot! We don’t have time for that.”

A large explosion occurred behind them. A patrol car had driven head on into a building. The raccoon looked over them worriedly.

Entryua sighed. *This is turning out to be a much more interesting arrest than I could have imagined.*

“Emergency, emergency.” The park intercom shouted out. “Any customers in the park should leave immediately. We cannot be held responsible for your safety any longer. Also, to the customer... err... intruder who destroyed the emergency exit, please behave in the Fantasy Land. Try not to destroy anything! Damn it! Why do you have to be this way!”

“Chief, over there!” Kite pointed forward.

A young couple was there. The girl’s hair was black, but she wore an Abh headpiece.

“Okay, go!” Entryua shouted out.

He wanted to be freed from this stupid assignment as soon as possible.

“They found us!” Jinto came to a halt. A row of hovercars charged at them. Lafiel tried to aim her laser pistol, but Jinto held her back as soon as he came to.

“Don’t, at least not here. Let’s go back to the marketplace we were in earlier.”

Lafiel was puzzled at first, but she nodded in agreement. The two of them ran back.

“Stop! This is the police!” A threatening voice sounded from the loud speaker of a car.

How many people in this galaxy would actually stop when told to? Jinto thought to himself.

“Inspector, we can’t go any further!” The command car came to a sudden stop. The street before them was barely suitable to be called a road; it was not even wide enough for three people to walk side-by-side, let

alone a car. They could go through if they ran over the stores, but a police would not do so if they wished to continue being loved by the people.

"The staff is to leave as well!" The broadcast continued. "Anyone with a technician status of level three or higher is to retrieve as many robotic animals as possible. But any staff members in section six and seven are to leave with no exceptions. Leave already. Why is this happening to me!"

"Everyone, get out of the car." Entryua ordered.

He got off ahead of them, and gave the same order to all of the cars following him. It irritated him greatly that they could not use communicators.

All twenty police officers lined up on the road. The criminal was no where to be seen, they probably went in a side street, or were hiding behind a store.

"Everyone, ready weapons."

All of the policemen took their dart guns out, and disabled the safeties. Kite also turned the safety off on his weapon, following in their example.

"After them!" Entryua ran into the street.

Captain Kite and the other twenty policemen followed him.

"Sorry, let us through!" Jinto jumped over the counter of a turtle's store. The turtle just pulled its neck back, and was otherwise silent.

"Forgive us." Lafiel jumped over the counter as well.

They went under a horned owl that was sitting over the turtle's shoulder.

"What naughty children!" The horned owl did not remain silent over getting the merchandise damaged. "You two are really naughty children!"

"Sorry." Jinto apologized without turning back.

"May I say something?" Lafiel asked, breathing quickly.

"What?"

"We are going back the way we came."

"That can't be helped. I mean... oh!" Jinto remembered. "The enemy's this way."

"Had you forgotten? Your lackadaisical nature is godly, I am impressed."

"... thanks."

"Oh, you haven't gone home?" The otter noticed the two of them. "Please buy something this time!"

"Do you have a spaceship or a starship?" Jinto asked while running past his store.

"Of course." The otter replied excited.

"What?" Jinto couldn't help but to turn back.

The otter was waving a toy spaceship. There was probably the picture of an otter on that as well.

The policemen appeared beyond the otter.

"Crap." Jinto turned right. There was a side street there. He could probably get through without ruining a store.

"This way, Lafiel!"

"Where are you going, sir?" The otter leaned over and shouted.

"Wait!" The policemen shouted at their backs.

There were no streets crossing the side street that they had ran into. It was surrounded by bushes on either side, until it reached a stone building.

Jinto was now suffering from a minor case of agoraphobia. Whenever he was in an open space, he was afraid that a bullet or a laser beam was going to hit him. But, he had no choice in the matter.

Give me a break. Entryua prayed. My daughters are starting to come into age, and I'm literally running after criminals. I wouldn't have had to do this if we could only use communicators. I could just sit back in the command car, split my subordinates into two groups and have them search this maze. I would just need to be there as my subordinates run them out of the maze. That's much more efficient.

He glanced at Kite, who was next to him. Though he was older, he was physically younger, and was not even short on breath. Entryua felt even jealousy towards him. He grabbed one of the poles supporting the store at the corner, to use centripetal force to propel him into the side store

He saw the back of the two they were chasing.

"Cut it out already!" Entryua got down on a knee and prepared to fire. "I'll fire if you don't stop!"

Jinto had already left the side street when he heard the warning.

Of course, he had no intentions of stopping. He hid where the chief inspector could not see him.

Suddenly he heard a scream from his left. It was a green colored uniform, a soldier from the invading

army. It was a far worse enemy than the police, but there was only one. Lafiel kicked him with a flowing motion before he could fire.

“Jinto, hurry. He was one of the soldiers that are searching for us. He called for help.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Jinto began running again.

He headed for the stone building ahead of him for now. He had a feeling that even a stone wall would be useless against the explosives that the enemy used to blast their way through the cave, but it would be better than a shop in the market. But the enemy soldiers appeared before he was even half way there.

They tried to get on a knee to shoot them, but Lafiel shot them down as they ran through. Jinto grabbed an energy cartridge from his pocket, and set it to detonate. He felt a vibration in his hand.

Though he had improved his through by playing Minteu, he was unsure if it would reach or not. When the enemy soldiers flew through the air with dirt and rocks, he gave his arm a pat.

But the enemy did not yield. More and more kept appearing.

Lafiel, who ran a step ahead of him, kept her eyes on the stone building, and fired the laser pistol over her shoulder. Even though she did not look at her targets, her aim was deadly accurate.

It was thanks to her spatial sense. Now, her spatial sense was almost magical in its effectiveness. With a headpiece, an Abh had vision all around. They are able to sense what’s around with them with a high frequency wave. There is no need for them to stop or turn around to aim.

But the bullets still kept flying at them, steadily increasing in intensity.

One hit the ground five dagh from Jinto. *Almost*. Lafiel ran into the open door. *Okay, I’m next*. The building was so close he could almost reach out and touch it.

“What’s going on!?” Entryua hit the ground instinctively. A firefight broke out just as they were about to leave the side street. It was a firefight of a scale never before seen on Krasbyul. *So this is the difference between an army and a police*. He was too scared to even raise his head.

“Pull back.” Entryua ordered after he regained his composure. His voice was almost inaudible behind the gunfire. “Let’s go back. This is no place for the police.”

“What!? Chief inspector, we’re giving up?” Kite protested.

“Of course.” Entryua shouted back. He was angrier at himself for being afraid than at Kite. “What do you want us to do, huh? It’s like a kid running up to join a fight between two martial artists. I don’t know what things are like on your world, but on this planet, the police have neither the training nor the equipment to participate in a killing field like this. We don’t receive our approval depending on how many officers die on duty. If you really want to catch the Abh, go join your friends over there.”

“Damn.” A fragmentation bullet pierced through numerous stores, shot right past Entryua and detonated a mechanical animal right next to him.

“What are they aiming at!? Idiots!” Entryua knew that they could not hear him, but he cursed anyways. Then turned to his subordinates. “What are you doing, get out of here already. Pull back to our cars. Make sure to keep your head down low. Bastards, we shouldn’t have come out here in the first place.”

“Jinto, hurry up.” Lafiel stuck her body out of the door, and covered Jinto’s escape with her laser pistol.

Jinto slid in the door, arms first.

“Welcome.”

It was a restaurant. The waiter rabbits welcomed them with ears flapping. Of course, there were no human customers. Jinto took a quick glance around the store. There was another exit near the back. It probably lead to the kitchen. Lafiel was still fighting.

“Let’s go.” He pulled at Lafiel’s sleeve.

“Okay.” Lafiel made three quick shots, and moved away from the entrance.

“How many people are in your party, sir? Allow me to show you to your table.” A group of rabbits said.

“Thanks, but it’s okay, there are plenty of empty tables around.” He said, and headed towards the kitchen.

“Sir, you can’t go there.” The rabbits tried to stop him.

The enemy were reorganizing themselves outside. Jinto noticed it by glancing out the window, and shouted. “Get down!”

Lafiel was the only one who understood his warning. Hardly surprising, the programmer for the artificial intelligence of these robots probably did not anticipate their being in a firefight.

A fierce attack came through. The stone wall was not as thin as Jinto had feared, but it was not thick enough to bare the attack for too long. The wall began crumbling. Bits of stone flew everywhere. Fragmentation

7. The Horse in the Fantasy Land

They went through the closest door on their left. That also lead to a kitchen, but it looked more like the kitchen for a café, than the kitchen for a restaurant. It was quite a bit smaller than the last room they were in, and the cooking machines were all of a smaller model.

The building shook. The enemy continued their assault. *This is good.* What Jinto feared the most, was for enemy soldiers to rush in. If the enemy came in right now, they would be unable to fight back.

“Sit here.” Since there were no chairs, he had Lafiel sit leaning against a wall.

“What are you doing?”

“Learning to become a thief.”

“We do not have time for that.”

“I know, but we need to do this.” Jinto found the bottles of mountain spring water, and tossed one to Lafiel. “We need water.”

Lafiel took the bottle with both hands, and began drinking. A few drops spilled out the side of her mouth, and moistened her clothes.

Jinto also drank half a bottle of the spring water. It felt as if the water was all absorbed before it could make its way to his stomach.

“If the head butler of the Royal family saw me like this.” Lafiel said after taking a deep breath. “He would faint from shock.”

Jinto took two cups out of the dishwasher and asked. “Is he very picky about formalities?”

“Yes. He was constantly scolding me. But I don’t think it matters because I can act as elegantly as imaginable when I am in a space that requires elegant behavior.”

“I believe you. Unfortunately, I don’t think I’ve intersected that space yet.” Jinto stared at the line of niches in the wall.

“Quiet you, I am usually very elegant in bearing.”

“Really?”

“I will rip you apart if you say another word.”

“That would be unpleasant.” Jinto did not disobey her.

He placed his cup in the niche that was labeled “Concentrated Grape Syrup” in Barone. The liquid fell into his cup. He tried tasting it. *I see, it is concentrated grape syrup indeed.* It smelled of grape, and had a thick texture, and it was so sweet it would even make a bee wince. It was the syrup that was mixed in with carbonated water or alcohol. Usually Jinto would not have taken more than one taste. But it tasted strangely good right now.

He filled the other cup and passed it to Lafiel. “Drink this.”

Lafiel took a sip. “If we were not in the situation that we are, I would have found this offensive.”

“We need sugar right now.”

“I know.” Lafiel finished the thick liquid in a gulp, and washed down the aftertaste with the spring water.

“Let’s go.” He reached his hand to Lafiel.

“You don’t need to carry me anymore. The sugar is helping already.”

But Lafiel’s step faltered, and she had to steady herself on the wall.

“Even an Abh can’t recover that quickly. Don’t strain yourself.” Jinto took her arm around his shoulder again.

“Yes...”

They were still thirsty, so they drank as they walked.

An explosion occurred near them, and the door leading to the hallway caved in. There was no one in the store outside. No people of course, but no robotic animals either. Jinto was thankful that no one would be here to engage him in idle conversation.

They left the store to reach a wide stone path.

Jinto took Lafiel’s gun, and gave her a bottle of spring water instead.

Lafiel took another gulp, shook the left over bottle asking for more. Jinto shook his head. Lafiel tossed the bottle away. The biologically safe plastic bottle rolled away making an empty sound.

“If that butler saw that...”

“It would go far beyond his fainting from shock.” Lafiel sneered happily.

A horse approached them.

“You shouldn’t litter.” The horse said.

“Sorry.” Jinto apologized instinctively.

“Are you tired?” The horse turned around, and began walking along side Jinto and Lafiel.

“Yes, very.” He said honestly.

bullets flew in from wherever the wall broke, and filled the store with explosions. Rabbit debris covered the ground.

“Attention!” Several rabbits said out the hole in the wall. “We are property of the Gzonu Fantasy Land, and you will be charged with vandalism if you break us. You will also be charged with the cost of repairs. For your information, the average cost of one of us is...”

The enemy guns screamed, and blew away the rabbits who were trying to warn them.

“Lafiel, are you alright?”

“Of course, a kin of the stars can’t...”

“Okay.” Jinto stopped her, and began to crawl forward. “Let’s hurry.”

“Sir.” A rabbit was looking down at Jinto. “It is dangerous here. I believe you should evacuate the area.”

“Thanks for the warning. I had a feeling that it was getting dangerous here.” Jinto was a little happiness that he could make jokes like that even now. But suddenly, the rabbit that told him to leave was hit, and fell.

“Damn.” Jinto’s happiness vanished, and was instead replaced by fury.

He knew that he had no right to be after destroying the Hyena, but he still could not find it pleasant to see something he talked to get destroyed.

The door opened when the two of them approached. Jinto entered the kitchen, and Lafiel followed. Entering the kitchen seemed like entering a whole new world. There was not a scratch in it. But they did not know how long it would remain that way.

Jinto got up and ran between the cooking machines. There was another door, when he went through there was a set of stairs, probably reserved for staff, with doors on either side.

Suddenly, Lafiel collapsed.

“What’s wrong!?” Jinto was worried. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” She gave a weak smile, unsuited for the Abh. “I feel sorry to say this, but I think I’m tired.”

“Oh, so you’re not perfect.” Jinto felt sorry for her, despite what he actually said. It must have been rare for an Abh to run for an extended period of time. And she was running at twice the gravity that she’s used to. *Knowing Lafiel, she probably ran until the very last ounce of her energy was burnt. How long have we been running? Three, four hours? We did stop and walk occasionally, but we were usually jogging. The last half hour has been a mad dash.*

Jinto was far from fit as well. He did not realize until just now because he was so tense, but he felt like throwing up from exhaustion.

“But we have to go.” Jinto contained his urge to vomit, and made a smile. “Come on, I’ll give you a hand.”

“I’m sorry.” Lafiel reached out for his hand.

Jinto helped Lafiel up, and wrapped her arm around his shoulder. “Should I give you a piggyback ride instead?”

“Do not mock me.”

“Sounds like something you would say.” Jinto felt relieved.

He could not run any more. He tried to walk as quickly as possible, but it was not too different from his usual walking speed, and may possibly even be slower.

“I’m sure the enemy is tired, too.” Jinto said, to try to cheer up Lafiel and himself.

Yeah, they were chasing us through the cave, too. And I’m sure they had quite a bit of heavy equipment on. He did his best to not think about the fact that they were specialists in ground warfare, and therefore had received training in long distance travel with heavy equipment.

When he thought about the weight of Lafiel on his shoulders, his thoughts flew to a totally different matter. Once upon a time, she would not have let him give her a hand like this. She would have demanded that Jinto go on ahead without her with the ship’s log.

Jinto was glad.

“Would you like a ride?”

“You’ll give us a ride?” Jinto said, surprised, and looked at the long face of the horse.

“Yup. That’s my job.”

“That would be great. We’re not only tired, we’re in a hurry too.”

“Then I’ll hurry up for you.”

“Great.”

Jinto helped the Princess up on the horse’s back, and gave her the gun back, then he jumped up behind her.

“You two sure are heavy children. Are you sure you’re not really adults?” The horse complained.

“We’re children suffering from being overweight.”

“I’ve given rides to two smaller children before, but this is the first time I’ve given two children as big as you guys a ride.”

“You can’t?”

“Not at all. I can do it.”

“Oh, good. Please take us to the exit.”

“Are you sure you don’t have to tell your mommy or daddy?”

“Both our daddies are at home right now.” He had no idea how many hundreds of light years the Capitol Lakfakalle, or the Hide Earldom was from here, but it was without a doubt the truth.

“Let’s go then.” The horse began to run.

Lafiel hugged the horse’s neck, and Jinto grabbed the reins. The horse’s speed was as fast as a person could possibly run, and it seemed like they could gain quite a bit of distance. They were in a very long building, but they were already approaching the end of it.

Lafiel extended the hand that was holding the pistol as they reached the end of the building. Ten enemy soldiers were waiting for them. But they did not seem to expect the two of them to be riding a horse. They responded a moment too late.

Invisible light shot out from Lafiel’s gun. They passed through the narrow gap before they could react, and a similar building blocked the soldiers once again.

“Can you go any faster!?” Jinto asked the horse.

“I can, but it would be dangerous for you two.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Really? Tell me if you get scared.”

The horse sped up. He was traveling at almost 500 uethdagh per hour now. It was dangerous. Unlike hovercars and land cars, a horse ride is very bumpy. Jinto stuck his foot into the stirrup, and tried his best to not get shaken off.

“Jinto I suggest you throw your head back.” Said Lafiel.

Jinto tightened his grip on the reins, and tilted his head back. He thought he felt a light beam fly immediately above him. Enemy soldiers were firing at them in the upside down landscape. They hid themselves behind buildings, and fired freely at them.

“Ahh!” He felt his chest tightening. The fact that he could do nothing but hang onto the horse multiplied the fear.

Lafiel’s laser pistol etched the corner of the building and shot down an enemy soldier.

They passed by several other buildings, and the enemy fire stopped. Jinto struggled to get back into a more comfortable position.

There was a hemispherical structure before them. The horse ran by it and bore right.

“Don’t go that way!” Jinto said in a panic. The enemy soldiers are to the right. Though there was probably quite a bit of distance, they were probably still within the enemy’s firing range.

“Why? It’s a short cut.” The horse protested.

“Just because!”

They moved past the hemisphere while Jinto argued with the horse.

They entered a clearing. There was a fountain in the middle, and various strange facilities surrounded it. To their right was a single town street surrounded by pink three story tall buildings. Enemy soldiers lined the path immediately before them, and they were all aiming at the two of them.

Lafiel’s gun was already in the air. Jinto too raised his pistol with his right hand, miraculously managing not to drop it, and squeezed the trigger.

There was only one moment in which either side could shoot, and Jinto and Lafiel made a hard target to shoot, but there were many enemies, and the horse was rained by enemy fire. Fortunately, none of them hit, but many small explosions bloomed around them. The stench of smoke surrounded them, and bits of stone showered them.

"It's hard to run through this. I wonder what they're doing." The horse asked a question.

"Go faster!" Jinto shouted when the enemy fire stopped.

"Faster? Okay." The horse sped up even more, running straight.

They managed to gain two thirds of the length of the field without getting fired at.

