

The Stirring Among the Stars

Book Two of the Dread Naught Trilogy

By Dylan Sanchez

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In Memory of Kaitlyn Anne Fox.

You deserved better. I'm not sure what else to say, other than that you were loved, you will always be remembered among the community, and that your memory will be recalled in some small way by all who read this.

In Memory of Matt Logie.

I never knew you as well as I should have liked to, but I'll always remember goofing off together in #Skullrant.

To My Wife.

You forever remain the most incredible and wondrous part of my life. I am eternally indebted to you for all you have done to make my dreams a reality, and I am eternally grateful that you love me.

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Vigilance

Sixteen years before the formation of Dread Naught ...

Eighteen minutes ago, the facility lighting had gone down. Fifteen minutes ago, a storm of gunfire had erupted at the main entrance and quickly made its way inside. Three minutes ago, a deathly silence had fallen.

The armored corpses of a well-armed private security detail lay strewn up and down the halls, four dozen bodies bearing ragged bullet wounds in their heads or chests. Blood still seeped from the corpses, intermingling as it crept outward across the white tile, creating a macabre pattern across the floor. The dead formed a morbid trail from the entrance of the facility, through long corridors, and across sterile chambers all the way to the door of the central office. Crimson splatters and streaks, empty casings, spent shells, and exploded munitions littered every corner.

A man in a tailored suit sat in the dark central office, tense and pale. The man was paralyzed with fear, his grip shaking around a pistol he had never actually used. A lone figure entered the office and paused, their gaze scanning the room before calmly removing the weapon from his trembling hand. The figure then took a seat in the corner, aiming their weapon at the man's head. After a moment, the stranger crossed their legs in an easy manner that, under the circumstances, felt almost ghastly.

“Who are you?” the man asked. His voice was devoid of all the authority of his former office. Now he spoke in little more than a tremulous plea.

The figure's shoulders moved in silent amusement. “You're likely in shock right now, but that was a remarkably obtuse question. You know who I am. You and all your lackeys were warned. You failed to disarm and surrender. You have lives to answer for.”

“You won't take me here—I have a complement of sixty—”

“—No, you don’t. Every member of your security detail that was within the facility when I arrived has already responded. Ten of them were wise enough to surrender; forty-eight others are currently marinating in their own vital fluids.”

“You’re supposed to be the ‘good’ one here, aren’t you?” the nervous man cried out, “You’ve killed more people than I have just getting to me!”

Unseen beneath their helmet, the figure sneered. “You should know better than to think a reductive splinter of philosophy would help you here. You filled your pockets with illicit money, promised a T’Hròstag contact something you couldn’t deliver, and fifty-five people are dead as a result.

“I looked into the eyes of those who survived, and what I saw there is that you have been granted a great deal of mercy. I came here to negotiate. I was the best and last chance you had, and still you chose to pile more corpses on the altar of your self-interest. Of the four guards left mobile, one of them is clambering through the maintenance hatchways above us. The other three are creeping up the hall outside, contemplating their fates. Should any of them continue, they will join their compatriots in death.

“You had a choice. They have all had choices. You created this charnel house, not I.”

The shadowed figure made a swift motion. Their blunt pistol flashed, illuminating their armored form for an instant. Blood began to drip from a hole in the ceiling, slapping against the floor with a funerary rhythm. The figure lowered their pistol as they spoke again.

“Consequences,” Bryluen muttered.

1. Politesse and Perspectives

Four months had passed since the discovery of the great tomb on Gru'Thiall. The Dreaded had attacked Qixing and Human worlds with increased fervor and growing numbers.

Study of the Stones had still not yielded information on their purpose. No known method could determine their true composition. The Stones were, however, discovered to be drawn to one another as they were drawn to the Dreaded. Upon touching they would seamlessly merge into a combined form, the patterns on each Stone interweaving and becoming more complex. The import of this discovery remained uncertain.

Dread Naught had participated in a score of skirmishes, evacuations, and intercept missions as The Dreaded attacked larger colonies and some fortified positions in pursuit of the Stones. Seven more Aeshmas—the massive sort of beast Dread Naught had battled beneath the Gru'Thiall tomb—had been encountered by both Human and Qixing forces, and with each assault The Dreaded were more numerous and coordinated.

For the first time in over ninety years, Humankind was at war. Funding programs, charity events, and recruitment drives were in full force as the Astral Marines brought The Dreaded to battle.

The Qixing Commonwealth's armed forces had so far endured the most attacks and, as a precaution, the Qixing had evacuated some of

their outer colonies. The T'Hròstag rarely communicated the details of

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their internal affairs to species other than the Ly Aulth, but had nonetheless admitted to a number of attacks requiring the attention of their Legionnaires.

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The *Atet* coasted toward Proxima Centauri, rings of defensive platforms and patrol squadrons scanning the small ship at regular intervals. Gradually the craft passed through tighter and tighter layers of defenses, converging on the central axis around which the defenses orbited. Kirby aimed the *Atet* toward a docking berth aboard the H.S.S.B.C. *Cybele*. For security reasons, the *Cybele* altered its location relative to Proxima Centauri each day, and the surrounding system defenses shifted their pattern with each new location.

The Battle Cruiser was a long, grim silhouette of straight lines and hard corners. The craft bore an impressive array of heavy weaponry in thirty main weapon mounts, enough to threaten a planetary garrison or firebase. The *Cybele*, however, was not intended as a warship, and had actually sacrificed twenty weapons for increased living spaces, small craft docks, and numerous other amenities.

The *Cybele* was most commonly known as CSOE Headquarters.

Bryluen calmly rehashed the earlier team briefing as she adjusted the high collar of her white blouse. “Again: the Press are clearly demarcated, and you already know what you can tell them. Any CSOE personnel, feel free to chit-chat—if they’re here, they already know your blood type and underwear size by heart. Let Bel’Wa lead on interactions with the Qixing entourage.”

“W-w-why would they ... know that?” Runner blustered.

“A joke, I will think.” Nico paused and thought for a moment. “... I retracted my previous confidence in that statement.”

The entire team wore their semi-formal dress attire, similarly to when the Qixing delegation had visited Raven’s Landing months earlier. In addition to his dark brown suit and creme shirt, Runner wore a single ear cuff encrusted with black opals and had his hair neatly braided and woven with decorative platinum spirals. His facial hair had become ever more precisely maintained and neat, the last subtle vestiges of his life on the run having already disappeared.

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Vort wore a creme vest with golden epaulets at the joints of his wings. His coloration had become more and more vivid over time, as he had settled into life in the Milky Way and become more comfortable with his surroundings. Kirby had added reasonable heels, a pair of rings, an ankle bracelet, and eye shadow to her green ensemble. In the last couple months, her tattoos had spread across across one collar bone and deeper along her waistline, while the various designs and images on her legs had crawled several inches up her thighs. Her still recent personal circumstances as a member of Dread Naught had re-ignited her need and desire to decorate her skin, and it showed. A recent extension to the tattoo behind her ear glowed subtly in low light.

Bryluen wore her CSOE badge on her charcoal jacket while her eyelashes, nose ring, and the tips of her hair glittered in metallic, ruby red. Rather than letting her hair settle into its natural state of vague continuity, it was meticulously curled back onto her head in an asymmetrical wave.

Nico's gray suit and suspenders were now accompanied by a short-brimmed hat, and spats adorned his shoes. He, otherwise, appeared in precisely the same condition as always. He never shaved, but his facial hair never grew or changed either. The static nature of his appearance only usually became apparent in photographs, where it was eerie to behold.

Overall, most of Dread Naught bore additions that heightened their state of dress in a way none present would consider showy. True formal dress, in all its quibbles and pageantry, would wait the three months from that day until Human, Qixing, and T'hròstag leadership were to gather at a Grand Council on Torva'Ang.

Bel'Wa, meanwhile, wore a lavish lavender robe festooned in fluttering banners displaying her various merits and medals. Though Qixing could see infrared light, they could only perceive the lighter blues and purples of the Human-visible light spectrum. Among other Qixing, Bel'Wa's eyes were thus considered black. Because of this, the purple tone of her diplomatic robe was chosen only because of how a Human would see her eye color. To Bel'Wa and her kin the robe was simply dark, aside from the shimmering way the fabric reflected infrared light.

Her lips, nails, and face were painted in swirling, iridescent

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patterns of archaic Qixing verse that Bryluen had spent a couple hours helping her apply the previous night. She wore towering platform shoes, which projected the digital recreation of splashing water around her feet as she walked. Her hair was suspended above and behind her head by a series of copper-colored clasps and wires in a simplified rendition of the Ho'Xal dynastic sigil. Her octagonal lip rings had been swapped for triangular, iridescent piercings that matched the writing on her lips. Jewelry made of fine chains dangled from her ears down to her shoulders, while a matching net of gems and thin coral tubing was draped from her neck down to her midriff. Each tube was tuned to the same musical chord, and generated a melodious jangling as she moved about.

Back at Raven's Landing, Kirby had asked if Bel'Wa was possibly over-dressing. The Storm Mother had simply laughed and stated, "Oh, darling: soon you will see what is considered formal for a member of the royal line. On that day, you will have no questions."

Bryluen added a final note to her briefing as Kirby began to exchange call-and-response synchronization signals with the *Cybele's* docking crew. "Remember, there are two T'hròstag observers here. Pretend they aren't present. That's key: Just ignore them."

Runner grunted, prompting Bel'Wa to raise her chin slightly. "Are you glad to see T'hròstag?"

A snarl passed across his face. "That would be a different grunt."

Vort wheeled an eye toward the vigilante. "YOU ... HAVE A HISTORY, I TAKE IT?"

"Yes," he sighed. "I d-don't intend to discuss it n-n-now."

"Then I suppose it's a fine thing that you're not even supposed to look at them." Bel'Wa fixed him with a stern look. She blinked slowly. The dim light of the disembarkation bay glimmered through the clear beads scattered among her eyelashes like water droplets. "And you won't. We are going to behave as befits our station. Pleasant speech and pleasant company, while Bryl handles the business. I'll open with the delegation of my people, and from there it's the same rules you observed with Rur'Thu's delegation. I will say, however, that Yiortx'Pa is an irredeemable q'ornk."

"Fuckin' hell, Bel'Wa, what'd she do!?" Kirby called out from the cockpit. Bryluen's laughter could be heard in the background. "I

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never thought I'd get to hear *that* word in the wild! And from you!"

"This word will have an unpleasant connotation, clearly," Nicadzim muttered, "What did it mean?"

"That's one way to put it," Bel'Wa laughed. "Well, if you must know ... it's a word for—oh, well, Humans don't have those. Not sure how much I'll need to explain. Anyway, Yiortx'Pa is awful, you'll see."

Bryluen spoke up in a sly tone, "I can definitely explain the insult, but if you don't already understand it you're probably not going to enjoy hearing it first from me."

The *Atet's* ramp hissed open to reveal most of Dread Naught laughing uproariously as they descended. Kirby's face was a bright red as she struggled to suppress a loud snort. Vort kept two eyes on Bel'Wa, doing his best to comprehend Bryluen's jocular description of the anatomical feature denoted by the Qixing insult.

Bryluen shrugged. "Now you all know why Bel'Wa is so keen for me to keep up on my Immuno-boosters."

Kirby nearly fell off her heels as she began to cackle. She held onto Runner's shoulder for balance while he clapped a hand over his eyes. "B-B-Bryl, holy shit! Ohhh, those were not the words I wanted to f-f-first say here!"

Nicadzim simply sighed, resigned to the burden of his new knowledge. The smirking Operative led the group from the dock into the nearest corridor. Bel'Wa strode beside her with four fingers resting on Bryluen's outstretched forearm, faintly containing a grin. Due to Bel'Wa's shoes the pair were, for once, nearly the same height, and her shoes splashed and plopped through non-existent water as she strolled along.

The interior of the *Cybele* was one of the most secure locations in known space. The occasional pair of gray-armored Marines could be seen roaming the halls on intentionally unpredictable patrol routes. The true bulk of the security was, however, far more subtle. By the time Dread Naught walked from the docking bay to the main perimeter corridor of the vessel, they had received three full inspections from unseen surveillance equipment.

In one of several secret rooms between decks, personnel assessed each batch of scan data. This not only included three-dimensional scans of each individual, but noted weapons, unseen articles of armored

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clothing, artificial or gene-modded organs, metabolic variances, and anything else that could possibly merit attention. In addition, any part of the *Cybele* could be instantly subdivided by bulkheads and barriers, allowing explosives to be isolated, poisonous gasses to be vented, and individuals to be contained. Hidden passages allowed specialists and Marines to enter a locked-off section of the ship and handle whatever threat was present.

A pair of Marines nodded to Bryluen as they passed, leading the team on a path she had trod hundreds of times before. The main meeting hall was located in the aft of the *Cybele*. As with most Human starships, the halls were bare and efficient, evenly lit by gentle overhead lights and containing minimal decoration aside from embossed flourishes along the bottom of the walls. In contrast to most craft, the halls of the *Cybele* were clad in soft blue carpet.

A fair number of high-profile individuals were present today: veteran reporters, one of the members of CSOE High Command, and an entire senior Qixing diplomatic delegation among them. The primary purpose of this Summit was to negotiate Dread Naught's role in future joint actions and interaction with the Qixing military and civilian hierarchies. This endeavor was being chronicled and recorded by the pair of T'hròstag observers present.

Dread Naught rounded a final corner, coming face to face with the wide corridor leading to the meeting hall. The walls were clad in decorated metal paneling, and lined with paintings of various Human worlds. Golden trim designs appeared on the carpet, and pressure plates caused the floor to glow beneath the feet of all making their way to the meeting chamber. At the end of the hall was a wooden hatch, etched with a painstaking map of the planet Earth. Great masterworks including the Pyramids of Giza, Atlantic Nova Corridor, and the Saharan Hydroponic Spire were embossed across the map as a brief demonstration of achievements on Humankind's home world.

Dread Naught had been scheduled to arrive after the Qixing and members of the Press had settled in. Therefore as the door opened, the team heard the rapid beeps and hums of camera equipment. A pair of Marines ensured the Human press kept a comfortable distance as the gathered reporters clamored to address the Strike Team.

The Meeting hall itself was a lavishly appointed space of

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flowing, polished wood furnishings. Circular dining tables and smaller private meeting rooms were arranged around a pearlescent dance floor. Just above the dance floor, a four-tiered chandelier glimmered and flashed, each crystal carved with the geographic details of a different Human settlement. At the rear of the chamber was a raised marble stage featuring the flags of the CSOE, Astral Marine Corps., Terran Parliament, and Planetary Arbiters' Court. To the right-hand side were the circular seals of the Qixing Gate Sentinels, Interior Guard, and Ho'Xal dynasty. Triangular standees at the left end of the row of flags displayed the martial sigils of the T'hròstag Chancellery and Praetorian Council. Bronze busts of each current member of CSOE High Command stood before the Human flags, each containing hidden sound equipment.

Each of the reporters gathered before Dread Naught at the door bore a glowing, yellow sash labeled "Press". A matching flag stood atop each camera drone jostling for the perfect angle. One of the drones was being manually piloted by someone seated in the dining area, a yellow video headset denoting their purpose.