"Jinto." Lafiel shouted in warning. "Behind us on the right, on top of the roof!"

Jinto grabbed the reigns and leaned backwards.

Lafiel began shooting again. Enemy bullets flew at them at the same time. One of them glazed Jinto's sleeve, ripping his shirt and scratching him.

"Gah." Jinto bit down in pain.

"More from behind."

Jinto turned around at Lafiel's warning, and saw enemy soldiers on horses chasing after them. They probably found nearby horses after seeing Jinto and Lafiel on a horse. There were three of them.

"I'll leave them to you. I'm busy with others." Said Lafiel.

"But..."

The hastily formed knights had obviously had no training for riding horses. The shots that they fired between desperate struggles to not fall off their horses were hardly effective. But they did manage to slowly gain on Jinto and Lafiel. Of course Jinto had received no training as well. He could not even hold his gun in this awkward stance. Jinto stuck his gun between his arm and body and grabbed an energy cartridge.

"Lafiel, close your eyes." Jinto tossed the energy cartridge. He was in an awkward position, and it did not reach the enemy.

Just before it fell, Jinto closed his eyes and looked away.

A bright flash appeared.

When he opened his eyes again, two of the enemies had fallen off their horses and were rolling around the ground covering their eyes.

"I thought I told you not to litter." The horse complained.

"We're naughty children."

The last enemy stopped as well.

"There's the exit." Said the horse.

There were twenty glass doors. They were all open.

"I can only go this far." The horse stopped.

"Thanks." Jinto jumped off."

"Let's go, Jinto!" Lafiel began to run off. Now it really seemed as if the sugar was having its effect.

"We look forward to serving..." A fragmentation grenade hit the horse's back while it was in the middle of its sentence. The smoke began to surround the area, and electric sparks flew off.

"It seems like I am malfunctioning..." The horse slowly collapsed.

"Sorry!" Jinto tightened his fist in front of his chest.

"Hurry!" Lafiel shot down the remaining knight.

"Yeah, I know." Jinto ran into the exit.

There was a large room with souvenir shops and park maps, and around ten stopped escalators. Of course, not one person was around.

Jinto looked for something next to the exit.

"What are you doing?" Lafiel yelled at him, she was already at the escalators.

"Wait five seconds for me." He was not sure if what he was looking for existed, but it was there. He found four buttons beneath the letters "Close Doors During Emergencies". There was another note "Attention. We will press charges on anyone who operates this without authorization." And instructions were written under it.

The steps for operating it were quite laborious, most likely to prevent children from accidentally activating it. Jinto hit the buttons in the order given by the instructions: three, one, two. The buttons lit up when he pressed it. The third button began blinking.

"Attention. Closing the doors violates both civil and federal laws. Please make sure that your situation warrants..." The mechanical voice instructed, but Jinto paid little heed to it. He could not. He slammed his hand down on the three buttons.

"Attention! The doors are closing. Please step away from the doors. Attention! The doors are..."

The glass doors all slammed shut. A steel door fell from above, and landed with a thud.

"Okay, let's go." Jinto ran to Lafiel.

They were at the bottom of a very long flight of stairs, probably five stories worth. When they dashed all the way up, they were heaving for air.

"Are you alright?" He checked Lafiel.

“Yes.” Her face was pale, but she could make a smile.

“Let’s go back to town. Let’s hide out again. The Empire will be back soon.”

They passed through the unmanned exit. The sun was already low on the horizon. There was a gentle upward slope outside the door, and the ground was lightly illuminated. The street, as wide as a field, split in two at the top of the slope. But before they could make it that far, hover cars appeared from both sides, barring their way. The cars looked familiar.

“It’s the police!” Jinto saw the police jump out of the shadows.

“Freeze!” The police surrounded them with guns out.

Lafiel’s right hand moved.

“No!” Jinto grabbed her wrist.

“Why!? Are we giving up!?”

“Yes.”

The enemy had surrounded them on all sides, and the police in front of them used their cars as cover. They stood no chance.

“Getting caught by the police is far better than getting caught by the enemy.” Jinto persuaded.

“But what if they hand us over!?”

“We’ll worry about that when it happens. If we fight now, we will die.”

Lafiel bit down on her lower lip, but lowered her gun.

A man got out of the hover car in the middle. He had brown skin, and had a cigarette in his mouth.

“I am chief inspector Entryua of the Lume Biga city police.” The brown colored man said. “I’d like to question you about a carjack that occurred five days ago.”

“Are we under arrest!?” Jinto asked, glaring at the chief inspector.

“Oh, you speak the Krasbyul language?” Entryua smiled. “Good. I haven’t used Barone since I learned it at school. I’m glad you can speak the Krasbyul language. As to the answer for your question, I’m not arresting you. I’m asking you to come with us. I can’t get a warrant for your arrest before I find out who you are. Of course, I think I have grounds to arrest you on vandalism and illegal possession of arms.

“I claim self defense.”

“That’s what I thought, that’s why I didn’t say murder. But I think it’s for your own best interest to come with us.”

“So we’re not under arrest?” Jinto checked.

“No, you’re not. At least not for now. There won’t be any handcuffs or restraining jackets.”

“What about the vandalism and illegal possession of arms?”

“Well there’s an agreement with the Empire on things like this. It’s up to the courts to determine that. I understand there are special circumstances. But I have no intentions of arresting you, do you understand?”

Jinto nodded slowly.

“Good. Can you throw away your gun now?” Entryua said gently.

Jinto tossed his gun away. He dropped the last energy cartridge he had left as well. Lafiel made no move to let go of her gun.

“That Abh girl, too.”

“Come on, Lafiel.” Jinto whispered to her quietly.

“I will trust your judgment.” Lafiel said to Jinto, and dropped her gun.

Entryua seemed much calmer, and he told two of his subordinates to go get their weapons. “Okay, please put both hands behind your heads, and walk over here. We won’t hurt you if you obey us.”

Jinto did as he was told. Lafiel put her hands behind her head reluctantly.

“You’re being too soft, inspector!” Someone else jumped out of the car.

It was a green uniform. He was an officer of the United Mankind.

“You tricked us!” Jinto tried to jump on the policeman who took his gun.

There was a moment of tension.

“Wait! It’s a misunderstanding!” Said Entryua. “Calm down, I’ll explain this.”

Jinto stopped.

“This is Captain Kite, who is helping us. Listen, we’re not helping the invaders, I am the one in charge here. So there won’t be any problems if you listen to me.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Kite pointed his gun at the two of them. “There is a problem. We haven’t even checked if they are unarmed! How can you trust them!?”

“Chief inspector Entryua,” Said Lafiel. “I don’t know what this will mean to an inhabitant of the ground, but I will swear upon the honor of the Abh. We do not possess any other weapons.”

“I trust you.” Entryua replied in his slurred Barone.

“No!” Kite mussed up his golden hair. “Abh! If you want us to trust you, take off your clothes and lie

down on the floor there. We'll inspect you thoroughly."

Jinto stepped forward and covered Lafiel behind him. "We can't do that. If you intend of ridiculing us..."

"Get out of the way you slave!" Kite suddenly exploded in anger.

"Ah!" Jinto felt a fierce burning on his left shoulder. He felt the scenery around him waver.

"Jinto!" Lafiel caught Jinto.

Fortunately, Kite's gun was a laser pistol. There was little bleeding. But cold sweat came out of every pore of his body because of the incredible pain. He felt his consciousness going for a moment.

"You!" Lafiel shouted out a cry of anger as fierce as an explosion on the surface of a star. "I won't forgive you for this!!"

that story was true. So I'm going to die... or am I already dead? Which one was it? But he felt Lafiel's warmth on his back. *Is she dead as well? Or... am I still alive?*

"Abh, citizen!" A voice shouted from the fog.

Jinto suddenly came to, it was Ming's voice.

"Hurry up. We don't have time!"

Jinto put his arm over Lafiel's shoulder, and walked towards the voice.

"Don't shoot, you might get hit by friendly fire." Entryua ordered out loud.

The hover car appeared in the fog. Jinto stuck his head in the open door. Lafiel pushed Jinto in the car, and tried to turn around.

"Where are you going!?" He grabbed her wrist at the last second.

"Let me go." Lafiel was furious with anger.

"We don't have time." Marka helped Jinto drag Lafiel into the car. "Go, Bill!"

The hovercar began moving. It drove past the police in a second and rushed down the road.

"Let me go, Jinto!" Lafiel struggled. "There is something I still need to do."

"Ouch, I'm injured, take it easy." Jinto grimaced at the pain in his shoulder. "What is this thing you still need to do?"

"Is it not obvious? I will change the one that did this to you into a ball of plasma! It's a far more poetic end than he deserves, though." Lafiel said furious.

Jinto felt good watching Lafiel angry over him. But he could not let her do as she wished.

"We're no in space." Jinto said soothingly. "So the best you could do would be a charred black corpse on the ground. I don't think that's a very poetic death."

"All the better then." Said Lafiel.

"What are you going to do? You're not even armed."

"I'll steal a weapon." Lafiel declared.

"Reckless." Undertaker sighed.

"You should phrase things accurately. 'Reckless' is a word you use to phrase more cautious plans."

"Why don't you take your time doing it later?" Jinto said to the Princess.

Lafiel opened her eyes wide in surprise. "You are a cruel man, Jinto. I do not enjoying taking my time killing a person."

"That's not what I meant."

"Both of you." Bill the driver said, fed up. "I'm sorry to be bothering you during such an important discussion, but would you let me close the door? The Abh is half out of it, and I can't close it!"

"I have no choice." Lafiel sat down properly on the seat. Then she took a careful look at Jinto's left shoulder. "Are you alright, Jinto?"

"It's just a scratch." Even though he tried to act tough, he was dissatisfied that she did not ask earlier.

"Hardly a scratch." Marka said, looking at Jinto's shoulder. "The bone's been shattered. You'll have to regenerate your entire left arm if you don't take care of it soon."

"Please, keep that secret from me. It's almost enough to make me faint." Jinto grimaced.

"Go ahead and faint. Daswani, take care of him." Marka switched seats with the big man. Daswani silently stopped the bleeding in Jinto's arm, injected painkillers, and applied regeneration accelerating medicines. He bandaged the wound, sprayed the bandages to make them harden to solidify the arm. Jinto managed to remain conscious.

"Is there something you'd like to say perhaps?" Said Undertaker. "Like words of thanks, or perhaps words of thanks, or maybe words of thanks."

"A million thanks to you." Said Lafiel.

"I'll thank you for treating my wound." Jinto rubbed his wound, which now hurt a lot less. "But you plan on taking us hostage, right?"

"Of course, we want a spaceship." Said Marka

"I'm against it." Undertaker shivered. "I don't want any more misfortune."

Jinto realized that he was at a disadvantageous situation. They were no longer armed. "I don't understand, why didn't you just run?"

"We did. But the situation's changed."

"What do you mean?"

"There's been a jamming signal ever since right after Bill picked us up after our escape from the cave." Marka explained. "The soldiers at the checkpoints also pulled back into the cities."

"Then..."

"More importantly, look at that." Marka pointed out the window. Six dots in the sky gathered and separated in complex patterns in the sky.

8. Dance of Victory

Entryua stared in awe at Kite's disgraceful act. He seemed like a totally different person. His meek attitude had evaporated like a puddle of water under a fierce sun. His lunatic smile disturbed the order that was once seen on his face.

"What can you do to me, you Abh." Said Kite. "If your pet is so important to you, you should do as I said. You're not supposed to have any sense of shame. You dirty artificial human, you debaucherous Abh."

The Abh girl glared at Kite with a glance that was as fierce as a laser beam, with the young man in her arms. She tried to help the young man down on the ground as she glared at him.

"N-No..." The young man whispered.

What the hell! Entryua started in marvel. *The Abh girl is prepared to take Kite down with her fists.* The young man seemed to know what she was trying to do, and desperately clung on to her. He stood before the Abh girl, even with his legs wobbling.

Entryua decided in an instant which side to help. The side he decided on was also the one that Krasbyullian law was on. Entryua stuck his dart gun at Kite's head. "Cut it out."

"What are you doing!?" Kite cried out confused. "Are you afraid of the Empire taking retribution on you? Don't worry about that. Our fleet may have suffered a temporary defeat. But our invincible army is still untouched. We should be able to hold onto the planet until we take back the space under god's guidance. You can carry out justice without worrying..."

"So that's what I'm doing." Entryua cut him off. "I don't care who rules space, but Krasbyul's laws and Krasyl's justice rules this planet. What you just did clearly goes against that. Too bad, I felt sorry for you, too."

"I am simply taking cautions against them."

"Now I understand why the people dislike the police on your world." Entryua gave an order to his subordinates. "Take this idiot's weapon away from him."

The patrolman closest to him carried out the order.

"You're making a mistake, inspector! Our army will punish you for this."

"Abh girl." Entryua ignored Kite's threat, and turned to the Abh girl. "It's as you see. I apologize for what he did, but could you please come with us? That boy needs to have his wound treated, too."

Dark pupils looked back at Entryua.

What a beautiful girl. Entryua was astounded. Even when covered in mud, the liveliness of her beauty was instead accentuated, and shined. Even now, surrounded by strangers and hostile people, the pride that kept her fighting showed clearly in her eyes. He had thought that the Abh were just haughty people living up in the skies, but the dignity she had could make the planet look towards her.

I can understand why he's so loyal to her. Entryua glanced at the wounded young man. He was a stereotypical city boy, the kind of person who would never be in the first wave of colonizers for a new world. Even when Entryua thought about the fact that he had gone through a firefight that even the police covered out of, he still could not avoid the impression that he was weak and not dependable.

Kite's crazed laughter rang through the air. "There's no point in helping the Abh, inspector! I'll drag her out of the police's jail. Have you forgotten? This Abh is mine. I'll bring an army with me, you will pay for this, inspector."

Damned bastard, he's right. Entryua admitted silently. *Aizan would turn the Abh over to the invaders without hesitation. Wait that might not be the case, he is quick to change loyalties. Now that the Abh have returned, he might not be quite so willing to kiss up to the invaders. But the invaders have been getting rougher lately, now that they've realized that they're not welcome. They might be willing to destroy a police station to get what they want.*

But there was no way that the police could allow a crazed dog like Kite to run free.

"Chief inspector Entryua." Said the Abh. "I will trust you."

"Good, then..."

"But..."

Entryua did not hear the rest of her sentence. Three clouds of smoke drew an arc in the air and detonated right before Entryua.

"Who is it!?" Entryua jumped out of the way.

"They're smoke bombs!" One of the police shouted in panic.

Entryua saw a hover car rush in just before the smoke blocked off his vision.

Jinto had no idea what was going on. When he came to he was surrounded by a dense fog.

This sounds like the entrance to the next world that my grandmother told me about. Jinto recalled. So

“Abrial Nei Dubrusque, the Viscountess of Parhynh Lafiel.”

A sudden uncomfortable silence fell in the car. The warriors of the Anti-Imperial Krasbyul rebels were silent, trying to absorb this new piece of information. It was Jinto who broke the silence. He decided that now that they knew who Lafiel was, it did no good to keep his own identity secret.

“And I’m...”

“No one asked you for your name, citizen.” Bill cut him off.

“Oh, okay.” Jinto changed his mind. *Now that I think about it, there’s no point in my keeping it secret, but there’s no point in my revealing it either.*

“I thought it was strange.” Said Ming. “According to what I looked up, the Marquess of Sfagnoff has two daughters, but the older one is eight.”

“But this is strange, too.” Undertaker shouted. “What is a Princess of the Empire doing here!?”

“Did you hear, Jinto?” Lafiel said with eyes shining. “Even a subject can tell the difference between an imperial princess and a princess.”

“You like to hold grudges don’t you? I didn’t mean to offend you, so what’s the harm?”

“Anyways, answer my question.” Undertaker said irritated.

“I was on a cruiser.” Jinto decided to explain. “That cruiser was attacked. I wasn’t a Flyer so...”

“You were a crewman, right?” Said Bill.

“No, I wasn’t a crewman either, I was a passenger on it.”

“A passenger?” Marka craned her neck. “You can be a passenger on a cruiser?”

“I could. I just happened to have a title.” He said casually. “So since I wasn’t a soldier I was asked to leave the battlefield. But I can’t fly a communications vessel, so Lafiel was assigned to me, because she was the only flyer trainee on the cruiser.”

“Wait.” Marka said confused. “You’re saying that you’re a noble?”

“Yup. That’s what I’ve been told.”

Bill whistled. “You don’t look it.”

“I’ve been told that, too.” Jinto played dumb. “I wonder why.”

“I have lots of questions, but let’s go over what I’m interested in.” Said Marka. “We have a member of the royal family, and a noble as hostage. And isn’t Nei Dubrusque the name of the family that the Empress is from? Am I right?”

“I am the granddaughter of Her Majesty the Empress, and Jinto is the successor to an Earl.” Lafiel admit. “But we are not your hostages.”

“No, you are.” Said Marka. “We can’t let such valuable hostages go. Not only can we get a spaceship, we might get exactly what Ming wants, independence.”

“I am thankful to you.” Lafiel cut off Marka’s excitement. “So I will tell you the truth. Everyone who has ever extorted the Empire has lived a life that is far from fortunate. Of course by that I mean that few of them survived.”

“I believe you.” Undertaker shivered again. “I’m unfortunate enough as it is.”

There was a flash outside the window. The peaks of all the mountains they could see on the horizon were shining. Pillars of light fell from the sky onto the mountains, and every time a pillar fell, a bright flash filled the sky.

“It’s an Abh orbital bombardment...” Ming said, as if anyone was in doubt.

“I wonder what they’re attacking there.” Jinto was attracted by the exotic sight. They suddenly heard the thunder.

“Bill.” Marka asked, realizing something. “How’s the jamming signal?”

Static sounded inside the car.

“It’s still there.” Bill shook his head.

“Oh, I would have expected them to hit whatever is broadcasting the jamming signal first.”

“You’re probably right. There was a strong jamming signal until just now. So they probably took out the global broadcast center.”

“Where else are the broadcast centers located?”

“I don’t know. There are weak signals coming from everywhere. I have no idea how many different ones there are.”

“It is probably an electromagnetic bug.” Lafiel guessed. “The Star Forces has a similar invention.”

“Electromagnetic bug? Bugs can emit electromagnetic signals?” Ming asked puzzled.