As practiced, Dread Naught took three paces inside the meeting room, and then stopped in an arc behind Bryluen. She placed her hand over the fingers Bel'Wa had laid gently on her forearm, and took a calm breath. Six reporters from across Human space, and two from Qixing networks, aimed their recording equipment toward the now well-known group. Kirby tried her best to keep from blushing, while Runner's face was serious as he focused on following Bryl's peculiarly specific instructions: "Don't have your hands on anyone when we enter, Runner. No need to start speculation."

Nico retained his normally stoic manner, while Vort looked about excitedly with all three eyes. One camera drone focused in on Bryluen's hand where it overlapped Bel'Wa's. This was the first time the pair of them had been together for any sort of event, and that in and of itself was news to some.

Bryluen spoke in an even tone, "Good evening, everyone. I hope you're all doing well. I take it you all have some idea of who we are?" She grinned at the chorus of chuckles from the Press Pool. "Dread Naught is proud to represent Humanity in the war against the burgeoning threat. We believe completely in the jurisprudence of this summit, and will precisely abide by all of its decisions and requirements.

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Thank you.”

The pair of Marines subtly motioned for the Press to part and allow Dread Naught to pass. Waiting behind them was a traditional Qixing delegation, arrayed in a bevy of colorful formal robes. The lead diplomat was a squat, midori-skinned woman with her hair arrayed into a series of vertical loops above and behind her head like a dorsal fin. Her red robe rattled with chains of beads that dangled down to her knees. A male and a female *yolnfa* stood behind her in brick red and turquoise splendor. The two secondary diplomats, clad in tangerine robes, stood quietly behind their superior. An Aqua-clad Sentinel stood at all four corners of the formation, armored but unarmed. Formal greetings had already been established by the host of the event, but Bel’Wa intended to break the ice with the Qixing delegates before Dread Naught could engage casually with the other attendees.

The Storm Mother dipped her head diagonally. “Good evening, madame *Yiorn’Rut-Xpah*. May we have found you in the arms of fortune.”

The diplomat’s expression darkened every-so-slightly as Bel’Wa spoke. She gave a subtle, diagonal nod. “Lady *Belzxilenth’Wa*. Fortune is rare to bring one to a war summit ... Regardless, greetings.”

Yiortx’Pa’s crimson eyes flicked to regard *Bryluen*. “Operative *Branok*, destiny calls as always.”

Bryluen’s face smiled every so slightly, a mere raising of her cheeks. “As always, I am ready to answer.”

Yiortx’Pa lightly steepled their hands for a moment and then turned away. *Bryluen* made a subtle head motion to Dread Naught and led them to a table a comfortable distance from the Qixing delegation.

Bryluen and Bel’Wa both relaxed and turned back toward the group, dropping their arms and holding hands in the manner to which Humans were accustomed. *Bryluen* motioned for Dread Naught to draw close and spoke quietly, “God, I hate that woman. But she’s a damn good negotiator and doesn’t let her toxic personal manner get in the way of business.”

Kirby’s brow furrowed. “Wait, what? I thought that went well! That was her? What am I missing?”

Bel’Wa momentarily made a face of disbelief for a moment. “Oh, right courtly intrigue. So introductions are complicated—but

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suffice it to say Yiortx'Pa went with the bitchiest pauses possible, and telling someone that destiny calls is the most proper way of indicating that both of you have important things to do that aren't speaking to one another. That's just not how you do a polite introduction."

Runner rubbed his nose. "O-okay, so do you-u have a history, or is she just like that all the ti-ime?"

"Eh, it's just her," Bryluen muttered, "She's rude as hell and difficult to deal with, but she cleans up the moment you start talking about things she considers important. She'd make a better T'hròstag."

"You were right, Bel'Wa," Kirby drawled, "She's just a q'ornk."

Bryluen smirked. "Alright, less genitalia-apellations, more keeping up appearances. I want you folks to meet Councilwoman Arai. After that, at least a couple reporters are here for personal bios so go ahead and tell them what you will on that. We're still in the preliminary greeting and briefing stage here for a bit, so feel free to chat with the Qixing as well. If they're inside the room, they're fair game. It looks good for us to be seen conversing with our allies, so do that at least once, and remember that your lapel pins deaden sound recording—so you don't have to worry about eavesdropping."

Bryluen flicked her eyes to one side. "Don't look, but in that corner are the two observers. T'hròstag are very particular about their job roles, so do not acknowledge them. They are here to observe and report back to the Chancellery. They will not engage with you, and any attempts to do so will damage their report. Ignore them."

Runner's eyes flashed in the direction of the observers. "Tha-at's not as easy as you make it s—"

"—Runner, I say this with affection and caring: I will kick your ass if you stare at them. I will drag you out of here by your hair. This is the big leagues, folks, we aren't fucking around."

Kirby blanched, her already pale skin becoming ghostly. "Oh fuck, okay. Don't fuck it up, got it. Okay."

Bel'Wa lightly touched Kirby's forearm. "Breathe. This stage only lasts another ..."

"—Hour," Bryluen offered. "After that, Councilwoman Arai issues the opening statement and declaration of the minutes. Then it's on to the actual schedule of negotiation and deliberation. Let me introduce you all to the councilwoman—the Press has more than enough pictures

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of our huddle.”

As the group spread apart, Runner’s eyes flicked over toward the two observers in the corner, a split-second flash of anger pulsing through his mind.

The T’hròstag were poster children for just how varied intelligent life could be. Their bodies were little more than hanging sacks containing all of their organs. Three ridged legs branched out from the middle of the body sack, and each ended in six suction-cup toes. A flexible neck tube led from the top of the organ sack to an upward-facing maw of sifting fibers, somewhat like a whale’s baleen. Along the thick rim of the mouth was a ring of squared, red sensory organs loosely analogous to eyes. Three whip-like arms were spaced evenly around the base of the neck, each tipped with four thin tendrils.

Their skin—almost always a pale brown or gray shade—was soft, vinyl-like, and pocked in large follicles. From each follicle emerged a hair about five millimeters thick. These shaggy hairs (as well as the T’hròstags’ sifting fibers) were subtly translucent and came in various metallic shades from platinum, to rose gold, to a wide array of lurid yellows. Finally, small tufts of coarse whiskers lined each toe and tendril.

The tripodal aliens walked by loping along such that their bodies did not bob up and down. They constantly tilted their “heads” in loose, swinging motions in order to best comprehend their environment. T’hròstag excelled at traversing uneven surfaces, and could naturally adhere to severe slopes and slick materials. Though not fleet of foot they could climb and leap far more capably than Humans or Qixing, and their lack of a skeleton (aside from internal, cartilage-like structural supports) made them outstandingly elastic and flexible.

The average height of a grown T’hròstag was anywhere from a single meter to two and a half meters, and thus any group of the beings varied immensely in scale. Regardless, even the largest of T’hròstag were light—their weight rarely exceeded one-hundred eighty kilograms.

The T’hròstag had evolved on a high-gravity world with massive tectonic activity. Numerous micro-fauna rode the thermal streams and lived among low-hanging ash clouds, allowing the T’hròstag to filter the air for sustenance. Their boneless and fluid-less anatomy made them less susceptible to gravity and temperature extremes, and they were much

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less easily disoriented than their bipedal counterparts. Breathing nodes dotted along their bodies filtered out unwanted particulates through a series of tubes just under the skin. When in the presence of a Human or Qixing-breathable atmosphere—such as at this summit—they wore small caps over their breathing nodes. Thin pipes led from each cap to a small tank containing the gasses and particles required by the T'hròstags' respiratory system.

The aliens spoke via a series of valves and cartilaginous pipes between each arm that sounded like some exotic form of pan flute or didgeridoo. T'hròstag diplomats learned to imitate the languages of other species in terms of chords and modified exhalations, a feat most beings could not hope to attempt.