“It’s a self-replicating nano-machine. It’s difficult to eliminate.”

“Oh. Will the Abh attack the cities?”

“I don’t think they will?”

“You think?” Ming seemed to have been hoping for a more clear-cut answer.

“Only the Abh would fly meaningless patterns like that.”

“It’s not meaningless.” Said Lafiel. “That is the dance of victory. It is used to communicate victory in the sky. It did clue you in to the return of the Star Force, did it not?”

“Leave it up to the Abh to rub salt in your wound like that.” Bill reflected.

“Then the Empire’s taken the system back!” Jinto cheered.

“Not the planet yet, but they’ll be back soon.”

“Everyone get in a car, we’re going after them!” Entryua shouted.

The fog had cleared up a great deal, but the police still had to rely on feeling their way to where they remembered their cars to be. Suddenly the ground shook in a large thud and the fog cleared a little.

“What is it this time?” Entryua was getting irritated. “It’s them. It has to be. Hey, hurry up before they complicate things.”

But the uniform footsteps ran up to the police before they could get away.

“Halt!” A strong voice shouted. “We will shoot if you move.”

“We’re the police!” Entryua shouted back. “We’re about to pursue the suspect. Don’t get in our way.”

“We don’t care if you’re the police or not, we’ll still shoot.” The green uniform appeared out of the fog, inspecting the cars.

“It seems that an officer from our army is here?”

Kite saluted. “I am Captain Kite. You?”

“I am Captain Shreet. The Abh should have come this way.”

“They got away.” Kite said quivering.

“Got away? Past this many policemen?”

“They’re useless. They’re just servants for the enslavers. But it seems that you let them get away too, despite your standard issue equipment.”

“These are not standard issue equipment. We left the artillery behind because we had to pursue them through a cave on foot.”

“But...” Kite suddenly realized that his translator was still on. The two officers turned their translators off at that point, so Entryua could not understand the rest of their conversation. Of course Entryua had no interest in the two of them shifting blame, but he had a bad feeling.

That bad feeling came true.

“Inspector.” Said Kite with a fake smile. “We must pursue the Abh.”

“Like I said, we were about to pursue them.”

“We’re pursuing them. We are commandeering your cars.”

“What!?”

“Our army does not have any means of transportation.” Shreet added. “So we need your cars. The drivers are to board the cars, but the rest of the police are to get off.”

“You can’t do that. What gives you the right to...”

“This give us the right.” Shreet pointed a gun at Entryua’s face. “We don’t have time. Hurry up.”

“Oh yes.” Kite was obviously pleased with the reversal in roles. “Chief inspector, we would like you to come with us. I would also like you to return my weapon.”

“But how did you know that we were there?” Jinto was curious.

“It was a fifty-fifty chance.” Ming shrugged. “But it would have been difficult for us to rendezvous with you, had you gotten into the main stream. You would have had access to any number of exits. So we placed our bet on the Fantasy Land. Then they began evacuating the customers, so we knew that we were right, and we sat around waiting for the right time to act.”

“I wish you could have kidnapped us before I got shot.”

“You’re asking for too much.” Undertaker said venomously. “What we did was risky enough.”

“First, there’s something I’d like the Abh lady to tell us.” Marka said.

“What?” Lafiel turned away from gazing at the beautiful dance of victory in the sky.

“It’s about when we entered the cave. I saw your ears, and it’s been bugging me ever since, but I haven’t had the chance to ask you.”

Jinto’s heart began pounding.

“I finally remembered after we were separated. I’m an idiot. But I had a hard time believing it.”

“What is your question?” Lafiel asked.

“What I want to know is, are people outside the royal family allowed to have the ear of the Abrial?”

“No.” Lafiel answered concisely.

“Just as I thought. Could Your Highness please tell us her name?”

“The Star Forces will not make a full fledged orbital bombardment unless it’s a last resort. They will take out the transportation and communication infrastructures first. Or perhaps they would make an air assault. They will not suddenly destroy the cities.”

“Where are you going to keep us?” Jinto asked, worried. They may be vulnerable to an attack by the Star Force depending on the location.

“Undertaker’s place probably. You’ve been there before...”

“I said I don’t want them.” Undertaker protested.

“Then Undertaker’s place of work.”

“Why me!?”

“Where else? Do you want to let another cell in on such a tasty deal?”

“What about Ming’s summer house?”

“Are you serious?”

“They probably won’t expect it after what just happened.”

“There’s little hope of that.” Marka put an end to that idea with a breath. “It’s decided, Bill. Let’s go to the funeral ground.”

“Actually we should find a way out of this mess first.” Bill said in a tense tone of voice. “It’s the police. They’re after us.”

“E Kon! E Kon!” Shreet was shouting.

After a wide curve immediately after leaving the Gzonu Fantasy Land, you enter a long straight road that leads straight to Gzonu city. When they reached that straight stretch of road, they saw the hover car ahead.

“Do you have any anti-vehicular weapons?” Kite asked.

“No.” Entryua had his arms crossed and his legs up on the back of the seat in front of him. “We’ve never needed it. Crimes that need it rarely occur around here.”

“That is unfortunate.” Kite prodded Entryua’s head with the gun he got back. “Anyways, sit properly, inspector. You are our prisoner.

“Oh, really?” Entryua raised a brow. “I thought you’d hired me to be a guide.”

“Don’t talk back!” Kite shouted with his mouth wide open. “You just need to obey us, you slave.”

It’s probably not a good idea to disobey him. Entryua decided. His opponent was a child who had lost his self-composure. Talking back would only end up in a childish fight. The only difference would be that his opponent has a weapon capable of killing.

“As you wish.” Entryua lowered his legs.

“E Brik!” Shreet ordered, and with that the invading soldiers stuck their upper body out of the windows and began firing.

“They’re not the police! The police don’t have weapons like that.”

Bullets were flying at them. The small but highly destructive fragmentation bullets left holes everywhere on the illuminated road. Though, none of them reached the car. So far only the path they’ve driven through have been damaged.

“Are you sure we should stay on the road!?” Undertaker screamed.

“It’s meaningless to leave the road.” Said Ming calmly. “They should be able to aim with sensors, too. We’ll be at a disadvantage because we won’t be moving as quickly.”

“But there’s a jamming signal in the air.”

“You’re quite ignorant. The region used by sensors and communicators are completely different.”

“Yup.” Bill sped up. “Don’t worry, Undertaker. I have all the safeties removed for situations like this.”

“But we’re practically begging them to blow us up if we just drive straight like this!”

“From an aerodynamic stand point, they shouldn’t be able to aim at this distance.” Ming rationally explained. “I don’t know how good their guns are, but judging from the fact that they haven’t hit us yet, we can be pretty sure that’s the case. Besides, they haven’t even come near us.”

“I’ll pray that you’re right.” Marka put her hands together before her chest.

“Anything you want to say as a military specialist?” Jinto asked Lafiel.

“I am not a specialist on ground warfare.” Lafiel sounded hurt for some reason, “But we should probably prepare for laser fire. At this range, they could do damage to us.”

“Do you have anything, Ming?” Said Marka.

“Yeah, we can probably use smoke bombs. Type K211 from the former Kminterr Republic. Its electromagnetic wave absorption rate is still the greatest in the universe known to man.

“Why didn’t you tell us about it earlier!?” Undertaker complained.

“I went through a lot of trouble getting them.” Ming explained.

“Use them.” Marka ordered.

Ming reluctantly grabbed his bag, took a cylinder out of them, and tossed it out of the window.

"I'll add this on as a bonus." Ming took a dozen or so cylinders with a diameter of 3dagh or so, and threw them on the road.

"What was that?" Bill asked, turning around from the driver's seat.

"Pressure mines. They're anti-personnel, but they should be effective against cars, too."

"Really, where do you get stuff like that, you weapon fetish."

"Those are home made. Tested to perform. They're small but effective, and they misfire very rarely."

Ming bragged. "More importantly, Bill, can you shake them?"

"Leave it to me. This is the fastest thing on the ground on Krasbyul. They're already falling behind."

"Can you go any faster?" Shreet yelled at the policeman who was driving.

"I can't." Entryua said, to cover for his frightened subordinate. "This is a command car. It's not made to chase after speeding cars. Let the patrol cars go ahead."

"Damn you. Why didn't you say that earlier!?"

"You didn't ask." Entryua said coolly. He suddenly felt a strong pain. Kite had hit the inspector in the mouth with his gun. *You bastard!* His eyes went in and out of focus from the anger. *I'm sure you didn't like the way I treated you, but I never hit you.* Entryua wiped the blood from his mouth, somehow controlling his anger.

The car suddenly slowed down.

When he opened his eyes, a black wall was gaining on them.

"Don't slow down, it's just a smoke screen." Shreet prodded the driver's head.

The command car drove into the thick black fog. An adhesive gas entered the command car from the open windows that they were firing from. Entryua covered his face with his hands to protect his eyes and nose.

That was when he heard the small explosions. *Did they hit us!?* The car swerved hard to the left before Entryua could figure out what was going on.

"Mines! They got the electromagnets!"

The left forward electromagnet was destroyed, and the hover car lost its balance. A horrible sound of metal scratching the illuminated road formed.

"Stop the car!" Shreet ordered.

"Don't stop, get off the road." Entryua reached his upper body over to the front of the car. "We have cars following us, they're going to rear end us, you idiot!"

The driver followed Entryua's instructions, he drove into the farm by the road and stopped the car.

The patrol car following them was hit with a similar fate. The patrol car that followed the command car into the fog lost its rear electromagnets. Its back dropped, and the air resistance hit the front of the car. It flew into the air, turning around, and slid across the road on its roof.

The cars following it were a mess. Cars that crashed into the forward car, cars that drove over the damaged car and flipped over, cars that got hit by a mine after miraculously avoiding all the other damaged cars.

Finally, the last car realized that something was happening in the fog, it drove through the farm on wheels, and managed to stop the car with no damage to it.

"Get away, quickly." Entryua waved them away forgetting the position he was in.

Soldiers and policemen began crawling out of the damaged cars. Fortunately police cars were well known for their durability, most of them were only lightly damaged, and there were very few injured. But they could not afford to waste time.

The hydrogen fuel of a patrol car, lying on its side, caught on fire. The concussion of the explosion threw the soldiers and policemen into the air. The explosion set fire to the crops in the farm, and the smoke from the fire mixed with the smoke bomb.

Entryua began coughing.

"There's an accident." Undertaker reported to everyone sarcastically.

"You have to drive safely." Bill said with a smirk.

"I agree." Ming replied seriously.

"Is the jamming signal still there?" Jinto asked.

"Don't worry, citizen. Oh wait, you're a young noble aren't you?" Said Bill. "It's still going on. We can't call for help for them."

"But something's coming." Lafiel said, looking in the direction they were traveling.

The lights of Gzonu were right before them. Something shining rose from between the brilliant buildings of the city, and was quickly approaching them. Five small flying objects followed it.

The flying object passed by Jinto's car without notice.

Marka sighed in relief seeing the crest on the belly of the largest flying vehicle.

"Phew, it's just the fire station."

“That is a large fire. I’m sure they can see it from the station.” Said Bill.
“But...” Jinto chimed in. “That may be a fire truck, but it was flying.”
“Yeah, that is much more efficient than traveling on ground.”
“Say, wasn’t the enemy riding police cars?” Jinto checked.
“Looks like they were, what are you trying to say?” Ming asked back.
“They commandeered police cars. What prevents them from doing the same to the fire trucks?”

9. A Soaring Nuisance

He must really love me. Entryua thought, looking at Kite with his arms crossed. He thought that he would finally be freed when the fire planes and ambulances arrived, but he was wrong. Kite insisted that Entryua go with them, and Shreet, who could not care less, approved it.

The commandeered fire planes left, ignoring the fire, and leaving behind firefighters, police, and any invading soldiers that did not fit. With the exception of the ambulance that was dispatched to report their situation, the other ships established an optical communications network, which would be unaffected by the jamming signal, five uethdagh above Gzonu city, and desperately searched for the hover car. A fleet of flying ships communicated ideas in a very primitive manner by flying around the center of Gzonu city.

Ridiculous. Entryua smiled. They were throwing in all of the forces in Gzonu city simply to try to take a pair of children away from the radicals.

“Inspector.” Kite spoke to him. “Do you know why I brought you with us?”

“I have no idea.” He said unsociably.

“As a guide.”

“As you know, I am a member of the Lume Biga city police. I was born in Lume Biga, and I grew up in Lume Biga. I know nothing about Gzonu’s...”

“That’s not it. A guide for the Abh.”

“Huh?”

Kite made a sad smile. “A guide into hell. I’m going to kill you, then the slaves that impeded our arrest, and finally that young boy who serves as her pet, all in front of the Abh. If the Abh’s artificial intelligence has anything similar to emotion, I’m sure she would pretend to be sad.”

“I’ve barely met the Abh.” *I know you far better than the Abh.* Entryua thought to himself.

“That’s why I’m only going to shoot you. But the ones that helped the Abh more will receive a much crueler fate. Especially that boy, he will probably be screaming all night long. Of course, we will prepare a much more elaborate departure for the Abh.”

“I thought you people were somewhat civilized.”

“Of course military law forbids killing prisoners without a trial or cruel and unusual punishment. But the situation being what it is, we don’t even know where military high command is right now. I’m sure we have a bit of freedom with what we do. Especially since the nosy central government can’t get to us.”

Is he serious!? Or is he just trying to get a little revenge by scaring me? Entryua was unsure. *No, he doesn’t have the right to make this kind of a decision. I’m sure there’s an officer higher ranking than Captain in the Gzonu city force.* But it was a foreign organization. He had no idea what kind of a chain of command they had. And... insanity had a tendency to spread.

An Armored Aerial Personnel Carrier landed next to them.

“This way!” Pulled along by Marka, Jinto hid behind a building.

They left the hovercar immediately after entering Gzonu city. If they had not, they would already have been destroyed along with the hovercar. They changed into clean clothes as well. They bought new clothes from a nearby vending machine with Marka’s wallet. The wrist computers and headpieces were put away once more, and Lafiel hid her spatial sensory organ with a wide rimmed hat.

“Let’s use the underground passages.” Ming suggested.

“Yes.”

The five members of the Gzonu cell of the Anti-Imperial Krasbyul rebels, and their two hostages, went underground. They entered a brightly lit underground road. It was as ride as an illuminated road from the surface, and there was a vending machine every 500 dagh along it. It was sparsely populated, and the road moved along at a jogging pace. They all boarded the walkway.

“This is getting serious.” Said Jinto.

“Well you did throw mud on their pride and then stomp it to a pulp. I’m sure they’re desperate to save face.” Marka said, turning around.

“Perhaps you should give up.” Lafiel suggested. “They are only after us. I do not wish to get you involved.”

“It’s too late for that.” Said Ming coolly. “I’m already too involved to back out. They know my name. Even now, I’m worried that my family is alright.”

“All the more reason then.”

“I’ve made a sacrifice. I’d like to get something back for it.” Said Marka.

“Independence or a ship may be impossible, but the Kreuve family will be thankful for everything you have done so far.”

“How will an Abh repay our kindness?” Undertaker joined in. “Lots of gold and treasures?”

“Unfortunately, what we want is a ship.”

“I said that is impossible.” Lafiel seemed perplexed.

“They can rent one.” Jinto said. “I don’t know what they’re going to do with a ship, but they’re not trying to pick a fight with the Empire, right? They may in the future, but not for a while at least. So what’s the problem?”

“Yes, that may be possible.” Lafiel nodded.

“Fine. Should we settle for that?” Marka looked at her comrades.

“I’d like to fly a ship with my own two hands.” Bill said dissatisfied. “But oh well, I’ll just have to mess around with the controls sometime...”

“The renters have a choice as to where we go, right?” Ming checked, and when Lafiel nodded. “Okay, a little detour isn’t too bad. I’ll use it to establish an interplanetary network of freedom fighters.”

Daswani nodded silently.

“I’d like to have the gold and treasure tacked on as well.” Undertaker added.

“Easily done.” Lafiel approved.

“Then promise us, Princess.” Said Marka. “That you’ll lend us a ship. For free and for an indeterminate period of time.”

“I can’t promise that.” Lafiel said with a frown. “All I can promise is that I will ask Her Majesty the Empress.”

“That’s fine. I’m sure the Empress will do anything her beloved granddaughter asks.”

“I will make sure to ask her, if I can live and see her again.” Lafiel jumped on the opposite walk way. “Let’s go, Jinto!”

“Oh, yeah.” Jinto followed.

Surprisingly, Marka followed as well.

“I’ll make sure that you live to see her again.” Marka whispered. “Come with us. We can get you back to space.”

“What do you mean?” Jinto asked.

“Undertaker really is an undertaker.” Marka said mysteriously.

“Look at that signal.” Kite pointed out the window. “That means they have taken over the transportation center. The underground passages will be shut down soon, and filled with our soldiers. The Abh cannot escape.”

Kite kept reporting the progress of their hunt to Entryua, probably because he had nothing else to do. He ended each report with the words “The Abh cannot escape.” Entryua felt an icy fear spread inside him each time he heard Kite’s monotonous voice. *I’m going to die as soon as the Abh is caught.* Entryua was sure now. It wasn’t a problem of whether Kite had the right to do so or not. Kite would probably rush to the spot as soon as he heard a report that the Abh was captured, and shoot him down happily.

When he looked down, there were numerous fires in the city. They were cars that were destroyed because they tried to ignore the checkpoints. They were all similar to the hovercar that escaped the invaders. He could see flashes from weapons fire as well.

“To the citizens.” An aerial tank broadcast as it flew over the city. “Cooperate with our search. Respond to our questions at the checkpoints quickly. If you see anyone suspicious, report it to the nearest soldier. We are searching for an Abh. To the citizens. Cooperate with our search...”

“Look at that.” Kite pointed at the closest part of the city. A soldier signaled the sky with a blinking light. “That signal means that they have searched all of the rooms in that building. Every inch of every room... The Abh cannot escape.”

“Searching someone’s house without a warrant... The dream of all policemen.” Entryua said sarcastically.

“It is your own fault. If you had only paid the god of democracy the respect that it deserves, we would be able to act more gentlemanly.” He said as if speaking of a forgotten dream. “We are not an invading army, we’re a liberating army.”