The T'hròstag reproduced asexually by generating polyps. Being thus well and truly genderless, they were uniformly referred to by gender-neutral pronouns: most often *ne*, *nem*, *nir*, *nirs*, and *nemself*. This also meant that their cultures had developed without a true concept of family, and that physical intimacy was a wholly foreign idea.

They found humidity and wetness harmful to their bodily tissues, and therefore regarded moisture as inherently morbid. For this reason, only the most strong-minded T'hròstag could be sent to observe Human and Qixing affairs outside of a masquerade: it was simply a fact of life that the shining eyes, wet tongues, glistening teeth, and various other bodily fluids of their bipedal neighbors were stomach-turning. The semi-aquatic Qixing were particularly harsh offenders to the degree that sale of their pornography was banned in T'hròstag space on grounds of obscenity.

The two observers were each around a meter and a half high, their heads swaying back and forth as if their necks were broken. The T'hròstag thought nothing of garments other than as a denotation of rank or defense against the elements. As a result, the two observers wore only scarf-like banners around their necks, indicating their purpose. Runner looked away after only a mere instant. The T'hròstag were not a species he had seen in a neutral interaction like this before. Runner realized Bryluen must have been aware of his reservations on the matter, and had thus catered her warnings and instructions to him. With that in mind, he took a deep breath and resolved to enjoy himself. He turned and followed the other members of Dread Naught.

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Councilwoman Arai was thin and ethereal, with rich olive skin and dark, almond-shaped eyes surrounded by bold kajal. Her high cheekbones and long nose gave her face an officious severity. She wore an elegant mint-green gown, and her black hair was cradled by a hijab of glimmering Qixing fabric.

She grinned as Bryluen approached. “Bryl, so good to see you! The hair is new, the eyelashes are great, I love that nose ring ... is this a dry run for the Grand Council?”

“You could say that,” Bryluen offered, “I figure it’s at least worth inspiring the speculation columnists in a fashion mag or two.”

The councilwoman placed the knuckles of one hand against her cheek. “Yes, they send someone to every event they’re allowed at. They pay entirely too much attention to us.”

Bel’Wa turned toward the rest of Dread Naught. “Bryl’s known Azzy here for ... forty five years now?”

Bryluen nodded. “We got matched in the same dorm at the CSOE academy, where we quickly bonded over our shared ability to remain completely silent in study for days at a time. This is Asmat Nishi Arai of CSOE High Command. She is a Xeno-Lingual Historian, probably best known for her writings linking T’hröstag Oulchük mysticism to contemporary Loth Tùrn Card-Missive codes. But, most importantly, she is my oldest friend.”

Asmat smiled. “It’s an honor to see all of you in person. Bryl, it’s been an age since we’ve been able to spend actual time together. Events like this make me wish you had an excuse for another bachelorette party.”

Bryluen smirked. “Me, too. Still one of the best damn brawls I’ve ever had. Ma’am, if I may speak of business, what are your initial thoughts on this summit?”

Asmat grimaced and glanced over toward Yiortx’Pa. “Things will go well and equitably. I believe Dread Naught will be permitted full operational capacity; Gru’Thiall proved the advantage and effectiveness of such an arrangement. I simply wish I were to be engaging with more pleasant company for the duration of this event.”

Bryluen grunted. “Well, I’m certain the High Commander knows he owes you one after this. I have no doubt the summit will go well.”

A slight scattering of voices flowed through the room as a bright

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red messenger drone hurtled toward the councilwoman. It stopped before her, and projected a Priority message into the air.

Councilwoman Arai's eyes widened. "Today may have more in common with your bachelorette party than we thought."

2. Disturbance and Destruction

The councilwoman paused a moment. “Operative Branok, my apologies: You and Dread Naught are to report immediately to the planetary Capital of Lurcqh Olnah for disaster assessment. The T’hròstag have ... asked for our help.” Asmat drew a tab from a concealed pouch amid the folds of her gown, and sent off a flurry of communique with rapid hand movements. “The Dreaded have devastated one of their cities and withdrawn. Their armed forces were crushed. I need you to hit the ground and find out all you can. I have already sent out orders to mobilize the rescue and salvage fleets, so that’s not your concern.”

Bryluen’s brow furrowed. “How bad does it have to be for the T’hròstag to want us in their space?”

“Very. Very bad. We have not seen an attack on this scale before. The capital is ... mostly gone. Go now, and find out how and why this has happened.”

“Yes, ma’am. Dread Naught, *Atet*, now!”

Dread Naught ran back up the corridors of the *Cybele*, removing jewelry and outerwear as they went. Bursting out into the docking bay, they jumped onto the *Atet’s* lowering ramp and proceeded inside. The team’s armor was stored in a case near the end of the disembarkation bay; Bryluen always ensured the team’s equipment was kept nearby

when they left Raven's Landing for just such eventualities.

Brylueen slid the case open and drew out the thin stand holding

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her armor. She kicked off her shoes, cast her jacket behind her, and replaced each of her garments with the relevant armor pieces in rapid succession.

“Of fuckin’ course,” Kirby said as she noisily kicked off a shoe. “The one time I ain’t in a sports bra and shorts.”

Vort was already hanging in his harness. “WELL, AT LEAST YOU GET TO PUT SOMETHING ON BEFORE BEING BOTHERED BY MONSTERS THIS TIME.”

“True. Guess I’ll warn everybody when I next change things up, so you know some shit’s gonna go down ahead of time.”

Bryluen was already seated in the cockpit and fully equipped. She had spent longer than some of her team mates had been alive taking her armor on and off. “And here I was, only disappointed that I can never wear my armed clothes on the *Cybele*.”

“Armed ... clothes?” Nicadzim queried.

“Oh, yeah. You would be amazed at the things I own.”

Bel’Wa chuckled as she finished restraining her hair and snapped her helmet on. Within five minutes, the team’s clothing littered the bay and each member of Dread Naught was in their harness, armed and armored.

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The *Atet* left the *Cybele* far more swiftly than it had arrived, racing back out to the edge of the system where the Proxima Centauri Compression Gate floated in silent vigil. The Gate took a moment longer than normal to fire up and open the way—a common occurrence when passing between Human and T’hròstag gates. After mandatory stops at the borders of Human—and then T’hròstag—space, they jumped to their destination. Even as they first began to pass into the target system, Bryluen knew things had gone terribly wrong.

The sturdy defensive emplacements around the Lurcqh Olnah gate were shredded and mangled, and the warped husks of hemispherical warships drifted to and fro. Before them, a large piece of the gate’s now-gutted firebase spun apart. The drones attending the gate took over and began to gather now bite-sized chunks of the firebase into a cluster that could be easily cleaned away.

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It was clear that a full-scale battle had occurred, and it had gone miserably for the T'hròstag in an alarmingly short amount of time. No ship had survived the encounter, leaving the wreckage of over two dozen craft—including a trio of cruisers—spread out across the system. Forensic teams would later use black box data to determine that the entire battle, from gate-dilation until the Dreaded reached the orbit of Lurcq Olnah, had lasted only twelve minutes.

T'hròstag vessels were aggressive craft with primarily front-mounted weaponry intended to end a battle as soon as it was started. They were fearless, capable, and rigidly organized. It was unheard of for them to lose such a force so quickly. Kirby swallowed loudly as she took the *Atet* on an express course for Lurcq Olnah. Without a word, Bryluen relayed the *Atet*'s display to the screen in the disembarkation bay. Dread Naught watched in tense silence as Kirby passed the deathly remains of the entire orbital defense force.

Vort made a sound like a chorus of deflating balloons. "I'VE ONLY EVER READ ABOUT T'HRÒSTAG STARSHIPS. STILL: THEY WOULD HAVE PUT UP A FIGHT. I JUST DON'T KNOW HOW SOMETHING COULD DO THIS TO THEM SO QUICKLY."