“We never asked you to come, you’ll admit that, right?”

“How unfortunate, inspector. I thought that we could come to understand each other.” Kite looked out the window and raised a finger. “Here, look at that...”

The city was in turmoil. Most of the citizens realized that the Abh had returned. It was not surprising that they started wondering what the benefit was of cooperating with the invading army. Most of the subjects neither loved nor hated the invading army. They saw them as a strange guest that came to Krasbyul for a short period of time. It did hurt their pride that the government officials were all arrested. Then there are people who

had their blue hair shaved off, and people who had family members who were sent to the 'democracy schools'.

Even so, the things that had happened recently were treated like a natural disaster. Most of the people found it entertaining, and put everything away as a seed of hate for the invaders.

But in the last half an hour the seed of hate had germinated, and was quickly growing. They blocked off the roads, they barged into homes, they violently did bodily inspections, they would open fire at the slightest misunderstanding. There were many reasons for the hatred.

"Citizens, the Abh is responsible for this temporary turmoil. Find the Abh. Tranquility will return as soon as the Abh is captured."

The voice in the sky repeated so, but the hatred of the people was directed towards the green uniform. After all the people who pointed guns with blood shot eyes were not wearing the black uniform of the Star Forces.

There were no organizations or weapons that would allow the citizen to rebel. But many unlucky soldiers were beat to a pulp and had their weapons taken away. Any citizens who were not so strong physically traded information, and tried to return home in a path that would allow them to avoid meeting a soldier.

This is the situation that Jinto and Lafiel were in.

"This way." Marka and the other four knew the city of Gzonu well. They had a good instinct for avoiding the enemy as well. At times they would join in the crowd, at times they ran down paths devoid of people. They ran down frozen walkways, and circled around alleyways on the surface. They cut across large fields by going through the skyways. They would make a mad dash, and then walk casually as if nothing was going on.

Whenever there were no people around, they would split into two groups and pretend not to know each other. When they entered the field, Jinto was in a group with Marka and Daswani. Lafiel was in a group with the other three, and were walking across the field ahead of them.

They suddenly heard a sound of air rushing immediately above them. When Jinto looked up in surprise, he saw two enemy soldiers. They were wearing a jetpack, and they landed in front of Lafiel.

"You! The girl! Take off your hat!" They ordered loudly.

Jinto felt something in his hand. Marka had given him a stun gun.

"What? What do you guys want?" Undertaker pretended to be drunk. "You like my niece's hat?"

"You don't need to take it." Bill joined in. "I bought her dat hat, if you've gotta problem..."

"You two! How dare you make such a demand!" Ming acted angry.

Now if only Lafiel would grab onto Bill with fear in her eyes, everything would be perfect. But of course a proud Princess of the Abh would not do that.

Jinto could only see her back from where he was, but he could imagine her silently saying "you're not even worth spitting on" to the soldiers.

Jinto's group passed them by on the side, pretending that they were strangers who did not want to get involved.

"Just take it off." One of the soldiers tried to push Lafiel's hat off with his gun.

Marka and Daswani acted at the same time from both sides. Jinto turned around an instant late and shoved the tip of his stun gun against the neck of one of the soldiers. His left shoulder throbbed in pain from the sudden movement. He bore that pain and fired.

Lafiel and the other three ducked quickly, and her hat floated in the air.

"Ahh!" The soldier screamed, and littered the sky with bullets. The other soldier fell to the ground silently without a struggle.

They left the soldiers weapons there, having weapons would only make them stand out, and left.

"I told you about the man who jumped into the bush, right?" Undertaker said after they returned to the underground walkway from the surface.

"Yes." Marka responded unkindly.

"There's a sequel to that." Undertaker said in an empty voice. "He did the same thing again a month after he came out of the hospital. Of course, he went back in the hospital. I went to visit him again at the hospital, and asked him why he did it. So he said that he doesn't remember the details but he was convinced that it was a good idea."

"Oh, really." Marka replied laconically. "We're almost there."

"I hope no one's there." Ming said what did not need to be said.

"We found them." Kite vacantly read the blinking signal. "They found the Abh."

"Have you caught them?" Entryua thought about the little time he had left. *It was such a short life. I wanted to punch my daughter's future husband before I died...*

"Not yet. A wounded soldier that we recovered reported so. They found an Abh like girl. One of them swears that he saw a spatial sensory organ. I'm sure that it was the Abh." Kite grinned devilishly. "I will be the

one to catch them..."

Kite ordered something to the pilot. The fire plane turned around and headed towards the Northwestern corner of the city. A group of towers appeared outside the city.

"What is that?" Kite asked.

Entryua knew right away what those towers were, along with what the people helping the Abh was thinking.

"Who knows? I told you, I know very little about Gzonu." Entryua lied.

"I can easily look it up, you know."

"Then do so, instead of asking me."

Gzonu City Funeral Grounds: Closed temporarily due to various reasons.

Undertaker unlocked the gate with practiced motion. The door opened without trouble.

"The guys in the government closed it right away when the invaders came here." Undertaker led them in. "So the invaders probably aren't paying very much attention to it, they might not even know what it is yet."

"Why did they close it?" Jinto asked.

"They were afraid that the invaders would mistake it for a ground-to-space weapon." Ming explained. "Gzonu city would be caught in the explosion if they were to destroy this place.

"A weapon?" Jinto was all the more confused.

When they left the small building, they got a better view of the place. There were rows upon rows of colorful towers. He remembered it. They saw this place when they were driving into Gzonu city.

"I've been curious as to what this place was since then. I guess it was a big cemetery." Jinto said while walking through the place at a quick pace.

"Don't mistake a funeral ground for a cemetery." Undertaker said bitterly. "There's a big difference."

"Sorry. Then what is that?"

"It's a coffin."

"What?"

"The cemetery is over there." Undertaker pointed up at the sky.

"What!?"

"You young ones really don't know anything do you?"

"I know about it." Lafiel looked at Jinto. "You are strange. It's obvious that the bodies should be sent to space when a person dies."

"Yup. An Abh would probably just jettison it from their ship, but we have to shoot them up into the sky from this little gravity well."

"On my homeworld we either burn or bury the dead bodies." Jinto said weakly.

"When I was landing on this world, I thought it was a very dusty world. I thought it was because of the battle in orbit, but they must have been coffins."

"But why don't you shoot them into space from the orbital facility?" Jinto asked.

"What an emotionless young man you are." Bill said with exaggerated hand gestures. "A funeral is a ceremony, of course it's better to make a big deal out of it."

"I thought funerals were done quietly."

"That's just your prejudice." Said Ming. "There's probably some Abh influence in this ceremony, but we come from space, too. So it's a fitting ceremony."

"It's not that I don't like the idea of shooting people into space." Then Jinto suddenly had a frightening thought. "Wait. Do you want us to ride this into space!?"

"You just realize that now!?" Undertaker and Bill said in unison.

"No one told me anything." Jinto protested.

"I'm ashamed, Jinto." Lafiel looked at him with a ridiculing gaze. "I thought you were more observant than that. I'm ashamed as a fellow Abh."

"Oh, sorry..." Jinto was crushed.

"But I have one problem." Lafiel said to Undertaker. "I am unused to ships like this. Will I be able to pilot it properly?"

Undertaker seemed stunned as he stared at Lafiel. "Listen, Princess. You can't pilot this. There's no need to pilot this. You just get shot up. That's it."

"I'm ashamed, Lafiel." Jinto took advantage of the opportunity. "I thought you were more observant than that..."

"Quiet you."

Why did I expect her to listen to my sarcastic remark to the end? Jinto questioned his own sanity as

Lafiel asked Undertaker her next question.

“Is it air tight?”

“Of course. I don’t know what kind of an idea you have, but even us grounders know a thing or two about what a vacuum is like. We even have an emergency oxygen supply incase a living person accidentally wanders into one of them. It’ll last 12 hours.”

There was a door at the end of the passageway, and a set of stairs to the basement appeared a little past it. There was a small room with numerous monitors at the bottom of the stairs.

“Prepare for the funeral.” Undertaker said to one of the screens.

“This funeral ground has been closed by order of the city government.”

“Haven’t you heard? That order has been retracted.”

“I can not get confirmation for that fact.”

“I don’t like disobedient machines.” Undertaker turned around. “Daswani, if you would please.”

Daswani nodded, he connected a keyboard onto the control panel. Daswani’s thick fingers typed the little keys at an incredible rate.

“It might be faster to use verbal commands, but Daswani doesn’t like to talk.” Undertaker said.

“This is much faster.” Said Daswani.

“Wow.” Bill was amazed. “Has anyone ever heard Daswani say so much?”

“He must be excited.” Ming said.

“Oh yes, what kind of propulsion does that ship use?” Jinto was reluctant to use the term “coffin”.

“Hydrogen.” Said Undertaker.

“Hydrogen? Nuclear fusion?”

“No.” Undertaker said in a strangely pleasant tone. “Chemical reaction. When you react hydrogen with oxygen, you get heat and water. We use that. Basically it flies by burning hydrogen.

“Jinto.” Lafiel said. “Hold me, I’m about to faint.”

“I won’t be of much use.” Jinto said stunned. “I think I’m going to as well.”

“Don’t worry.” Undertaker soothed. “We haven’t had an accident in awhile.”

“In awhile?” Jinto was not soothed.

“Oh, my mistake. Let me rephrase that. We have never had anyone die since the founding of the planet. Though a few coffins have exploded before.”

“... wonderful.”

“Oh yes, we have a type with a self-destruct device and one without a self-destruct device, which one would you like?”

“Self-destruct device!?”

“It usually returns to the atmosphere two hours after launch, and we self-destruct it when it does. Anyone at the funeral looks at the firework in the sky and thinks about the parted once more.”

“... no self-destruct device, please.”

“Oh, really? Too bad. The ones with the self-destruct device are more expensive.”

“Just the feeling is enough.”

“Undertaker. Stop teasing them already.” Marka said.

“I have a right to get revenge.” Undertaker said happily.

Daswani looked up from his keyboard.

“Prepare for the funeral.” Undertaker ordered once more.

“Understood. Please input the name of the undertaker.”

Undertaker slid his wallet through the control panel.

“Please confirm your identity.”

Undertaker looked in to a window on the control panel for a retinal scan.

“You have been approved for a funeral ceremony. Please continue. Please input the name of the person responsible for payment for the funeral...”

“The undertaker will pay for the funeral.”

“Understood.”

Undertaker smiled at Lafiel. “Pay me back later, okay?”

“Yes.” Lafiel nodded.

“Please input the funeral permission number.”

Undertaker input a string of permission numbers from his mobile computer. “You guys are Biggs Tempel alright? Though Grandpa Biggs’s real funeral isn’t for a week.”

“Permission number confirmed. Please input the planned orbital flight path...”

“Marka, I can handle it here. Take these two to the launching tube. The third one, you know where it is, right?”

“Yes.” Marka nodded towards the two of them. “Let’s go Your Highness the Princess and Your Grace the Successor to the Earl.”

Entryua watched quietly as Kite struggled with the unfamiliar Imperial computer to get the information he wanted. Even though Entryua refused to speak, he could have asked the fireman, but it seemed that he was no longer willing to trust any Krasbyullian.

Kite seemed stunned when he finally managed to get the information he wanted translated on his own computer. “Why didn’t you tell me about Krasbyullian funerals!?”

“You never asked.” Entryua shrugged. He expected to get hit, and braced himself. But Kite only stood there tightening his fist, until he suddenly started laughing.

“You can’t get away like that! The Abh cannot escape!”

He patted a soldier on the shoulder, and gave an order. The soldier began transmitting a signal.

A red light was on at the top of the door to the third launch tube. “Currently fueling and preparing the coffin. Please wait.” A brand new coffin sat outside the tube waiting.

The launch tube was underground.

“It’s to protect the city from the launch blast.” Marka explained.

“When I was a kid, they launched it from the surface, and we would come watch all the time. But the city grew larger, so the launch tubes were moved underground. It’s unfair, the funeral grounds were there first.” Bill, who followed them, added.

“I just had a thought.” Jinto found yet another source of worry. “What if the Star Force thinks that we’re a weapon launched against them?”

“A ship that flies by burning hydrogen?” Lafiel wrinkled her delicate nose line. “It may be effective in making them laugh to death.”

“Oh...”

“Yes. And my wrist computer can emit a friend-or-foe signal. There won’t be any electromagnetic bugs above the stratosphere.”

“Okay then.”

“You worry too much.”

“Call it being cautious. You looked pale until just a second ago, too.”

“I’ve already made my decision. I will trust them.”

“What an honor.” Marka smiled.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you...”

“Marka” They heard Ming’s voice from the loudspeaker. “They’re here. But don’t worry. It’s just the fire plane, and we can launch in a minute.”

“What will you guys do? The enemy might come here after you launch us into space.”

“Worrying about us now?” Marka smiled. “Don’t worry. We were born and raised in Gzonu, we won’t get caught by some foreigners. Instead worry about when you come out of the launch tube. There is no armor, so be careful.”

“Thanks. But how can we be careful? We can’t pilot it, right?”

“I heard that the Abh are not religious. Are you not religious as well?” Marka asked.

“No.” Jinto was at a loss for a second at the unexpected question, but he answered it honestly. “I’m a member of the long life worshipers. Though I’m not a very devout member of it.”

“Then there is something you can do.” Marka placed a hand on Jinto’s shoulder, and said to him as if cheering him on. “Pray.”

“Are the reinforcements still not here?” Kite shouted.

Entryua had already heard him ask the same question five times.

“They’re here.” The soldier reported in relief.

Five planes arrived above the funeral grounds. They hurriedly sent a signal.

“Just five?” Kite seemed dissatisfied. “This funeral ground is big. And that’s an unarmed transport!”

“They’re asking where they should land.” Said the soldier.

“I don’t know either. We just have to look for one that’s preparing to launch. Destroy it as soon as you find it.”

Gzonu’s funeral grounds all used underground launch tubes, and the towers on the surface were only the coffin bullets, placed there for display. Entryua knew so, but he kept silent. *Hurry up Abh. Get out of here already.* If he had to die, he wanted to die after the Abh pulled one over the invaders.

The display light changed from red to blue. "Ready to load coffin"

"Hurry, we're launching in thirty-seconds." Ming spoke out over the intercom.

"Bye then. Don't forget about the spaceship." Marka gave them the coffin.

"I will make sure to ask." Lafiel lay down in the coffin.

"Here, you too." Bill said.

"Yeah. Thanks for everything..."

"Make sure to repay our kindness."

Jinto lay down next to Lafiel. The coffin was sucked into the door, and the three layers of doors closed one after another. It was dark inside.

"What a disgrace." Lafiel whispered. "I have to ride a ship that has neither a control glove nor external spatial sensors."

"This isn't a ship. It's a coffin. C-O-F-F-I-N." Jinto gave her a dose of reality.

"... I suddenly find you annoying. Get away from me."

"We don't have much room, I can't help it. Ouch! I'm wounded!"

"You said it was just a scratch." Lafiel's tone was cruel.

"I lied. I lie sometimes. Didn't you know that? ... Ouch! I said ouch!"

ROAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR

The coffin began vibrating.

"Over there!" Kite opened his eyes wide at the spire coming out of the ground. "What are you doing, why aren't you shooting, can't you see that!?"

The five aerial armored personnel carriers landed around the spire, and soldiers were pouring out.

"Signal them!" The soldier in the co-pilot's seat began to blink the landing lights to signal the other ships. But the coffin bullet kept rising.

Finally, it was completely on the surface. A fierce ignition blasted the surface, and several soldiers were blown away. The coffin bullet kept rising into the air, increasing its speed. Soon it flew past the fire plane.

"Get it! Crash into it!" Kite ordered. But the pilot was a fireman, who was temporarily working for them. There was no way that he would follow an order that would only lead to his own death. Of course, even if it had been a soldier of the invading army, it is questionable whether he would have followed that order or not.

Instead, the pilot backed the fire plane up, to avoid getting caught in the wake of the coffin.

Kite desperately leaned out of the window and began shooting. "Damn it! Where's the reinforcement! What's the air force doing!? Let me fire! I have to shoot down that flying nuisance!"

GOAAARRR

The heat from the burning hydrogen blasted in from the window, and the fire plane shook. Entryua quickly pressed his face into the seat in front of him. Even Kite was forced to cover his face with his arms. When Entryua looked out once more, the coffin was already far in the sky, and all he could see was the fire from its rockets.

"Damn it! Damn it!" Kite started firing once more.

That was when the soldiers finally began firing at the coffin from the ground as well. But by then the coffin was already in the stratosphere. Like a phoenix looking down upon the mortal realm, it roared into the sky trailing a splendid fire, not bothered by the gunfire.

"It's useless." The soldier said calmly. "The flying nuisance has become a soaring nuisance..."

When he heard that, a laughter began in Entryua's chest, and spilled out of his mouth. Entryua doubled over laughing. He had not felt so great in a long time. Though he did consider for a moment that they may kill him, that thought could not contain the laughter that was spilling out.

"Damn it!" Kite cried out. "Why!? Why do they get all the luck!? Did god not approve of us!? Why doesn't he give me even just one sacrifice? That is all I ask for."

That was when Entryua finally realized. There were two races, both born to genetic manipulation, but with very different fates: The Abh and the Sylezia Republic. Kite's hatred was not something personal, but it stemmed from a cruel sense of jealousy towards the Abh race. Though he did regain some of his sympathy to the Captain, it still did not contain the raucous laughter of the Chief Inspector of the Lume Biga city police. Entryua continued laughing.

"We have destroyed what has been designated the 128th supply depot at 38 degrees 11 minutes west longitude, 52 degrees 24 minutes south latitude." Kfadis reported. "And..."

"Please, head advisor. Don't bore me with detailed reports like that." Sub Admiral Sporth, high commander of the reconnaissance division of fleet Ftune, shook her command rod before her fascinatingly beautiful face.

“But commander...”

“I’ll leave everything concerning the destruction of ground based targets to you.”

“But I have to report our progress to you at least.”

“Your commander said that it’s not necessary.” Sporh turned away. “This isn’t war, this is just extermination.”

I agree. Kfadis also began to regret suggesting this plan.

15,000 people, including the Krasbyul army high command, were on board the transports that they captured in the Sfagnoff Marquessate region, and the databanks of those ships still contained intact various military information.