"I've led skirmishes against them," Bel'Wa muttered, "and every time has been a distinct challenge. This many ships ... it'd take at least forty, fifty Sjorthursars minimum—one of the largest space armadas ever assembled. Even assuming we've never seen the same Sjorthursar twice in all recorded encounters, we'd only barely surpass that number. The Dreaded simply haven't been shown to possess that many craft ... or to attack gate defenses."

Kirby's voice came from the overhead speaker, "I mean, we'll have to see more ... but we knew shit was gonna start goin' up in flames at some point."

"IT HAS BEEN UP IN FLAMES," Vort retorted, "THE CONCERN IS THE RATE OF ESCALATION. THIS IS BEYOND SUDDEN. A MASS ASSAULT ON AN ENTRENCHED WORLD ENTIRELY WITHIN SUCH A SHORT TIME FRAME ... IT SHOULDN'T BE POSSIBLE."

"The Big One." Nico took a deep breath.

"Y-You say that like you know so-omething." Runner shifted in his harness.

"I did not ... I felt something when we are passing into the

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system. A coming spoor of a presence, like it will be leaving a wake in space itself.”

Bryluen grunted. “We still haven’t even seen what happened to the ground forces. Even with an orbital strike, whatever Stone the Dreaded were after would be kept in a low level if the T’hròstag knew about it. The T’hròstag would have fought for every inch of tunnel. Numbers alone wouldn’t do the job. Not this quickly.”

After twenty minutes of travel, Dread Naught drew close enough to see the ring of orbital turret debris that now decorated the planet. Like almost all inhabited worlds, Lurcqh Olnah was defended by a Particle Net—in practice, this was an automated defense system that incinerated anything attempting to breach orbit without clearance. This could include anything from meteors, to smuggling vessels, to individual projectiles fired by hostile craft. Without such a defense, almost any object could be accelerated into a planet fast enough to deal a catastrophic, if not outright world-ending, impact. After all, the actual mass of an object only faintly mattered if it could be fired at a hundred kilometers per second. T’hròstag Particle Nets were infamously responsive, able to clean the entire orbit of a planet of space debris in a matter of minutes. Only a rapid and systematic dismantling of the system would have enabled a successful orbital strike.

Kirby took the *Atet* down through the thick, gray atmosphere of the world. The T’hròstag built their cities as vast, crescent-shaped arcologies, each containing the essentials of living for millions of individuals. T’hròstag arcologies were some of the largest artificial structures known and were designed to be both self-sustaining and able to withstand an assault. Anything infeasible for inclusion within the arcology lay just outside the main structure; art installations, parks, and other colorful luxuries bloomed around each arcology’s base like a flower field.

Lurcqh Olnah was an excellent example of T’hròstag city-planning and engineering. Several other arcologies were visible on the descent, each truly massive in scale and spaced apart with careful consideration for the surrounding ecosystem. The areas of non-essential construction sprawled over the world’s orchid soil in an eye-dazzling vista. The obvious neatness and nicety of the scene made the *Atet*’s intended destination all the more evident.

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Riür Luk Tahn, the capital of Lurcq Olnah, could now be only generously described as a city. The majestic structure lay in ruin, millions of tonnes of sturdy construction sundered and burning. A great deal of the damage was from a single, massive impact, like some angered god had cleaved the arcology in two with a flaming sword. It was apparent that the blow had been dealt from orbit, likely just after the obliteration of the stellar defenses.

Dark smoke rose in a swirling column just discernible from the thick, dusty atmosphere of the world. Kirby had pinged traffic control as the *Atet* had breached the atmosphere, and finally received a response from an emergency team. The T'hròstag had formed staging areas within the sundered part of the arcology for medical structures and rescue vehicles to deploy. The cleared zone the *Atet* was directed toward was little more than a border of flares and a few tents. As the *Atet* came lower to the ground, additional damage became evident: impact craters and structural damage from the Dreaded ground forces riddled every inch of architecture.

Though the main structure of Riür Luk Tahn appeared featureless from above, on the ground—and even through the smoke and devastation—the elegance of the city's design became apparent. In a twisted fashion, the vertical bisection of the arcology exposed the intricacies of its design. Numerous floors towered hundreds of meters overhead, each featuring varying chamber sizes and designs. Residential areas, cafeterias, and meeting places were visible among the thousands and thousands of hollowed spaces, some many dozens of meters across. A wide range of colors and textures gave each surface life, and the overall impression was that they had arrived inside a massive pinata. The entire interior of the arcology was evenly lit by numerous flat bulbs along the walls. The arcology appeared uncomfortably dim to Human eyes, as the light fixtures mostly generated light outside the Human-visible spectrum.

Dread Naught's armor would remain vacuum-sealed during their time on Lurcq Olnah: the air contained a number of gasses and a particulate count that were highly poisonous to both Humans and Qixing. In addition to this, Bel'Wa's physiology required that her armor use a pressurized tank to maintain a certain moisture level—the local atmosphere was far too arid for her.

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The *Atet* settled down in the landing perimeter projected by a T'hròstag guide drone. A trio of T'hròstag officials shuffled to meet Dread Naught as they came down the ramp. Each was designated by small flags standing atop a sort of collar fitted around the edge of their mouths, with a hole for each of their “eyes”. The end result was a gray, crown-like shape whose intended appearance was a vivid ultra violet shade imperceptible to Humans.

Dread Naught's visors automatically adjusted to the environment, refining visual settings and filtering to remove as much smoke as possible from their line of sight. After a moment the air appeared mostly clear, though an environmental warning remained in the corner of their HUDs.

When communicating with T'hròstag, Bryluen spoke in an Arabic-Tamil pidgin language featuring a context-dependent cadence. This linguistic invention had been wrought by the CSOE to allow a Human speaker to closely mimic the structure of the common T'hròstag Hyihnkia language. This resulted in the best possible translation with a mere milliseconds-long translator delay, allowing fast-paced discussions between the two species.

“Rescue forces are inbound and will arrive shortly. How fares the arcology this dark day? May the Empire wreak its due in vengeance against the enemy for this slight.”

Any T'hròstag words rendered into Human letters or characters were extremely crude imitations of the basic sound or chord progression the word was derived from. No Human or Qixing could properly speak or pronounce even the most elementary of T'hròstag phonemes due to a lack of parallel speech organs. Meanwhile, a T'hròstag could produce as many as seven tones at once, each of which could be used to modulate the meaning, mood, and intent of a word or phrase.

Thus, while Bryluen had to speak a specialized language through a translator unit, the lead T'hròstag simply responded in a howling, wheezy storm of sound that resolved itself into a surprisingly understandable rendition of Standard Mandarin.

“We have so far discovered lower than expected civic loss, and no remaining hostiles. Thank you for your considerate desires. After the initial orbital strike and the opening stages of the assault, we observed the Dreaded had little interest in areas of Riür Luk Tahn besides

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Industrial District Three. No records show a Stone having been stored or discovered anywhere there.”

“Grant me a waypoint and my team will investigate. Imperial resources are better spent on stabilizing the city.”

“I will relay both the waypoint to your armor systems and your statement to the Councilor. You may borrow our Human-interface rover. I hope that you will continue serving your people.”

“All information will be promptly relayed to the Empire. I desire the same for you.” Bryluen turned back toward Dread Naught, and reverted to speaking in English. “Alright, let’s get moving. I’ll drive the rover, so just keep tight on us, Kirby.”

The rover was a compact tracked vehicle with a padded interior. While the vehicle’s controls were clearly re-purposed from some manner of Human vehicle, the design of the seating area was clearly T’hròstag in nature. Runner, Nicadzim, Bel’Wa, and Vort found themselves awkwardly seated back-to-back in the center of the vehicle with their armaments laid before them. As the T’hròstag could see in three hundred and sixty degrees, it was possible the designer had simply not accounted for a more Humanly-sociable seating arrangement. Nicadzim and Runner briefly jostled for shoulder space, while Bel’Wa crossed one arm over her chest in order to keep her shoulder pad from jabbing Nicadzim in the ribs. Vort tucked his wings in as much as he could, but still found his feathers occasionally ruffling against his neighbors.

Bryluen set the vehicle in motion as Kirby plodded alongside them. Riddled among the wreckage were numerous relief teams of both engineers and volunteers, already clearing wreckage and scanning for those still alive beneath the rubble. The bodies of numerous T’hròstag legionnaires and auxiliary militia soldiers were laid out for cataloging, their graceful armor sundered, burnt, and warped.

“Gate defenses, orbital defenses, and ground defenses all devastated before a mayday can even be received,” Bryluen said. “This is obscene. Look to our left—see that impact crater there? The size is much larger than Aeshma fire, and the T’hròstag wouldn’t employ ordnance of that scale inside their own arcology. Additionally, the remaining stratum isn’t glossy, so it doesn’t appear that much heat was involved. Definitely something we haven’t seen before.”

The team passed a number of similar craters over the next

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several minutes. They soon began to spot a series of unique marks across the exposed structure of the arcology amid the more familiar forms of damage. Each mark appeared to be the result of a projectile melting whatever it struck but, unlike the acid streams projected by Ogumos, each mark was precise and clearly came from the air.

“I CANNOT SAY I MUCH APPRECIATE THE NEW DISCOVERIES WE ARE MAKING,” Vort wryly commented.

Bryluen drove further into the arcology, closing in on the waypoint marker indicating the heart of Industrial District Three. By the time they arrived at the perimeter of the sector, they stopped seeing living T’hròstag entirely. The abandoned production and recycling facilities were deathly silent, their robotic workers deactivated or destroyed. There were few signs of T’hròstag resistance this far into the arcology and accordingly the destruction wrought by the Dreaded slackened off as well. Still, as seemed to be their nature, they left few things undamaged. Bryluen set a series of scans on the rover’s detection array, and began to trundle through the empty travel tunnels in search of answers.

Dread Naught proceeded in silence for nearly a half hour. Several dozen shuttles of Marine rescue teams and medical caravans had since swarmed into the city behind them; fire fighters bound in hulking red armor set about lifting obstructions, scaling walls, carrying injured T’hròstag out of danger, and subduing chemical fires with back-mounted powder cannons. White-armored medical specialists provided triage, and helped to relieve the patient load on the remaining local hospitals. It was the first time in many years, if ever, that the T’hròstag of Lurcq Olnah had seen Humans. For that reason, the rescue teams continuously broadcast calming messages to warn of their arrival. After all, given the violent events of that day, it was more than a little alarming for a powered-armored human to crash through a wall just after a large-scale alien assault.

Dread Naught had fallen silent as Bryluen continued to comb the area, making it all the more surprising when she abruptly stopped. The team jerked to attention as she turned away from the controls toward them. “Geologic scan just populated a pit, about two clicks east. Not a hole, not a crater: a pit. Rough so it was dug recently, deep and straight enough that it had to be intentional. We’re going to close in some, then

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make the rest of the walk on foot. I've got a feeling about it, so I want us to keep a low profile once we leave the rover. Kirby, you're just gonna stick a quarter click out from us in a flanking position."

Bryluen turned the rover on a new course over collapsed masonry and through the dim tunnels toward the pit. Nicadzim drummed his fingers on his leg plate. "What did you think we will find?"

"THE DREADED ONLY EVER ATTACK DUE TO A STONE," Vort said. "THE T'HRÒSTAG HAD NO RECORDS OF A STONE, BUT THAT OF COURSE DOES NOT MEAN THERE WASN'T ONE HERE. WHY IT WAS IN AN INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT IS AN ENTIRE OTHER QUESTION."

Nicadzim grunted. "I could only guess. Any insights?"

Bel'Wa shifted in her seat. "T'hròstag city-planning is meticulous. Either a factory was storing the Stone for some reason, in which case it would have been documented, or the Stone was held somewhere it wasn't supposed to be. Perhaps it was buried and unknown, having landed—or been taken there—ages ago."

"Hm, you think we might run into some ruins or somethin'?" Kirby spoke over the team comms.

"I'm not sure about that," said Bryluen, "The pit's not deep enough to be missed by a survey during construction. I think someone was keeping something somewhere they weren't supposed to."

Runner closed his eyes. "And g-got a hell of a lot of people killed-d. Damn."

A minute later, Bryluen parked the rover and Dread Naught disembarked, taking up their weapons and beginning their march toward the pit. Bryluen had brought her thermal shotgun to accompany her usual arms, while Runner carried his T'hròstag ax and pistols. Bel'Wa rapidly loaded anti-personnel rounds into her arm cannon as she hefted her shield. The team trekked out across the crumbling devastation, making their way over hills of rubble and winding between cracked pillars. The detailed T'hròstag masonry made for a complex field of debris. Filigrees and the detailed likenesses of revered T'hròstag Industrial leaders jutted from the wrecked tunnels and chambers.

Bryluen suddenly signaled for the team to move into cover. "Kirby, I'm sending you a nav point. Stay at this distance for now, and circle out to our left."

"You can see that? I'm the one with the big sensor array, I was

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just about tell y'all. On my way.”

Bryluen grunted. “Well, my sensor suite is a little more integrated than yours.”

Nicadzim looked toward Bryluen as he moved into cover behind a structural support. “What will it be?”

“Armored figures around the pit. T’hròstag, and no one who’s cleared to be here. Emergency procedures are strict and centralized in any arcology. They’ve got vehicles, too, and the profiles don’t look civilian.”

“What’s the plan, Bryl? A-are we gonna ambush e’m?” Runner’s hand moved to his pistol.

“Kirby, Runner, and Vort, you’re going to flank. Runner and Vort, go right. Nico and Bel’Wa, you’re with me. We’re going to try and talk to them first. They could just be looters or some other type of opportunists. Risky as hell here, but if so we can just scare them off with no need for bloodshed. Unless someone shoots first, wait for my signal to engage and mark every target you see.”

Dread Naught’s armor was insulated and hardened against detection via a combination of advanced material science and transmission masking, making them much more difficult to perceive outside line of sight. This allowed them to approach close enough that their scanning equipment could divine a great amount of detail without giving their presence away. They soon took up position among the gutted buildings surrounding the pit and took stock of the situation. The team collectively identified forty armored individuals, a survey drone, two tracked transport vehicles, and a three-legged light walker.

The presence of a full armed and armored retinue, as well as a combat vehicle, made it clear the group’s intent was not innocent. The majority of the warriors present bore a two handed firearm and either a side-arm or a melee weapon. The advent of recoil-less weapons meant that a T’hròstag could wield both their armaments at once, making them dangerous in close combat. Four of the warriors bore heavier weapons attached to harnesses that required all three arms to operate—the third arm manning a targeting system, adjusting weapon settings, or simply helping to control the weapon.

The T’hròstag’s boneless anatomy meant they had a long history of light, flexible armor rather than a tendency toward rigid forms of

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protection. As a result, they had developed exceedingly sophisticated materials emphasizing the deflection or diffusion of oncoming attacks. The majority of the warriors present were equipped in light armor suits following this principle, each a series of sleek ridged tubes terminating in metallic claws at the end of each limb. Their “helmets” were fluted cylinders with a narrow visor slit all the way around the top edge, giving them an appearance not dissimilar from that of a Victorian iron stove. The armor suits were coated in artful designation glyphs and maxims in colors that Humans could not properly perceive.