According to those. They had released roughly 300 million electromagnetic bugs. The bugs were nanomachines, and whenever they received an electromagnetic wave, they released static at the same frequency as the wave they received. Though the signal released by each of them was weak, when 300 million of them were put together, it became quite powerful. The electromagnetic bugs produced by the United Mankind were impossible to halt once released. Even the United Mankind could not stop them now that they were activated, let alone the Star Force.

In other words, the 200,000 enemy soldiers on the surface of the planet Krasbyul lacked a command structure, and were isolated from each other as well.

By hitting the broadcast centers at the mountain peaks on the world, they were able to stop the global jamming of electromagnetic frequencies. In rural areas, they could even receive some communications from the orbit. But the Abh still could not reach the populated city areas.

The heavily armed knights of the sky, the reconnaissance division Ftune could do nothing but destroy isolated enemy bases and mobile enemy units that were far away from any population centers, to try to lighten the load of the aerial combat units. To be quite frank, it felt empty. Shooting down defenseless people did not sit well with them. And unfortunately most of the enemy forces hid in the cities, where they could not be touched from orbit.

“Just come to me for permission if something you’re doing might harm the subjects. If it doesn’t, I’m fine if you do this job however it suits you.” Sporh’s face grimaced as she said the word “job”.

“Understood.” Kfadis said.

“How long until the main force arrives?” Sporh asked.

“Their estimated time of arrival is four hours and fifteen minutes ship time from now.”

“Oh.” Sporh stood up. “Then I’m going back to the commander’s room.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kfadis saluted.

“Head advisor, emergency message.” The communications advisor reported.

“Relay it to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

His wrist computer beeped, signaling the transfer of information.

“Please wait, commander.” Kfadis called to Sporh after taking a glance through the information.

“What?” Sporh turned around.

“The Radbyulsh’s reconnaissance vessel seems to have rescued a stranded in orbit.”

“And?”

“The stranded claims to be Her Highness the Viscountess of Paryuun and His Grace the Successor to the Earl of Hyde.”

“Her Highness the Viscountess of Paryuun? What is an Abrial Princess doing at a place like this?” Sporh tilted her head. “Running away from home?”

“No, I believe...”

“No.” The Sub Admiral turned back towards her command room with her cloak floating behind her. “It’s hardly elegant to deal with a rebellious child.”

“That’s not it.” Kfadis explained. “I believe Her Highness the Viscountess of Paryuun was on board the Gothelauth as a flyer trainee, and His Grace the Successor to the Earl of Hyde was on board with her. So...”

“I know that, head advisor. You’re too serious.”

“... my apologies.”

“Please don’t apologize over trivial matters.”

“My... Yes, ma’am.”

“But to think that they were alive on the planet. Where are they?”

“They are still on the reconnaissance vessel. The Captain of the Radbyulsh is asking what he should do with them. I believe it would be best to have them come directly to our ship.”

“The graceful Sporhs have never gotten along well with the coarse Abrials...” The commander muttered to herself with her arms crossed.

“Then should we have them go to the Radbyulsh for now? And wait for the arrival of Admiral Trife to deal with them?”

“What are you thinking?” The scarlet pupils looked into the head advisor’s eyes with wonder. “It sounds like fun, have them come here.”

10. The Return Home

A reconnaissance vessel landed in the landing bay of the flagship Herrzbyulsh of the reconnaissance division Ftune.

“We’re here.” Jinto looked into Lafiel’s face as he rubbed his wounded shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“The Grand Duchess of Letpanyu.” Lafiel muttered. “The commander of this division is the Grand Duchess of Letpanyu of all people...”

“Oh, are you talking about Sub-Admiral Sporh? What about it?”

“The good spirited Abrials and the back-handed Sporh have never gotten along.”

“Really...”

“To be saved by a Sporh, and to have to see her in these clothes!” Lafiel shamefully looked down at what she was wearing. She was in a Krasbyullian “one-piece”.

“We are prepared for you to board. This way please, Your Grace.” The Captain, who had the insignia of a Rear Flyer said to Jinto. Then he faltered a bit and said to Lafiel. “Flyer trainee Abrial.”

Lafiel stood up and saluted him.

“Thank you very much.” Jinto saluted as well and headed for the airlock.

Ten or so flyers were already waiting in the landing bay. The Flyer in the middle reminded him for a carnivorous butterfly. She was fascinating, yet vicious. Her rank insignia showed the rank Sub-Admiral. She must be Sub-Admiral Sporh.

When they walked down the stairs from the reconnaissance vessel, Lafiel saluted, and Jinto bowed.

Sporh took a long gaze at Lafiel as she saluted, and bowed down gracefully. The Flyers around her did the same.

“Welcome to my ship, Your Highness, Your Grace. Oh yes, Your Highness, please act like a member of the royal family on board my ship.”

“But...”

“I have not received notice of a Flyer trainee being assigned to my ship.”

“But Sub-Admiral...” Lafiel tried to continue putting up a fight.

“Besides, it is impossible for me to think of you as a Flyer trainee with those garments on.” Sporh made the finishing blow.

“Then I will do as you say.” Lafiel indignantly undid her salute. “It has been a long time, Grand Duchess.”

“Really it has. Not since the celebration for Your Highness’s graduation from the trainee program.” Sporh got up from her bow, “I, the Grand Duchess of Letpanyu would like to give my sincerest congratulations on Your Highness’s health and growth... but it seems that your aesthetic taste. Why are you dressed like that?”

“It was not my idea.” Lafiel glared at Jinto. “Jinto... err, it was the Successor to the Earl of Hyde’s idea.”

“Oh.” Sporh’s eyes opened wide in awe. “So you’re saying that the Successor to an Earl made Your Highness wear that, and made you dye your hair black.”

“This is still not too bad. You should have seen what he originally bought for me to wear.”

“Oh.” Sporh was stunned silent, and turned her scarlet pupils towards Jinto.

Jinto was embarrassed. He wondered if Her Grace the Grand Duchess would listen to his explanation about why it was necessary.

“My apologies, Your Grace.” For some reason, Sporh bowed down to Jinto even though he was of a lower rank than her.

“Oh? For what?” His bewilderment grew greater.

“I believed that the King of Balke was acting too capriciously when he allowed the formation of the Hyde Earldom. I did not think that we should make someone who was unacquainted with the lifestyle of the Abh a noble. I do not mean to offend, but the weapons that the planet Martinyu had was hardly a threat.”

“Caprice you say...” Jinto did not know what to think.

“But I was absolutely wrong. Your Grace has accomplished far more than enough to deserve your title of an Earl.”

“Th-Thank you...” *What does she mean I’ve accomplished enough? Is she talking about how I saved Lafiel? But it doesn’t sound like that...*

“All of the Empire is aware of how easily angered the Abrial are, and how much destruction that anger can cause. The fear throughout the Empire of it has become legendary. From what I hear, Her Highness Lafiel of the Kreuve family is an Abrial amongst Abrial, I was under the impression that the fire of her anger was unseen since the formation of the universe.”

“Grand Duchess.” Lafiel said, trying to cut in.

“To make Her Highness Lafiel,” Sporh ignored her. “dye her hair black, and wear such an eccentric garment. I cannot believe that such a task has been accomplished, even though I see it before me. This accomplishment is worthy of not just the title of an Earl but that of a Marquess, no it is worthy even of the title of a Duke. I am in awe.”

Jinto looked down. He could not just take this compliment at face value. It seemed to him that she was insulting him in a roundabout way for making Lafiel wear such strange clothing.

“Don’t worry about it, Jinto.” Lafiel said, feeling sorry for him. “She’s just teasing me by using you. The personality of the Sporh is as twisted as a DNA. To borrow the words of the Grand Duchess, Her Grace Penejue of the Letpanyu Grand Duchy family, is a Sporh amongst Sporh. She is known as someone who has raised the roundabout techniques of insulting others that the Sporh have developed in the last millennium to an artistic level.”

Sporh laughed, and looked directly into Jinto’s eyes for the first time. “But it is true that I like you. I heard that you are becoming an administrative Flyer, I wish you could fight under my command.”

“Before we discuss the future, Grand Duchess.” Lafiel quickly cut her off. “Could you prepare a uniform for me? I would also like to change the color of my hair back.”

“I can get the uniform right away. But how can we wash the dye out? Do you just need to take a bath?”

“It did not come off when I took a bath.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

“I do not know.” Lafiel looked at Jinto. Sporh also looked at Jinto.

Jinto had no idea. “I think it said something on the instructions book... but we threw it away...”

The two Abh females were still staring at Jinto.

“Umm... That hair dye was really popular on Krasbyul, so if we go down there and ask someone...” Jinto suggested.

“A frightening thought just entered my mind from somewhere. It is where a Flyer from my glorious Ftune lands on a planet under enemy control. He then eliminates enemy resistance, with his uniform stained red by the blood of his enemies, he captures a frightened subject, and asks him. ‘Do you know how to wash hair dye out?’ Oh how quickly the prestige of the Ftune would fall.”

“Oh yes.” Jinto’s shoulders drooped. He had forgotten because they were now safe, but the enemy army still controlled the planet Krasbyul.

“How about this. I will pass one of Her Highness’s hair strands to the chemical department. I will have them examine it and produce something to wash the dye out. How does that sound?”

“Please. And this.” Lafiel took out a data crystal from her breast pocket. “It is the navigational log from the cruiser Gothelauth.”

The Flyers saluted to the data crystal that Lafiel held in her hand. There was a moment of silence, until it was broken by Sporh.

“Head advisor, please take it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” A flyer with light green hair, who for some reason showed deep exhaustion in his beautiful eyes, stepped forward and reluctantly took the data crystal.

“Well then, Your Highness, successor to the Earl of Hyde. This way please. I will show you to your rooms. Oh, it seems like the Successor to the Earl of Hyde should go to the infirmary first.” Sporh looked at Jinto’s left shoulder. “Really, how did you do it? To have Her Highness let you off with just a shoulder after you made her dress this way?”

“I did not shoot him.” Lafiel said angrily.

Thirty-seven minutes later.

The flagship of the Trife fleet, the cruiser Keirhdysh entered normal space through the Sfagnoff gate. An incredible amount of information was sent to the Keirhdysh from the Herrzbyulsh as soon as the Keirhdysh entered normal space.

“Your Grace.” Kilocommander Kahyurec called his commander.

“What is it?” Admiral Trife glanced up.

“It seems that Her Highness the Viscountess of Paryuun and His Grace the successor to the Earl of Hyde have been rescued.”

“Huh?” Trife’s jaw dropped. That information was hard to believe. He knew that the two of them were on the cruiser Gothelauth, but why were they here?

“Is the Gothelauth intact?”

“No, unfortunately it seems that the Gothelauth was indeed destroyed.”

“Oh. That is regrettable. But then why is Her Highness the Princess here?”

“She evacuated the ship under her Captain’s orders, and escaped harm on this planet. She has not filed

her report yet, so the details are unclear.”

“Hmm. I don’t blame you.”

“Her Highness the Princess has brought back the Gothelauth’s logs. There was a very interesting piece of fact in it.”

“What?”

“We now know where they came from.”

“Where?”

“Gate Kysh 193. The Captain of the Gothelauth believes that they used that gate by moving it to the Vascotten system, which is 4.1 light-years away.”

“Hectocommander Lexshue... She was a good Flyer.” Trife said as he paced around the bridge.

“Yes. Her chain of logic seems flawless, and I agree with her opinion on the matter. We have just begun analyzing the data in the enemy ships that we have captured, but they will likely backup her theory.”

A planar space diagram appeared in the command bridge.

“There are two territories between here and Kysh 193. The Gamtesh Viscounty and the Febdash Barony. We should immediately dispatch the fleet to these locations, and evacuate the lord and his vassals if possible.”

“Can you get in touch with the Volash Earldom? By going around Kysh 193?” Trife came to a halt and thought.

“We should attempt to do so. Shall we use the Ftune?”

“Do you think that the Ftune needs to rest?” Trife warned.

“There is no fleet other than the Ftune who could accomplish this mission.” Kahyurec declared.

“You’re right.” Trife nodded, “We must do this quickly. Let us work the Ftune to death.”

“Yes. But we cannot have the two we rescued with the Ftune when they do so.”

“Of course not. Why do you always say such obvious things? Send a ship to transfer them immediately.”

“Understood.”

“Operation’s over. The first aid on this was remarkably well done.” The doctor, who was obviously born on a planet, removed the operation assistance device from Jinto’s shoulder. “I barely needed to touch it. You won’t be able to use your arm for a bit, but it should completely recover by the time you reach Lakfakalle. The doctor put a cast around Jinto’s arm and hardened it.

“Thanks.” Jinto looked at his left shoulder. There was a new cast on it completely hardening it above the elbow.

“Your clothes have arrived. I hope you like them.” The doctor passed Jinto his overalls. The sleeve for the left side came out near the waist, and was connected to the rest of the suit above. It was a perfect fit for Jinto’s arm right now.

“I like it.” Jinto put the suit on.

A Wing Flyer entered the infirmary, as if he had been waiting for the operation to finish the entire time.

“Our division has been assigned a new mission.” The Wing Flyer said. “We must ask Your Grace to leave our ship.”

“Already?” Jinto was surprised.

“The Captain is very regretful. She says she would have liked to have heard your adventure stories over dinner.”

“Please give her my regards.”

“Yes, sir. Please come with me now.”

Jinto said goodbye to the doctor, and left the infirmary. The Wing Flyer lead him to the landing bay.

“We will have Your Grace and Her Highness board the communications ship *Ekrerr*. The *Ekrerr* will travel straight to the Capitol, so you should arrive within three days.”

“I’ve never been to Lakfakalle before.” Jinto confessed.

“Is that so?” The Flyer seemed a little surprised.

Lafiel awaited him in the shuttle. She wore a uniform that lacked a rank insignia, and her hair was a light blue yet again.

“You’re back to normal.” Jinto light-heartedly said to her. He had liked the way she looked with black hair, wearing the one-piece. But he saw now that she looked best with light blue hair and the uniform.

“Do you really think so?”

“Yeah, of course...” Jinto became uncertain now because he detected that Lafiel was displeased from her tone of voice and the look in her eyes.

“Take a good look.” Lafiel grabbed a lock of her hair. “The color has faded.”

Now that she mentioned it, the color was slightly lighter, and seemed closer to a plain blue.

“But that’s a pretty color, too.” Jinto soothed. He tried to tell her that they had had no choice in the matter, but he realized that there was no need to do that. She knew just as well as he did that the situation warranted it. There was also no need to try to wash the dye out in such a hurry. If she was willing to spend more time analyzing the dye, they may have been able to develop something to wash the dye out with less damage to the hair.

“I’m not blaming you.” Said Lafiel. “I’m just disappointed that you have such a poor memory.”

“But it didn’t change that much!”

Even if Lafiel had not been angry before, that situation has definitely changed.

The Princess looked the other way, and did not talk to Jinto again until breakfast the next day.

11. The Capitol: Lakfakalle

There was no map for that city. The buildings composing the city were not built upon earth, but instead constantly moved across an arc of spatial distortion by a gravity well. Because only the Capitol Traffic Network was aware of the location of the Capitol at any time, and even then only for a split second, the Capitol was called "The Capitol of Confusion".

It is also called "The Root of the Dragon's Heads". The crest of the Empire, the Gaftnohec, was also a metaphor for the Empire itself. The paths to the eight kingdoms were like the eight heads of the dragon. This was the only place where the eight heads met.

Occasionally it is given the simpler name "The Eight Gated Capitol". There are numerous systems that have more than one gate, but this was the only one with eight gates in known space. A thousand years ago the eight closed gates that a giant ship collected, and used as its energy source, were opened here.

Sometimes it is also called "The Cradle of the Empire". The largest Empire in the history of man started here, and built its fierce and bloody history from here.

Because of that history it was also given the name "The Falling Place". Because it was the capitol of an Empire that would go to war with another nation even if it were at a disadvantage, this place had faced the fires of enemy ships three times. But it never fell. Even nations that had once fought its way to this Capitol, were now part of the Empire.

Another name is "The Capitol of Love". There are few opportunities for a race who lives on orbital manors and spaceships, and spread themselves thinly over a vast Empire to meet each other. Therefore they normally spend half of their life at this capitol. There was always a party somewhere in the Capitol, where all was welcome, and they gathered here to meet others like them.

Just "Home", a race calls it. That is because any member of that race was probably born from an explosive encounter that occurred here. They are born and raised here, spread themselves across the vast universe, and then eventually come back.

"The Capitol of Confusion", "The Root of the Dragon's Heads", "The Eight Gated Capitol", "The Cradle of the Empire", "The Falling Place", "The Capitol of Love", "Home", The Capitol Lakfakalle.

The star that shines over the Capitol is the star Abrial. Yes, to the Abh, Abrial is the name of the city-ship that their ancestors lived in, the name of the Empress, and the name of the star that shines over their home. The source of this name comes from the sun goddess of the race that created the Abh. The people who are indirectly the ancestor of the Abh worshipped the sun goddess Amateras back when they were farmers, before they discovered the secrets of space flight. After thousands of years of change, the sounds of Amateras changed into Abrial. Therefore this system is called the Abrial Earldom. The title of Earl or Countess of Abrial is always given to the Emperor or Empress.

Anyone who approaches the star Abrial would see a star surrounded by a cradle. A spherical net made of very fine thread. But this thread is only very fine when compared to the star, and was actually 500 uethdagh in width. Solar panels lined the side of this thread that faced the star, and the other side continuously created antimatter fuel from the numerous linear particle accelerators. This was the largest antimatter production facility in, not just the Empire, but also the entire universe known to man.

The Capitol Lakfakalle was about 300 sedagh in length, and was shaped roughly like a sickle. It orbited the star Abrial at a distance of about six zesedagh. The Imperial palace, the Royal palaces, the Capitol manors of various lords, the residential areas of gentry and citizens, space gardens, market places, Star Forces facilities, ship yards, etc... A collection of numerous such artificial constructs formed the Capitol. Numerous transports flew amongst them, and any ship entering the system from planar space enters the city. Most facilities have some mobility to automatically avoid collisions.

The eight gates lined up in an orbit 1000 sedagh away from Lakfakalle. They orbited the star in the opposite direction as Lakfakalle, with a fortress outside each of them.