Despite the prevalence of flexible armor, the T’hròstag had eventually followed the lead of the Qixing and Humans in developing powered armor—a task far more complicated for beings without hinge joints. A particularly large T’hròstag equipped in such plating was a terrible enemy, and six such warriors stood guard around a figure who was the evident leader of the group. Each of the guards was a behemoth, thickly coated in overlapping armor plates. While Human and Qixing armor focused on ease of manufacture and repair, T’hròstag powered armor almost always incorporated built-in weapons and sundry auxiliary systems, making them even deadlier.

The drone was only a survey unit bearing a small drill. The walker, however, was the main concern. The tripod vehicle bore an almost eerie resemblance to the T’hròstag around it, a hanging pod containing the crew and maintaining balance between the three legs. A battery of high-caliber firearms and a trio of missile launchers topped the machine. The weapons were able to divide into three separate groups and thus attack in three separate directions and, though this meant the walker had smaller weapons than an equivalent human walker, it made it highly adaptable and lethal against infantry.

Bryluen leaned out from her ground-level cover, her HUD flashing rapidly through various visual filters and compositing a Human-visible image so that she could read the armor markings on the T’hròstag. “This isn’t going to end peacefully. But in case any of them survive, we aren’t going to shoot first.”

“Whoa, Bryl, whattaya mean?” Kirby’s voice was a hushed whisper despite the fact that the T’hròstag could not hear her.

“I mean we don’t want to take blame if a firefight breaks out. I’m going to talk while the rest of you pick targets and hold position. Let

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them guess at our numbers and as soon as they move to fire, we let loose. The walker and the heavy weapons go first, and while we mean to capture the leader, don't risk letting the warriors get around you. We can do this fairly handily if we just stick to protocol. Despite numbers, we outgun them. Alright: Nico, Bel'Wa, move out to my flanks."

The surface of Dread Naught's armor shifted in hue, shedding their color-coding in order to match the tones of the surrounding environment. The nanotechnology responsible was fairly common, but had little application against the Dreaded, who seemed to chiefly rely on methods of vision aside from the light spectrum.

The lead T'hròstag puffed from nirs vocal pipes, producing a staccato flutter of notes loud enough to echo among the desiccated ruins of the industrial sector. To those who understood it, the sound was laden with annoyance.

"Disappointed?"

Bryluen stepped into the open, using her HUD to trigger a passive defense system. A number of small emitters across the surface of her armor plates emitted a dazzling array of signal noise and flashes of light that dazzled the ocular sensors of the T'hròstag. The warriors raised their weapons at the area where Bryluen was standing, the guards bristled in their powered armor, and the walker began to scan the area. While it may be able to get a rough read on Kirby, the walker was an older model from which the rest of Dread Naught would be doubtlessly obscured.

"You have been discovered, and I therefore doubt this will end peacefully unless you surrender. You are surrounded and, should you wisely believe me, cruelly outgunned." Bryluen crossed her arms.

Runner, from a second-floor position in cover, had his helmet perform a scan once more. He identified the nearest several warriors, a trio armed with axes and a T'hròstag shotgun variant that fired groups of spiny projectiles able to easily crack infantry plate. Between them stood one of the heavy weapon warriors, bearing an out-sized missile launcher with a sophisticated targeting array. The warriors were spread out among the cover in the area in groups of three or four, while the tripod remained to one side of the leader and his body guards held the center. Runner continued to listen for a few minutes as Bryluen and the T'hròstag spoke to one another, though the T'hròstag mostly made bombastic threats.

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As he glanced at the scans of the rest of the enemy formation, he felt a primal foreboding. On a whim, he tapped into Bryluen's HUD display to get a glance at the leader of the T'hròstag party, and froze.

He remembered every single detail. The main projector squealed and sparked as the roof caved in on top of it. Soot and smoke washed over him, obscuring his vision. He crawled blindly, tears already streaming down his face as the flames licked out toward him. He had stopped thinking, his body simply obeying the commands of the most primal part of his mind.

Though he had seen it happen, it would be some time before he could comprehend the fact that his father had been standing next to the projector just a moment ago.

Scant seconds afterward he heard, for the first time in his life, the loud pop and snap of gunfire.

Runner clutched a piece of debris in one hand, the material beginning to crack and crumble in his grip. He blinked away an unexpected tear. "Bryluen. That's *nem*."

She sent a shorthand text response back to his HUD as she continued to speak with the lead T'hròstag. "Aff. At Hos., App."

He considered arguing, but knew the matter was settled. Bryluen had commanded him to apprehend the leader, which unfortunately meant eliminating nirs heavily-armed guards—there was no doubt that they would die before allowing *nem* to be taken.

Bryluen's order rankled with Runner, but he knew that she had yet to steer him wrong. Moreover, he would not endanger his friends by doing something unpredictable. He would, however, be speaking with her later on the matter.

The next second, the tripod's weapons abruptly spun toward the building behind which Kirby was obscured.

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Kirby had already locked in a responsive firing solution so that the instant the tripod acquired her as a target, her cannon sent an armor-piercing shell through the building she stood behind and directly into the walker's chassis. The shell pierced the armor plating of the walker and detonated within its heart, sending shards of warped shrapnel out in every direction as the vehicle's top half exploded. The tripod, nothing now but an intricate device of metal, went whirling to destruction. Bryluen swiftly leapt backward into cover, unslinging her thermal shotgun as she did so.

The T'hròstag warriors opened fire on the buildings around them in an attempt to strike their attackers. Squared high-impact bullets intended to maim targets, self-propelled micro-shells, and clusters of star-shaped shot peppered the area in a lethal crossfire. A rocket collapsed the intervening building between the T'hròstag and Kirby with a deep, rumbling impact. The way in which T'hròstag arcologies were built meant that the destruction of individual structures mattered little, even in the lower reaches of the arcology. The surrounding construction was sturdy, and the outer shell of the arcology depended on vast main supports that could each stand alone and support the buildings hanging from them. Such was the quality of their construction that an arcology could be hollowed out and still remain standing.

As the fighting began, the powered-armored guards hustled the leader away from the pit, and gathered in cover. The various mounted

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weapons on their armor unleashed suppressive fire on all the surrounding buildings in a desperate attempt to protect their leader. Their armored bulk obscured the unarmed central figure, and their weaponry was fearsome. Bryluen knew Vort or Kirby could easily crack the position open, but it left the leader at risk of being obliterated along with his guards. The maneuver was a smart one, calculated and practical.

Bel'Wa howled an exultant hunting cry from her armor's speaker as the rest of Dread Naught opened fire. Kirby's rotary cannons tore into the T'hròstag, sawing through walls and masonry alike. The T'hròstag hunkered down, but Kirby managed to punch fist-sized holes through eight warriors in the first sweep. She fired a cluster of rockets, detonating one of the transports and sending it rolling over another group of warriors.

From a concealed position, a gout of blue flame engulfed one of the T'hròstag heavy weapons, and took two warriors with it. Vort scuttled through a ruined building, staying on the move and contributing devastating blasts of flame or lightning when he could. After the first shot, the T'hròstag understandably focused a good proportion of their firepower toward him. Fortunately he was a small, swift target far more nimble than the Humans he fought alongside. The T'hròstag didn't quite know where to aim, most of their shots flying above Vort's head. Plasma bolts from the guards licked away swathes of the building above him, his armor flashing heat warnings when a shot roamed too close. He realized that against such an enemy, flight was likely to be a death sentence—the guards' target tracking would allow their integrated weapons a great advantage at shooting him down. Fortunately, he expected the T'hròstag would not close on him due to him essentially being a flamethrower, which allowed him greater options as far as movement and positioning. So, as the enemies' weapons fire grew too close, he simply stopped attacking and made for the next building. This caused the T'hròstag fire to die down for a moment, enabling him to attack again from an unexpected quarter.