Jinto and Lafiel's communications vessel the *Ekrerr* entered the Capitol from one of those eight gates, the Iryush gate.

Unlike a communications vessel, a communications ship is built like a small-scale passenger transport. It was designed to relay not only information but messengers and nobles, so there were twelve fully furnished guest rooms, and even a small recreation room.

When Jinto, who was bored in his room, looked into the recreation room, he saw there.

"Hey, are you done with your report already?" Jinto initiated conversation.

"Yes." Lafiel turned around and pointed to the large screen before them. "What do you think of Lakfakalle so far?"

The Home of the Abh was displayed in the screen before them. To Jinto, Lakfakalle was a swarm of

lights. It was far too beautiful a sight to him. Since the communications ship was on the same orbit as Lakfakalle, it was like looking through a galaxy lengthwise.

"It's far more than I expected. It's incredible."

"Really." An innocent and satisfied smile appeared on the Princess's face.

Jinto grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down next to Lafiel. The impression of the Capitol that he told Lafiel was honest. But his heart was filled with a completely different emotion. Loneliness.

It was quite a bit longer than he had expected, but the trip from the Volash Earldom to the Capitol Lakfakalle was coming to an end. The end of this trip would also mean saying good-bye to Lafiel. And chances were that it would be a permanent good-bye. To make things worse, Lafiel spent most of her time cooped up in her room writing her report. The only time he ever saw her was during meals.

"Did the Captain tell you?" Said Lafiel.

"What?"

"We are headed towards the Imperial Palace."

"Directly?" Jinto was surprised.

"Yes. Her Majesty the Empress seems to want to talk to us."

"With you, you mean."

"No. Not just me, she wants to talk to you as well."

"Wow." Jinto's shoulders drooped. "You say it so casually. But I guess you are just meeting your grand mother."

"I have not seen my grandmother in a year."

"Oh. Then I'm sure you two have a lot of catching up to do."

"We do, but Her Majesty is probably busy. You may have forgotten, but the Empire is in the midst of a war."

"I know. I wonder how the war is going. Have you heard anything?"

"I have not heard anything." Lafiel tilted her head. "Are you worried?"

"Of course, have you forgotten where my home world is?"

The Hyde Earldom was on the other side of the front line. It was his home world, and it was filled with people who believed that Jinto was the son of a traitor.

The Iryush Kingdom was circular, so they would not immediately lose touch with them. But he could not remain calm when he considered the possibility that it was taken over like the Sfagnoff Marquessate.

The people of his home world would probably get along with the invaders far better than the people of Sfagnoff would. No matter how hard he tried not to think about it, all he could think about was how they would deal with his father the Earl of Hyde.

They had not met in many years, and they did not know each other very well to begin with, but he was Jinto's only living relation.

"Oh, yes." Lafiel made a sad face. "It was a stupid question, I should not have asked."

"It's alright. I'd forgotten about it myself when we were on Krasbyul."

"We were rather busy then."

"You have a way of making great understatements sometimes." Jinto said, impressed.

The lights of the Capitol approached quickly, and soon they were able to make out the closest building. Numerous spheres moved along a cylinder like appendages. It looked like a peculiar organism that had hit an evolutionary dead end.

"It's the Beturec shipyards. The cruiser Gothelauth was born there." Lafiel told Jinto.

"I see."

"That is a nursery yard." She said pointing at something floating beyond the Beturec shipyards. "There are many of those in the Capitol. There is no gravity inside, and it's cushioned inside with Styrofoam stars floating inside. A child is tossed in there with a headpiece soon after they are born. There they teach themselves about action and reaction, and learn how to use their headpiece. The navigational lobe doesn't develop unless this is done while the brain is still growing..."

Jinto thought to himself while listening to Lafiel give him a tour of the Capitol. *Is she as sad as I am that we'll be leaving each other soon? Does she not want that to happen as much as I do?*

When they reached the Imperial palace, numerous butlers appeared and separated Jinto from Lafiel. He was not very happy about this because of what happened at the Febdash Barony, but he had no choice but to do as he was told. He was taken to a very large bath, and Jinto stretched his limbs out in the hot water.

A change of clothes was already prepared for him when he left the bath. His shoulder had completely healed, just like the doctor had told him. The hole in his left shoulder was now covered with a new layer of skin, and he could not even feel the pain in his bone.

He put on a normal overall, and wore a cloak over it. There was a headpiece just like the one that was taken from him at the Barony, and there was a wrist computer to replace the one he had borrowed from Selnay. After Jinto finished making himself look like an Abh noble, he signaled as he was told. "This way please." The butlers arrived to guide him. A transportation tube awaited him in the hall. "Please get on." "Okay." Jinto stepped into the transportation tube. The butler followed him, and punched the orders in. "Umm... where are we going?" Jinto fearfully asked when the tube began to move. "I was told to bring you to the Hall of Imperial Visitation." "Hall of Imperial Visitation!? But I thought that hall was used only for important occasions..." "You are absolutely right." "Umm... what's going on?" The butler turned around and raised one of his eyebrows. "Do you really not know?" "No. Please forget that I asked." He quite before he was compared to frozen vegetables again.

"Stop fidgeting, Jinto." Lafiel frowned. She had arrived at the waiting room first, and she was sipping on a drink.

"You ask me to do the impossible sometimes." Jinto could not calm down. "What am I supposed to do? Is there some tip you can give me?"

"Not much. Just use common sense and be polite."

"You forget that I don't know what the Abh's common sense is like."

"Just do what I do. Walk to the throne. Bow down. Wait for her to speak to you. It is that simple."

"Sounds simple." Jinto admit.

"It is simple."

The butler came in. "I'm sorry for the wait Your Highness, Your Grace. We are prepared to receive you."

"Okay." Jinto tried to walk towards the butler.

"No that way. This way." Lafiel pointed towards the giant door.

"See, I made a mistake already." Jinto muttered to himself.

"Walk next to me, and match pace with me."

"Okay."

"Stride proudly. You are a hero."

"First I've heard of it."

"Idiot."

The large doors opened. The soft lights of the morning cast down on the Hall of Imperial Visitation. They let the light from the star Abrial in directly.

There were many beams above them, but there was no ceiling for them to support, and instead there was just a vast blue sky. Instead various standards hung from the beams; the standards of the various noble families in the Empire. Jinto found the new family standard of the Earl of Hyde's family at the very front.

The two of them walked down the black marble floor towards the throne, surrounded by butlers on either side. Soldiers from the entertainment division began playing the Imperial anthem. They did not sing the lyrics, but Jinto knew them. The lyrics were about how they hoped for an eternal life for the Empire so that they could watch the Universe grow old. The lyrics were very Abh, in other words the lyrics were very haughty and reckless.

Jinto did not wish to blunder again the way he did when he first met Lafiel, so he studied the faces of the nobles and royalty that he may meet today in the communications ship. So he was able to tell who the three people that greeted him were.

The one getting up from the throne of flight right now, surrounded by the family standards of the Eight royal families, with a large imperial flag behind her, is of course Lafiel's grandmother, Her Majesty The Empress Ramaju. The man to her right, standing one rung lower than the throne, with grayish blue hair is Lafiel's father, His Highness The King of Kreuve Dubyus. The beautiful young man with Indigo colored hair, smiling below the King, is Lafiel's younger brother, His Highness Duhiel the Viscount of Uemdais.

Jinto was confused. Both the Empress and the King of Kreuve looked like they were Lafiel's siblings. In fact, the King of Kreuve looked older than the Empress. He thought he understood how the Abh aged, but now that he faced an example of it, it seemed incredibly peculiar. How did the Abh themselves tell how old everyone was?

Lafiel knelt on a white carpet, placed in front of the throne so that anyone who knelt there would be looking up at the throne. Jinto quickly followed suit.

"Stand up, successor to an Earl." A voice said near him. When he raised his head, Ramaju had walked

down from the throne and stood immediately in front of him.

“Stand.” Ramaju said.

“Yes.” Jinto stood up.

“Please accept the thanks of the Abrial, successor to an Earl.” Ramaju motioned to Lafiel. “She is no one at this point. But she has great potential. You are the one that kept that potential alive. If not for you, I would not have seen this young alive again.”

“Not at all.” Jinto’s face went red. “I... I have not done anything. In fact she saved me countless times...”

“Not at all, successor to an Earl.” Ramaju took Jinto’s hand. “You are probably not aware of it yourself, so it was not a mistake for you to say so. However, if you had not told her when to run, she would have kept moving forward towards certain death. Though it is a trait of our family to not know when to back away, she is exceptionally so. You are also an Abh who knows the ways on a planet. Without that trait of yours, I am unsure as to what would have happened.”

Red pupils, placed in a beautiful face similar to Lafiel’s, gazed at him from close by. The Empress’s hands were cold, but he felt subtle warmth in them. Jinto panicked.

“You have my sincerest thanks as well, successor to an Earl.” Said Dubyus. “Planets are a strange land for those of us born in Lakfakalle. Most of us are born in the world of Abh, and die in the world of the Abh without ever stepping foot on a planet. I do not mean to offend you, but we are afraid of planets, successor to the Earl. Words cannot express my gratitude to you for bringing my daughter back from the surface of a planet.”

“Umm... there are many nice people on planets. Without their help we would have been captured by the enemy.” Jinto rebutted.

“Successor, you have misunderstood.” Dubyus laughed. “I am not saying that everyone who lives on a planet is evil. We are just as evil as they are. It is just that the lifestyle on a planet is too different from the lifestyle of the Abh. A foreign culture can easily kill a person. To make matters worse, that world was ruled by people who absolutely hated us. Without you to guide her, my daughter would not be standing here right now.”

“Exactly.” Said Ramaju. “I have already read the Princess’s report. I am aware of those who ended up aiding you. I feel gratitude towards them as well, but right now we are thanking you.”

“But she helped me a lot as well. Especially in space.”

“That was her duty, as ordered by Lexshue.” When he said that, a look of grief flashed over his orderly face. “You are unused to space. My daughter was ordered to help you through that world that you are unused to. But no one ordered you to help her through the world that she was unused to.”

“Feel pride in the heroism of what you did, young man.” Ramaju said. “At least, it was the absolute pinnacle in noble heroism for us.”

“Please allow me to thank you as well, Successor to an Earl.” Duhiel humbly cut in. “I am very happy that you have made it possible for me to see my sister again.”

Jinto finally relaxed with Duhiel’s honest words of thanks. The Empress and the King’s words of thanks were far too formal and roundabout for him to feel thanked. He understood how they felt, but it felt like they were for someone else.

“I am honored, Your Highness.” Jinto bowed down. “Your Majesty, and Your Highness the King. I am honored by the great words that you have given me.”

“You’ve done more than enough to deserve them, Jinto.” Lafiel whispered to him. “Act more proudly.”

“Am I really acting that nervously?” Jinto was trying to act as proud as he could, but he was uncertain as to how successful he was.

“Yes. You look pale.”

“My beloved daughter, you left something out of your report.” Dubyus grinned. “You did not mention that you had become so friendly with the Successor to the Earl of Hyde.”

“Anyone would become friendly with each other after going through so much danger together, father.” Lafiel replied.

“I see.” Dubyus said with a malicious smirk on his face. “Lafiel, would you like to go on a walk with me?”

“You may go, Lafiel.” Ramaju said in a depressed tone. “It seems that I must take care of an unpleasant task. Successor to an Earl, follow me.”

“Yes... but what do you mean by unpleasant task?” Jinto asked.

“I must give you bad news.”

Lafiel walked on white sand, following her father. A stream of water made a small river above the white sand. Filled with the light reflecting off the sand, the entire room was bleached white. Numerous white

pillars. It was not inlaid, so it could not be read until one was very close, but those pillars were filled with names, written on in tiny letters.

These are the names of those who died for the Empire. Carved in order of his or her death regardless of status, anyone who died at the same time in alphabetical order. If one took their time to look through them, he or she would find the name Abrial mixed in with those of gentry and citizens.

The same phrase was carved at the top of every pillar. "The Empire will not forget about you." This was the Hall of Memories, a holy space even for the unreligious Abh.

Dubyus stopped in front of one such pillar. "Have I said, welcome home yet?"

"No. You have not yet." Lafiel responded.

"Well then, welcome home my dissolute daughter. I am glad that you are back." Dubyus turned around, "Our bodies are always young, but our spirits will age. Even the Abh who possess youthful bodies until death, only have a short youthful period. I am nearing the end of that period. You have experienced something valuable during your true youth."

Dubyus turned back towards the stone pillar, and glanced at a point on it. Lafiel looked closely at it as well. Lexshue Uef Lobel Prakia.

"I have never told you this before, My Love. But I have not altered your genes. It is as it was in the beginning. That is why your ears are small for an Abrial."

Lafiel raised her head. "Why?"

"Of course because there was no need, Lafiel. Prakia gave me a fantastic gift by coincidence. With my limited talents, I would have been unable to make you any more beautiful than you already are."

"Father, I am uncertain why but..." Lafiel was unsure what her own feelings were. "I am glad to hear that."

"Really?" Dubyus laughed light-heartedly, "Good. I thought you hated me for the ears."

"The truth is, I did... a little." Lafiel confessed.

"Well that can't be helped, my beautiful daughter." Dubyus suddenly became silent after saying that. He simply stared at the name on the stone pillar with his mouth closed. Lafiel also remained silently, and gazed at the stone pillar with her father.

"They were wonderful days." Dubyus eventually began speaking again. "Next to a giant star nearing its death, surrounded by greenery that stretched to the horizon, inside a nebulae that was about to turn into a star... Prakia and I loved each other, and used each of our privilege to cause a great deal of trouble to each other."

"Privilege? Causing trouble for each other is a privilege?"

"To be troubled by the other." Dubyus smiled. "I do not have to worry now, my child. You are still too young to fall in love."

"Really..." Lafiel tried to rebut, but she could not say anything.

"I could not believe it when those fantastic days were passing. I could not believe it, but I felt the time passing by with all of my body. So at least I..."

"Father," Doubt ran through her chest. "Are you trying to say that you created me as a memory of Lady Prakia?"

"Is that so wrong?" Dubyus stroked Prakia's name with his ringer, "Prakia was everything to me at the time. My shining one, is it not only natural to wish to make that moment remain with me forever?"

"I am not a memoir, father. I am not a replica of Lady Prakia either." Her doubt had changed into anger.

"Of course dear captive of anger, you are none of those. Prakia was understanding. She would not raise her voice for mysterious reasons."

"Mysterious reasons!?" Lafiel grew even angrier. "I am me. I believed that you loved me as myself, father."

"I do love you. How can I call you my love if I did not?" Dubyus was unmoved.

"You love me as a memoir of Lady Prakia."

"No. I love you as yourself, flower of the Abrial."

"I do not believe you, father."

"I do not ask you to believe me, you stubborn beauty. But remember this, you were born as a memoir of Prakia, and you grew into my love. You resemble Prakia, but you are nothing like her inside. Though I will not say how you are different. At one time my love did go through you to Prakia, but now I will not ever see Prakia beyond you."

Lafiel was unconvinced. She respected hectocommander as a person and as a Flyer. But Lafiel wished for her father to recognize her as an independent person. Her father did say that he did indeed see her as so, but she felt as if he did not mean it.

"Tell me. Was it your idea, father, to have me serve aboard Lady Prakia's ship?"

"Is it not too convenient to be a coincidence? I wished for her to polish the gem that I had created. I am retired, but I do hold the rank of a Sub-Admiral, so it was not hard to arrange it." Dabyus thought for a moment. "I suppose I need to come out of retirement now that we are in a war. I fear the thought of having to serve under that boy from the Balke family."

"I believe that His Highness the King of Balke was the same age as you, father..." Lafiel pointed out instinctively.

"I came out of the artificial womb three months earlier. This is a large difference. I never lost to that boy at a fight when we were children."

"More importantly, father." A new question appeared in Lafiel's mind. "Did you also arrange for Jinto to board the Gothelauth?"

"Yes." Dabyus confirmed. "It was mostly coincidence though. There were about fifteen ships suitable for the Successor to an Earl to board. I secretly nominated for her ship to do so. I believed it would do no harm for you to have a friend who was born on a planet. Though I had no idea that you would become so close to him."

"It seems to me now that everything was arranged by you, father... Even the invasion by the United Mankind."

"You think too much of me, my daughter. If I were to have aided the enemy, your grandmother would tear me apart."

"But even so, you are working behind the scenes to raise me, father..." Lafiel did not like that fact.

"I am your parent. I gave birth to you with a gift from Prakia, and I raised you alone. But that is now over. You are now a daughter of the Empire."

"Really?" Lafiel gazed at the side of Dabyus's face suspiciously.

"She was a wonderful woman." Dabyus continued to recollect his memories, ignoring his daughter's suspicions. "When we first met, I was a failure of a decacommander, and she was a hopeful Wing Flyer. I can think of a hundred reasons why I was attracted to her, but I still have no idea why she loved me."

"It was your title." Lafiel regretted saying so even as she said it. She did not even know why she said something so malicious, probably because of her anger towards her father.

Dabyus turned around. His eyes were narrowed, clearly showing his anger. Lafiel's father was exceptionally cool headed for their family, but he was still nonetheless an Abrial. "You have known Prakia since you were a child. You were also aboard her ship. Do you evaluate half of your self as such a person after that, Abrial Nei Dubrusque the Viscountess of Paryuun Lafiel? Answer me honestly."

"No." Lafiel drooped her head. "She was not like that."

Dabyus gazed at his daughter for a moment. He probably sensed honest regret within her. "Good then, you fool. Never speak such idiocy again."

"Yes..." Lafiel was unable to look up again. "Could you tell me one more thing? Do you know what Lady Prakia thought of me?"

"She spoke a word of you to me privately... that you were her pride."

"I am her pride..."

The happy days she spent with Prakia ran through Lafiel's mind. Memories of the person, who would be considered her mother on a planet, ran through her mind. And only happy memories...

Her vision blurred, and she felt something warm on her cheek.

"Are you crying, Lafiel?" Dabyus noticed it.

"I am not crying because you scolded me, father." Lafiel sobbed, as if she was still a child.

"Then are you crying in grief for Prakia's death?"

Lafiel could not speak because she was desperately trying to keep herself from bawling. She quietly nodded.

"I'm disappointed in you. It seems that I have made a mistake raising you." He said, but his tone was filled with warmth, "I have not seen you cry since you stopped wearing diapers, heart of steel." Dabyus hugged Lafiel.

"Listen, our family has a reputation to protect, as the cold Abrial, the heartless Abrial, that the Abrial do not twitch an eyebrow even at the death of a close friend or a loved one. What would happen to this infamous reputation of ours that our ancestors worked so hard to make, if people were to know that an Abrial has cried? It is all right to be angry; it is all right to smile at times. But someone born to the Abrial does not have the right to cry. You cannot let your guard down even when you are surrounded by family. If you really need to cry, do it where no one can see you."

"You are unfair, father." Lafiel tilted her crying face up from her father's chest.

"How?"

“Why do you not teach me how to cry without shedding tears like that?”

A man in a uniform waited in the room that the Empress took Jinto to.

“He is sub-hectocommander Birskurs from military intelligence.” The Empress introduced, “sub-hectocommander, please explain the situation to the Successor to the Earl of Hyde.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A planar space diagram appeared in the center of the room. It included all of known space. The area around the Sfagnoff gate turned red.

“There was a battle here. I believe you are aware of it. The Star Forces won, and we have recovered the Sfagnoff Marquessate.”

A red dot appeared between the Sfagnoff Marquessate and the Volash Earldom.

“This is gate Kysh 193: the point through which the enemy penetrated our territory. After a forceful reconnaissance mission by the reconnaissance division Ftune...”

Red lines stretched from Kysh 193 across the Iryush Kingdom. Any gates intersected by the lines also turned red.

“The enemy have turned nearby gates into military supply bases, and have completely blocked transportation in the area. This would not be difficult for the Star Forces to recover. The problem is...”

Another red area appeared on the other side of the Sfagnoff gate. It included several gates, but the borders were uncertain. Red arrows appeared from there and it moved towards Iryush gate, the entrance to Lakfakalle.

“The enemy headed towards the Capitol with a force of about 120 divisions of fleet. The enemy movement near the Sfagnoff Marquessate was nothing more than a diversion. We did predict this, but we did not expect them to come in through the Iryush kingdom.”

A blue arrow appeared from Iryush gate and impacted the red arrow.

“We retaliated with 140 divisions of fleet under His Highness the high commander of the Imperial Star Force. We did succeed in defeating them, but our losses were heavy. We lost many good people and many good ships.”

The planar space diagram disappeared.

“This is all we know right now. I have received a report that the Imperial Star Force is currently doing reconnaissance of the penetration area in preparation for a counter attack. But there is no doubt that the enemy has solidified their defenses on both sides. Our forces still do not have the capacity to undertake the large-scale military operation needed to retake the area. We need to rebuild the Star Force, send forces to defend the frontiers, and check to see if they have managed to penetrate any other points. So we will need at least three years to build a force capable of breaking the walls in the Iryush kingdom. We only have around one division of fleet worth of force on the other side of the wall, and only if all of the ships gather together. Since they are not organized under one command, they will not stand a chance against any real advances by the enemy.”

Jinto thought about what that meant. The Hyde Earldom was on the other side of the walls...

“It is unfortunate, Successor to the Earl.” The Empress said in a sympathizing tone. “I did not wish to repay your favor of giving us good news with such bad news, but the truth is the truth. We cannot put the entire Empire to danger to save a small part of it. Contact with your territory has been cut, and will not return for a long while.”

Jinto was stunned. Not only has he lost contact with his home the Hyde Earldom, he has also lost contact with his second home, the Volash Earldom, where all of his friends are. He had lost everything from his past... but he did not feel sad about it.

Jinto was both puzzled and shocked by his own lack of grief.

12. Daughter of the Empire

The Elder Royal Council met in the Imperial Palace on the day of Jinto and Lafiel's arrival at Lakfakalle.

The Elder Royal Council is formed by a representative elder royal member from each of the eight families. It had only one purpose: to debate the promotion and punishment of any Flyers from the royal family.

Since the most talented Flyer from each generation of royalty is given the right to sit in the Throne of Flight, the Elder Royal Council's job is to decide the next Emperor or Empress over a long period of time.

Their topic of discussion this time was whether the actions of the first Princess of the Kreuve family were worthy of those as a Flyer, and a candidate for the throne. The meeting took five days. In addition to Lafiel's report, they went over in detail the statements by the former Baron and vassals from the Febdash Barony. And on the last day...

Lafiel was called to the Hall of the Elder Royal Lords. The Hall of the Elder Royal Lords is circular, there was a Gaftnohec drawn on the floor at the center of the room, and the front of the room was a level higher than the rest of the room. When Lafiel named herself, holograms of the representative upper royals appeared. They were the oldest Abrials, with their aged spirits in a youthful body.

"We have gathered today to decide whether Her Highness Lafiel of the Kreuve family is suitable as a flyer or not. There are several things we would like to ask her directly, so we will now begin the questioning of the Princess." The former Emperor His Holiness Dugas declared.

"You may look up, Your Highness Lafiel." The oldest member of the royal family, His Holiness Dusum of the Balgzed family called out.

"Yes, sir." Lafiel raised her head.

The eight elder royals, including the two former Emperors, looked down at Lafiel. Dugas and Dusum stood in the center. It seemed they were going to head the questioning of Lafiel.

Dugas was rather young to be an elder royal, but he was already past 100. Of course, he looked young on the outside. His childish face looked as if he had stopped maturing half way through puberty. It still showed a great deal of his youthful days.

As for Dusum, he was already far past 200. His bearing was full of character, and his long drooping bangs were a faded purple. For some reason, he depended on his spatial sensory organ, and rarely opened his eyes. Even now, his eyes were closed.

Lafiel was nervous. It was first time that she was examined by the elder royal council, but she had heard a great deal about them. Rumor said that the elder royals, who had retired from both war and trade, had nothing to do other than to polish their skills of finding demerits of young Abrials.

"Inspections of Fitness for Flyer Status are quite boring." Said Dugas. "You children have a misconception. It is hardly interesting to list the accomplishments of Flyer trainees. Some of us have lead fleets of tens of thousands to ships to bring famous interstellar nations to their ruin. Why would we find pleasure in a job such as this?" His Holiness Dulaz, who commanded the Shashain campaign a hundred years ago, spoke of his own accomplishment.

"But we found Your Highness's case very interesting." Said Lamlynyu of the Vesko family. It was the trade mark of elder royals to make the title "Your Highness" sound derogatory.

"Your actions are very careless. Especially when you depressurized the Baron of Febdash's manor, that incident is hard to forgive." Said Dugas.

"The former Baron of Febdash has sent a request concerning this matter." Lamlynyu of the Skeel family said. "He asks us not to punish you for anything you did in the Barony. But the former Baron misunderstands. The Elder Royal Council is not here to punish you for your crimes. We are here to judge whether you are fit to be a Flyer. The Empire will take responsibility for your many acts of destruction as part of this war."

Lafiel remained silent because she took all of this for granted.

"But the fact that you caused the manor to be depressurized is serious. Who knows what occurs in battle. Even we kin of the stars cannot live in a vacuum." Dugas said sarcastically.

"Yes, sir." She felt worried.

There is nothing more insulting than when someone deems you incapable of accomplishing a task that you really wish to accomplish. Lafiel would rather have died than be decided unfit to become a Flyer.

"But Your Highness, the Elder Royal Council has agreed that it is exactly the kind of mistake that a Flyer trainee would make." Dusum comforted her. "Everyone here went through an uneventful period as a Flyer trainee, but many of us have made major mistakes during our stints as Flyers. Do you remember, Your Holiness Lamlynyu when you stood there to receive your demotion from Admiral to hectocommander?"

"Your Holiness!" Lamlynyu shouted red-faced. "You do not need to be bringing up such ancient

history now.”

“But, Your Highness.” Dusum continued. “There are two actions that we cannot let pass. We would like to hear your view on these actions.”

“What are they?” Lafiel stared straight at the oldest Abrial.

Perhaps Dusum saw the brilliant pride in the young Abrial in his abandoned sight. He smiled bitterly for a moment.

“Your Highness,” Dusum asked. “Did you not use your status as royalty to insight a rebellion against the Baron when you were in the Febdash Barony?”

“Your Highness Lafiel.” Dugas added in before she could respond. “We Abrial are thought by the people to have a soul filled with fury. Unfortunately, I have to admit that it is true. Even I sometimes forget myself in my anger. But the citizens still recognize and love our rule. Do you understand why that is? It is because we have always distinguished between our anger and the Empire’s anger. It is because not one of us attempts to use the irresistible whip of the Empire for our own anger. If even one Abrial, who is fool enough to use the Imperial rod for their own means, were to be given the Throne of Flight, the citizens will lose faith in us. The most important job of the Elder Royal Council, since the founding of the Empire, has been to keep anyone who may sling mud upon the pride of the Abrial away from the throne...”

“Wait, Your Holiness.” Lafiel stopped.

“What is it, Your Highness?” Dusum permitted her comment.

“I did not use my title there. I did not incite a rebellion either. I simply requested aid from the vassals there as a soldier from the Star Forces because the Baron attempted to impede me in my mission.”

“I see, it sounds justified.” Dugas crossed his arms. “But, Your Highness. Do you think it would have succeeded had you not had the last name of Abrial?”

“That does not concern me.”

“What do you mean it does not concern you?” Dugas frowned.

“That was war. Luck plays an important role in any field of battle. The fact that I was an Abrial is a stroke of luck. If I were to feel proud of myself for accomplishing the task, ignoring the fact that I was lucky, it would be unjustified. I will not ignore the fact that I was lucky.”

“What would you have done, had you been a gentry?”

“Exactly as I did.” Lafiel responded without pause. “I cannot conceive of a better way to carry out my duties.”

Dusum smiled. “I must admit, you did make it out of that bind very well for a young chick.” Lafiel did not know whether he meant the bind at the Febdash Barony or the bind she was just in.

“Okay, with the approval of the other Elder Royals, I would like to dismiss that fact. Are there any objections?” Dugas waited for objections. There were none.

“Okay, then the other matter, Your Highness.” Said Dugas. “This is the more serious of the two. It rattles the foundations of the Empire. It seems that you promised subjects from the Sfnagnoff Marquessate a ship.”

“I did not!” Lafiel denied. “All I did was that I promised them that I would ask Her Majesty the Empress to lend them a ship.”

“A young one like you could not possibly know, but the words of royalty are always interpreted in favorable ways. Just the suggestion of a possibility by an Abrial is enough to convince people that it will happen. And when it does not, they believe that they have been deceived.”

“Especially in this case.” Said Lamyunyu. “They would think that you lied to them simply to save your own hide. This is absolutely intolerable.”

“Your Holiness, that is a very unfair accusation!” Lafiel raised her voice despite herself.

“There is no way that your request would be granted to begin with.” Dugas calmly said. “The Empire has a custom that does not allow anyone with a rank of less than gentry to rent a ship. Did you not know?”

“I did not...” Lafiel bit on her lip.

There were many customs in the Empire, and they were very complicated. Even though she knew the basics, she did not know all of the details.

“How shall we settle this?” Dugas shook his head. “It cannot be helped that you were unaware of the custom, but you could have figured it out had you thought about it. The Empire and its subjects do not have any responsibilities to each other. The Empire is the patron for the subject government, and the subject government cares for the subjects. A subject is therefore in a way unrelated to the Empire. How can we rent a ship to such a subject?”

“It was foolish, Your Highness.” Said Lamlonyu.

Lafiel was at a loss for words. She did not make a definite promise. She felt the entire matter was unfair, and grew angry with the Elder Abrials. But when she thought about the weight of the words of royalty, she

Epilogue

On the command bridge of the flagship of the reconnaissance division Ftune from the Rarbyuv regional defense headquarters, the cruiser Herrzbyulsh.

"They're taking the Ftune away from me!?" Sporph shouted out loud.

"It was awkward for an Admiral to be the commander of a division of fleet to begin with." High Commander of the Regional Defense Headquarters, Star Forces Admiral Unyush's hologram explained patiently. "As you know, we lost many ships in the battle three years ago. Our fleet has finally been reorganized. We will have you command a fleet, and work under Greater Admiral Trife."

"Which fleet?" Sporph asked suspiciously.

"It has not been formed yet. We will have you serve as the sub-commander of the regional defense headquarters for now, but it will not last long. The time for the enemy to learn what the Imperial Star Forces is capable of is quickly approaching."

"Has my flagship been decided? I personally like the Herrzbyulsh."

"It is certain that it will not be the Herrzbyulsh. The Herrzbyulsh is the flagship of the Ftune. Give it to your successor."

Sporph glared.

"Anyways that is what has been decided." Unyush quickly said. "The order will officially go out in three days. Settle things over there before then. I'm prepared to discuss the staff for your new command. Now if you will excuse me... Congratulations Admiral Sporph."

The hologram of the high commander disappeared.

Sporph continued glaring at where the hologram had been.

"Congratulations!?! Does he think that I wanted a promotion? I am already a Grand Duchess!"

Kfadis was relieved to hear what had just transpired. He could not bear to have Sporph as his commanding officer. He thought that he would get used to her after three years, but it turned out to be just wishful thinking. She was selfish and whimsical. But what was worse was the fact that she was a very capable commander!

I hope this new commander is easier to deal with. Kfadis dreamt to himself.

"What are you so happy about, head advisor?" Sporph was glaring at him.

"Nothing." Kfadis wiped the happy look off his face.

"Oh? You're welcome to be happy. Please settle your belongings as well."

"Huh? Why?" Kfadis was stunned.

"You heard. He said that he's prepared to discuss the staff I want for my new command. You're the new head advisor."

"Wait!" Kfadis was taken back. "I am a hectocommander. My rank is too low."

"You're about due for a promotion. I'll back you up. After all I did become a success in this world. I have to spread this fortune amongst my subordinates. Congratulations, Kilocommander Kfadis."

"I am thankful for this fortunate opportunity but..."

"Is there a problem?" Sporph crossed her arms.

"No, it is a great honor. Thank you very much." That was all Kfadis could say.

"You're welcome." Sporph then turned around to declare to the rest of the bridge crew. "You're all getting promoted! I'm taking you all with me!"

Kfadis sighed heavily in the happy uproar of the bridge.

Planar Space: On the light transport Krasbyul, traveling near gate Kroha 229.

"This was not my idea of life in space." Marka complained.

"What can you do about it?" Said Undertaker.

"I came into space, leaving behind my beloved husband and children. So why do I have to ferry cargo at the beck and call of the Empire?"

"What can you do about it?" Said Undertaker.

"We're not even ferrying the cargo." Bill took a swig of his alcoholic beverage, "It's the Abh who's doing the actual piloting. All we do, other than loading up the cargo that the Empire asks us to, are drink, like we're doing now, or gaze at our ever-growing bank accounts."

"What can you do about it?" Said Undertaker.

"Just think of it as saving up funds for the eventual war for the independence of Krasbyul." Ming lifted his cup. "And with the help of the Empire nonetheless. Yes, that is a pleasant thought."

"How is it pleasant." Bill attacked. "We can't even go back to Krasbyul. We're infamous over there. It's all 'Hey, my lord gentry, I apologize for asking, but could you please ferry around 10 Uethpo of this pork

ribs to the next town?' I'm tired of it."

"What can you do about it?" Said Undertaker.

"I'm rather happy. We get to see many different worlds. I'm learning a lot in preparation for the war of independence. Let's just wait patiently until this war is over. Once it's over, we can go wherever we want with this ship."

"Until this war is over!?" Marka threw her hands up in disgust. "When is it going to end? It hasn't even really started yet."

"What can you do about it?" Said Undertaker.

"Really." Bill looked at Daswani. "Can you take over the thought crystals of this ship somehow? We can take care of the crew."

The big man silently shook his head.

"There's nothing we can do then!"

"What can you do about it?" Said Undertaker.

"Undertaker." Marka glared at her comrade. "Can you say anything other than 'What can you do about it?'"

Undertaker glanced at Marka with his drunken eyes, "Did I tell you the story about the guy who jumped out the window?"

"You told me, Undertaker. Hundreds of times."

Sfagnoff Marquessate: Lumé Biga City Police Headquarters on the planet Krasbyul

"The election results are in!" One of his subordinates stormed in.

Entryua looked up from the screen on his desk. He could tell the results by the expression on his subordinate's face without his saying a word. But he still had to ask. "Well?"

"Aizan loses!" His subordinate raised his fist into the air, expression his joy with all of his body. "We have been freed from the twelve year rule by Supervisor Aizan!"

Entryua grinned, "It was a mistake for him to cooperate with the invaders.

"Aizan's supporters are making a fuss. They're saying it's against the election rules for current police officers to leak disadvantage information about the supervisor."

"I simply told the truth when asked for it. It would have been wrong of me to have said any lies, but what's wrong with telling the truth?"

"You're absolutely right." His subordinate laughed happily. "Though they're saying you shouldn't have responded when asked."

"You've got to be kidding." Entryua raised an eyebrow. "We're the people's beloved police force, right? How can we keep silent to the press."

"Of course." His subordinate nodded. "Well then, chief inspector. I'll go tell everyone else the good news."

"I'm sure everyone knows already."

"Probably. But I still want to tell them. I'm sure everyone will be happy to hear this news over and over."

Entryua looked back at the screen after his subordinate stormed out of his office. The screen showed a letter from Captain Kite who was now far away in the Siturec prisoner-of-war camp in the Vesko kingdom.

Abrial Earldom: Airlock aboard the antimatter fuel tank inspection ship Selnay, cruising three light seconds away from the Capitol Lakfakalle.

"We were really close there." Selnay said as she took her pressure suit off. "The electromagnetic containment field was degrading. But the thought crystals on the remote monitoring outposts were malfunctioning, and the database misreported the..."

"Please don't lie to me, too." Arsa frowned as she helped Selnay out of her pressure suit. "You did it again didn't you, Selnay?"

"You got me." Selnay stuck her tongue out.

"Why do you always insist that you repaired something that you didn't?"

"But we make so much more for making repairs during checkups than we do for just a check up."

"That is true, but we have plenty of work to do even without doing that. Greda just told me that headquarters is getting suspicious."

"What?" Selnay frowned at the bad news.

"Why do the fuel tanks that Selnay incorporated inspect always have unexpected problems? Will the answer to this problem create a new field of statistics, or is this caused by another reason?" they said." Arsa paused for a moment. "Want to make a bet? I'll bet my life savings that it doesn't create a new field of

statistics.”

“It’s alright, the Kreuve family is backing us up.” She said, mostly to herself.

“We shouldn’t expect any help from the King’s family. They only gave us the money to start this business. And how can we ask them to help us cover up our own crimes? Wouldn’t that just be asking for the anger of the Abrial to fall upon us?”

“But Selnay inc. still has a lot of potential for expansion.”

“At the rate you’re going, it doesn’t.”

“Okay...” Selnay gave up. “This will be the last time.”

“Selnay, do you know how suspicious headquarters are?” Arsa asked with a sigh.

“They’re that suspicious?”

“Worse.” Arsa stuck in. “They’re not suspicious at all! It’s their warning, saying they’ll let everything we’ve done so far go, but stop immediately.”

“So you’re telling me to say that there was no problems with this one, too!?” Selnay threw her arms up.

“Yes. Say there was no problem with this. Ask them only for the normal check up fee.”

“But I did repair it.” Selnay was dissatisfied. “I replaced the electromagnetic containment field with a new one. I reprogrammed the thought controls, too. Though they were unnecessary.”

“I’ll make sure to tell Greda to take it out of your share.” Arsa said.

“But I’m the president!” Selnay complained, but she did not seriously intend to get more money. If Arsa and Greda were to leave, Selnay inc. would collapse. Unfortunately, that fact.

The Capitol Lakfakalle: Waiting Room in the Capitol Manor of the Baron of Febdash

“How quickly time passes, it’s been three years already. You’ve completely grown up.” The old man reached his hand out.

“Yes. Your Grace the former Baron has not changed at all.” Jinto shook that hand.

“I’m doing well.” The former Baron of Febdash motioned for Jinto to sit, and sat down himself. “I heard you inherited the title of Earl.”

“Yes.” Jinto nodded and sat down.

The death of the former Earl of Hyde, Jinto’s father, was confirmed by a broadcast by the United Mankind. That was when Jinto inherited the title of Earl. He had not completed the term in the Star Forces that was necessary for his inheriting of the title, but he was able to inherit it thanks to the King of Kreuve.

According to the news, a new planetary president was elected, and he has declared a will to fight against the Empire as a part of the United Mankind. The new president’s name was Til Corint...

“Perhaps this is inappropriate of me to say when you’re mourning but, congratulations Your Grace the Earl.” Said the former Baron.

“Thank you very much.” Jinto smiled, accepting the congratulations. He had learned of his father’s death a year ago. He had expected as such, and had already settled his emotions. “But please don’t call me Your Grace the Earl. I just have the title, and I don’t even have a realm yet.”

“Then, young man.”

“I’m hardly a young man anymore.” Jinto laughed bitterly.

“Yeah, you’re already twenty aren’t you? You’re already very much an adult. But what should I call you then? Grown man is rather awkward.”

“Jinto is fine. Though to tell the truth, I like being called Administrative Wing Flyer Lin right now.”

“Oh, yes. I should congratulate you on your assignment as well. Congratulations.”

“Thank you very much.” Jinto thanked him again.

“What would you like to drink?” The former Baron activated his wrist computer. “Or would you rather eat instead? Though it is a bit early.”

“Oh, umm...” Jinto scratched his head, “to tell you the truth I don’t have much time right now.”

“Oh, that’s... thanks for visiting me when you’re busy.”

“I really am busy. I had some time off after my training cruise, but...” Jinto desperately tried to explain when he saw the sad expression on the former Baron’s face.

The former Baron began laughing. “I know you’re not lying, young man... I think I like that name the best. I’m grateful that you remembered this old man to the end.”

“It’s hardly the end. And I needed to come visit you.”

“My thanks to you. I still have many old friends in Lakfakalle, but it’s awkward to see them because they’re all still young.”

“I’m sure I’ll feel the same way some day.”

A smile spread across the former Baron’s face. “Do you remember, you said the same thing three years

ago.”

“I did?” He honestly did not remember.

“How can you forget something that this old man still remembers? Then do you remember that I told you I would teach you how to act like an Abh?”

“I remember. I look forward to it, but right now...”

“I know. I have no intentions of taking away time from a young man with a future. A young man is the type of organism who usually gets bored listening to old men.”

“I’m not bored at all...”

“Do you remember when I told you that an obvious lie can hurt a person’s feeling? You should have learned by then, and it’s already been three years.”

“Yes I remember.” Jinto turned red. “But I really am not bored.”

“I have my doubts. But I won’t hold you back. Go now, you don’t have much time, right?”

“I still have some.”

The former Baron shook his hand. “Don’t strain yourself, young man. I look forward to hearing the adventures of Administrative Wing Flyer Lin. Oh, yes I have one more question. Where were you assigned?”

“I’ve been assigned as a clerk to the assault ship Barsrogrh.”

“Oh, I’ve never heard of that ship. Though that can’t be helped with assault ships.”

“It’s a new ship too. But I’m sure it’ll be well-known soon.”

“Because you’re on it?”

“That’s one reason.” Jinto nodded. “But the Captain just happens to be an Abrial as well.”

“Oh.” The former Baron seemed impressed. “It seems that you came to visit me at a very busy time, young man. I thank you. Fly off now, go see Her Highness the Viscountess of Paryuun.”

“Okay.” Jinto stood up. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t stay very long.”

“Don’t worry about it. But come visit me whenever you have time. To get bored of course.”

“Okay. I’ll come again. Please take care of yourself Your Grace the former Baron.” Jinto stood up and saluted.

“Of course, young man.” The former Baron laughed.

The Capitol Lakfakalle: Bridge aboard the docked assault ship Barsrogrh

Everything was new. That was to be expected. The Barsrogrh had just come out of the Lespo Shipyards. It was a brand new ship that has not even gone through its breaking-in cruise.

Lafiel touched the brand new electronics on the bridge, and breathed in the thrilling and sweet fragrance of the new ship. Her heart was filled with pride and joy when she looked up to the ship standard, modeled after the digger wasp (rogrh).

This is the first ship given to her.

The Star Forces has not engaged in a full-scale operation during the last three years. It did not have the power to do so. It seems to have been the same for the enemy, nothing more than small-scale skirmishes occurred.

What was unexpected was the action by the Hania Alliance.

When the Empire revealed proof of the United Mankind starting the conflict, the navigational log of the Gothelauth that Lafiel brought back, they condemned the United Mankind for lying about the cause of the war, and declared their neutrality in the conflict. The Hania Alliance was the only nation out of the Alliance of Four that did not declare war on the Empire, so the Empire has no reason to engage in conflict with them.

Most people believed that the Hania Alliance could not possibly value justice enough for that to be sole reason behind their neutrality. Had Lakfakalle fallen, they would immediately have declared war on the Empire as a member of the Alliance of Four, to divvy up the territory of the Empire. In other words, they were testing the waters.

The other three nations of the Alliance of Four were dissatisfied with them, but a great number of Abh were as well. Though the Abh’s complaint was that now this may not be the last war. Lafiel was one such Abh.

But right now, they had to fight the immediate enemy. The front lines had solidified. Two thirds of the Iryush Kingdom was behind the two walls that the enemy had established, and still has not been recovered. But the annoying present situation will end soon enough.

The Empire was now revealing their alternate nature as an engine of war, and was continuously producing a fleet, to try to increase its size by several fold before the coming battle.

One out of every ten ships out of the Lespo shipyards was a rogrh class assault ship. Most other major shipyards were also producing a specific type of a specific class of ship. The Beturec shipyards were producing the state-of-the-art Kau class cruiser instead of the Ross class cruiser. The Vobinott shipyards were creating the Sof class ship-of-the-line. The Sul shipyards were making the Gamf class assault ship and the Hegh class escort

ship. The Gkrosh shipyards were...

Most retired Flyers were being recalled, and the various training centers were overwhelmed because of their need to retrain. New students were also pouring in at a never before seen rate. The recruitment of crewmen had also increased by a great deal on every world.

With the crews filling every new ship, the new fleets were starting to gain life. Soon a real offensive by the Empire will begin. Lafiel and this ship of hers will head to that battle.

Lafiel breathed in deeply, trying to calm the excitement.

No one was aboard the bridge. The crewmen were all gone preparing themselves before the ship left, and the Flyers were all busy supervising them. There were four Flyers other than Lafiel: two from the Piloting branch, one from the engineering branch to be the supervisor for the crewmen, and an Administrative Wing Flyer to be the ship clerk.

"Captain." The clerk came in to report. "We have finished loading food and spare parts onto the ship."

Lafiel giggled at the formal salute. *Perhaps he is bitter about my calling him Administrative Wing Flyer Lin.*

"You and I are the only ones here, Jinto."

Jinto smiled. "Oh, yeah. I wanted to see you."

"Listen, I'm about to reveal top secret information to you... I wanted to see you, too."

"I'll make sure to keep it secret. But you really haven't changed. You're exactly as you were three years ago."

"How can I change in just three years? You've gotten a little older.

"I prefer to call it 'matured'."

"Pha"

"Did you just laugh, Captain?"

"I told you that we're the only ones here." Lafiel scolded.

"But we can't act too familiar with each other when other people are around."

"Yes, it would affect morale."

"We might accidentally call each other by our first names. Maybe I should get in the habit of calling you Captain of Decacommander Abrial."

"Do you want to?" A mix of worry and anger filled her heart.

"Do you think I do?" Jinto laughed with his eyes.

"Then..." Lafiel turned around. Her light blue hair flew through the air, and the connections at the end of her data links shook like an exotic earring. "Just call me Lafiel!"

The language that Barone was based on most likely had characteristics of an artificial language. But that was because it was the ancient form of a language, reconstructed by dogmatic culturalists. Words originating from Western Influences were of course removed from that language, but the words that originated from Chinese, which have been a part of that language since the beginning of writing, were also eliminated.

Of course reconstructions to this scale presented a great deal of difficulty. Since they had no intentions of abandoning civilization, they had to represent all the products of the science that brought them into space (albeit, just recently), from the vocabulary from a period when their ancestors had just discovered metalwork.

When Israel was formed, the Jews reconstructed ancient Hebrew. A degree of work far exceeding that had to happen here.

Though there were some stretches, they managed to transform the ancient language into one capable of expressing modern technology through stretching the meanings of forgotten words, creating new words from onomatopoeias, and various other methods.

But there were problems with the language because it was so forced. There were too many syllables in this language to begin with. Though they managed to reduce the number of syllables considerably through the use of borrowed Chinese words, the number of syllables grew even more because of the elimination of those words.

This was the language that the first generation of Abh was given. When one considers these facts, it becomes understandable as to why Barone went through such a drastic change. Yet another reason for this is that the first Abh did not have a system of writing.

The people who created the Abh did not wish for the Abh to create their own culture. All they wanted from the Abh was to repeat what they were taught, and make decisions during emergency situations. Because they believed that words would not aid this purpose, but instead harm it, the first generation of Abh were taught without words, and they were only given auditory and visual methods of storing data. They were forbidden from using the most efficient and long-lived data storage system: writing.

It is well known that a language without writing goes through rapid changes. Barone was not an exception. If one were to ask for another reason, it would be that very few people lived in the environment of the Abhs. Whenever someone made a change to the language, that chain immediately spread through the entire population, and remained there.

According to the few records that are left, the number of vowels decreased first. A simple elimination of vowels would result in numerous words with the same pronunciation. So a phenomenon of the remaining vowels getting dragged on through the places with the missing vowels occurred. As a result of this, the number of vowels increased.

It is unsure what relation this has to the shortening of words, but it is believed that the order of pronunciation of consonants also changed, nasal and fully voiced sounds were introduced, and the fusion of end sounds and particles in stems of words occurred. These changes, although great, are believed to have occurred in an incredibly short period of time, probably two to three generations. After that the Abh declared their independence, threw away the restrictions placed upon them by the mother city, and designed their own system of writing.

After the development of writing, the rate of change in Barone dropped. With the formation of the Empire, a standard Barone was declared. There has not been any significant change since then. This is because an effort has been made to preserve "the right Barone" in order to maintain ability to communicate with comrades, most of whom you meet rarely because of life on a spaceship or orbital city.

One of the most remarkable features of the new complex grammar of Barone is in the change of noun cases. Here is a table of noun case changes in Barone. Though there is a system of writing in Barone called ath, we have replaced it with the roman alphabet here.

	Type 1	Type2	Type3	Type4
Subjective	abh	lamh	duc	saidiac
Accusative	abe	lame	dul	saidel
Pocessive	bar	lamr	dur	saider
Dative	bari	lami	duri	Saideri
Processive	Bare	Lame	Dugh	Saidegh
Ablative	Abhar	Lamhar	Dusar	Saidisar
Instrumental	Bale	Lamle	Dule	saidele

Author's Afterword

So anyways, "Crest of the Stars" which spanned three books despite the fact that it was the debut work of an unknown author, ends here. Did you enjoy it?

I planned on writing about an interstellar war when I was coming up with ideas for this book. But it would be hardly interesting to write about a war between galactic nations that are just an expanded version of nations on Earth. Instead I wanted to put an interstellar Empire, which requires the expansion of mankind onto numerous systems as a prerequisite, against an expanded version of the current idea of a nation. So I created the Empire of Mankind by the Abh as the type of nation that cannot exist on Earth, and created the race of Abh to hold the Empire together.

I like to think that I created a rather unique Empire.

I created the young man known as Jinto to guide the reader through this Empire. Since he knew some things, and was unaware of some others, he was the perfect guide. He is without a doubt the main character in "Crest of the Stars".

The reason I say so is because the guide to the guide, the girl Lafiel made too much of an impression, and Jinto didn't stand out very much (LoL). I would feel sorry for him if I didn't state so here.

But it couldn't be helped. I don't feel as if I created the character of Lafiel, though it is more or less the same with all of my other characters, too. There are even characters that I didn't plan to put in the novel, but came out on their own and didn't work out.

From the perspective of acting as a guide to the Empire, Crest of the Stars is still insufficient. It wasn't able to show the side of the Abh as traders at all.

Also, it is finally time for the war to begin, but (To those of you who read volumes one and two. You didn't actually think that I would be able to finish the war at this pace, did you?) at this point I don't really mind if the series ends here. When I finished writing this novel, I felt that this story was completed.

Even I, the author, do not know the future of the Kin of the Stars right now. All I know is that the Abh will be exterminated if they lose in the war. An Abh who is tied to a planet is not an Abh, and most importantly they would become genetically unstable and die out as a race within a few generations if genetic engineering was forbidden.

Will the Abh get exterminated, or will they bring a sleepy peace to the Galaxy? I would like to see what happens. But, as embarrassing as it is for me to say, I also want to leave a future to them.

Writing stuff like that makes it sound as if Crest of the Stars was the product of a great deal of thought LoL. The truth is exactly as I told you at the end of volume one; I set the background as I wrote the story.

I started writing this during the period considered "the winter of science fiction" (though science fiction is still in a slump right now), so I wrote the story as a science fiction story you can read light heartedly despite the times. I aimed for 400 pages or so to make it more likely for it to get published, but I realized that it was impossible on the third day of writing.

"Then I'll have to keep it under 600 pages somehow..." I told myself, but it immediately became "800 pages can go in one thick novel". I finally gave up on that idea when, after writing 550 pages, I realized that I was about halfway through the story. Though I actually ended up writing another 700 pages before reaching the end.

Both the background settings and the vocabulary changed a great deal during the writing process. For example, Lafiel was "Candidate for Space Force Officer" instead of "Star Forces Flyer Trainee", and Captain Lexshue was also a "Captain" instead of a hectocommander. When I reread my writing after awhile, that portion seemed to stand out. That is when I created the terms "Star Force" and "Flyer".

The concept of planar space and Barone were relatively well thought out in the beginning. I do like to think of myself as a science fiction writer, so I devised planar space travel to avoid dismissing faster-than-light travel as "warping".

There are several reasons why I added the Barone for a word after the actual word. One reason for it is the fact that I wanted an exotic atmosphere in the book. [Translator's note: There is actually quite a bit more Barone in the Japanese books than the English, but they were only included in the translated versions on their first appearance]

Jinto is set as a person three hundred years ahead of us in time, so you can just think of him as a person from the future. But Lafiel is more than two thousand years ahead of us. If you don't know why this gap exists, do some research on the works of Hendrick Antoon, Lorentz. Please don't ask the writer, I don't know LoL. I didn't want to fill the book with foreign words.

Though there was no way around using plasma and energy. I believed that Plasma had a translated term called “Denrishitsu” but it was not in the Koujiin so if I were to annotate it with Barone, the reader would not be able to understand it. I thought it would be a little too unkind to use the obscure kanji for a common term and annotate it with a fictitious language.

Speaking of Barone, its nature was finally revealed in volume two (it was, right?). I prepared the extras this time for those people who still don’t understand how Barone was formed. Anyone who bought all three volumes at once and are about to read through them should not read the extras, they contain spoilers.

Anyway, it’s the last volume so I’m going to fill the end with thanks.

Mr. Masahiro Noda’s recommendation letter was wasted on the likes of me. Thank you very much. I’ve only met you once when I greeted you, but you taught me how great space operas are through the stories you published in science fiction magazines, especially your “Portrait of a science fiction hero”. I can’t forget the days in grade school when I would read the episodes of “Potrait of a science fiction hero” from the old issues of SF magazine during the hot summers.

I would also like to thank Mr. Koumi Akai for drawing the cover illustrations despite his busy schedule. I’m sure that most of the people who bought the book were drawn in by the cover illustrations. (Are you one of them?)

And we mustn’t forget the people I troubled for the Barone annotations. At first I was reasonable with the annotations, but I went berserk later. I placed annotations on things that didn’t need Barone annotations, and the pages were filled. I owe my editor, Mr. N a great deal for organizing the barrage of annotations. Of course Mr. N helped me out a great deal in all respects, not just with the annotations.

Also, I’m sure it was hell for the publishers to print the book. Thank you very much. I do believe that less is more with annotations, so please don’t give up on me.

Of course I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for sticking with me for this long. I would be even more grateful if you could write me your thoughts on the novel.

I had a great deal of fun writing “Crest of the Stars”. I’m sure you found it enjoyable if I was able to communicate even a tenth of the fun I had to you.

Well then, in hopes of meeting again somewhere else.

May 10th, 1996