Bel'Wa used her shield-mounted gun to fire past the wall she hid behind, bullets and shot ricocheting off its surface as she did so. A shot sped home, piercing a corner of masonry and blowing a rough hole in one of the T'hròstag. After a fraction of a second, they collapsed soundlessly. She fired a pair of shots over some low cover, forcing the

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T'hròstag behind it to hunch down.

Bryluen leaned out from her cover and fired, removing half the organ sack of a T'hròstag warrior in a single shot. Ne collapsed without a cry, air and particles wheezing from nirs body. Bryluen rolled back into cover, moved to a second position, and fired her weapon once more through a nearby hole in the masonry before once again changing positions. Each shot found home, the thermal shock of the weapon tearing apart armor and flesh.

Nicadzim used his pearlescent cone to lay down suppressing fire on a group of six warriors converging on him. He struck two dead-on, the spiked orbs lodging heated darts in their armor and causing them to thrash and flail. As their compatriots moved to help, he blinked among them, icy flywheel in hand. He slew a warrior bearing a heavy weapon first—in this case, an anti-vehicle beam weapon requiring all three arms to carry. Nicadzim's superior reach allowed him to hold the warriors at bay, falling among them with broad strokes of his exceptionally sharp weapon. Regardless, he was forced to blink several times due to the unpredictable fashion in which the ax-armed warriors could swing their weapons. Their cartilaginous limbs allowed a wide range of movement, and their melee weapons depended less on impact strength and more on a lethal edge, some form of poison, acid, or explosive material.

Runner cursed himself for not bringing along his sniper rifle. He launched himself between two pieces of cover, firing both of his tri-pistols as he did so. A T'hròstag warrior collapsed as the clusters of shot struck home. The warrior's fellows turned their attentions toward Runner, who kept in motion. It was a game he had played dozens of times before; fire, move, fire, move—always a step ahead. The lifts on his boots made the task almost comically easy, allowing him to circle around the group of T'hròstag and herd them away from their fellows. He picked them off one at a time, as he had done to so many cartel members during his career of vigilantism. That said, he knew he had to exercise extra caution; a T'hròstag's all-round vision and radial symmetry made them much quicker to change direction and acquire new targets from “behind” them. Still, the strategy worked just as well.

As the initial shape of the firefight settled down, the lead T'hròstag began to issue commands. The T'hròstag moved and fired with renewed coordination. A cannon began to fire toward Bryluen, each

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shot within a couple meters of her last position. The warrior was hunkered down, holding its cannon above its head and using its HUD to approximate target positions. She couldn't strike the T'hrostag bearing the weapon dead-on as a result, but she fired suppressive shots on the warriors that her HUD showed her were nearby, forcing the heavy weapon trooper and its nearby allies to move as she did.

"Vort! Cannon!"

Vort sent an affirmation blip to Bryluen's HUD.

From the other side of the pit a lightning bolt struck the T'Hrostag holding the cannon, causing it to stiffen and topple like a statue. Vort had recently learned to focus his attacks and had become capable of smiting individual targets like an angry god; the effect was always greatly satisfying to watch.

Vort scuttled through an increasingly ruined building as bullets slammed into the structure around him. Currently, a T'hrostag with a beam weapon was firing his way, the plasma warping and melting through the architecture with each shot. He sung flame through an existing gap in a wall overlooking the shooter and, due to the extreme heat, the weapon's magnetic containment tank ruptured spectacularly. This resulted in an eight meter detonation that incinerated every T'hrostag in range. Dread Naught's visors dimmed to near-total opacity for an instant, the brightness of the white explosion like a second sun.

This type of fighting was a very different affair for Dread Naught from their usual sorties against the Dreaded, which often resolved into some form of choke point melee or surgical extraction. A primarily ranged battle such as this was fast, lethal, and loud. There was less footwork, more outright sprinting from one firing position to the next as chips of paint and building material ricocheted in every direction. The distinctive crack of splitting armor cut through the constant bangs and booms of firearms and munitions. HUD scans and overlays helped filter the distracting chaos, but without constant spatial awareness it was still all too easy to be outflanked or to leave yourself exposed.

Bel'Wa tore apart a warrior with an anti-personnel round from her arm cannon. "Runner, once you're done with that group you will be clear to move toward the leader. We need the guards engaged, now."

"Lifter, incoming!" Kirby cried out. She crashed through the remains of a wall, bisecting a trio of warriors with one blade, then

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turning a heavy weapon trooper to dust with a burst of rockets. “Moving on the body guards.”

Kirby sheathed her blades and armed her auto-cannons. She side-stepped past a column and sent a shell glancing off of one of the guards. The group hunched down as she began to fire precise shells at each of the powered-armored figures. They turned their weapons toward her, unleashing barrages of plasma, bullets, and micro-explosives. Her armor ignored the majority of the impacts, allowing her to approach and take an angle she could strike from. Firing each cannon at a separate warrior, she blew open two sets of heavy armor with a deep series of crunching explosions.

A third perished as Vort, now under far less scrutiny, closed in and lashed out a focused beam of fire. It took a split second to breach the armor, but after that the T’hròstag within felt nothing as it was incinerated. Bel’Wa and Runner met up a few wall fragments away from the guards, who now attempted to fall back toward the trajectory of the their escape vehicle. Through the vast clouds of smoke above them, the transport was not yet visible or close enough to populate on armor scans. Even Kirby’s scanner suite barely saw the vehicle by its exhaust output, and the chaos among the arcology surely aided it in approaching so quickly without being seen.

Bel’Wa nodded to Runner. “Runner, I’ll take the one on the left, you take the right.”

Runner reloaded one pistol while using the other to down one of the remaining lightly armored warriors. “What about the third one?”

“I will have handled him,” said Nicadzim, “We need to have moved at that moment.”

The hard spotlights on the transport pierced the haze overhead, focusing on the leader. Lowering to the ground and turning away from Kirby, it opened its ramp and allowed a group of warriors inside to begin unleashing suppressive fire. Kirby fired on the ship, but even her caliber of weaponry did little against the space-faring vehicle.

Runner, Nico, and Bel’Wa had already closed in, each engaging one of the hulking guards. Bel’Wa removed her target’s armor-mounted turret with a breaching round, then drew her sword and charged in. She crashed directly into the guard as he tried to aim his weapon toward her. The guard slid backward and recoiled as Bel’Wa immediately hacked

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her blade through a seam in the guard's armor and removed the arm holding its ax. She backed the guard up with an aggressive series of sword swings, each striking the same plate of armor. As ne tried to block her strikes with nirs rifle, ne attempted to pick up nirs ax with a remaining hand. With a deft partial turn, Bel'Wa shifted and removed the end of the outstretched limb before breaching its armor and thrusting her sword into the gap. The guard paused a moment as it was stabbed and Bel'Wa shifted her grip, stiffly yanking the blade back and forth. She pulled her sword from the wound, and kicked the T'hròstag over as it died.

Nico sparred with his opponent, matching his two-handed ice weapon against an over-sized T'hròstag ax. He blinked behind his opponent, cleaving a long gash in nirs armor as ne twisted nirs limb and swung at him. Blinking away again, he returned and drove his frosty weapon into a thick armor plate. He continued on, receiving several close calls and glancing blows until, finally, one of his strikes wrenched the T'hròstag's armor open with a metallic squeal. The T'hròstag unleashed a vicious lateral swing, but Nico used the handle of his ice flywheel to stop the blow short. The two braced and began to slide back and forth as they attempted to gain the advantage. Nico grunted with the effort while the towering T'hròstag generated an angry wheeze, like a rhino huffing through a pan flute. Nico leaned in, pushed hard, and then blinked. The T'hròstag stumbled forward as Nico struck the open rent in nirs armor. The roaring wheel ground into the guard's flesh, sending nem into a momentary spasm before ne came crashing down.

But it was all too late. The remaining guards and what warriors could move near enough hustled the leading figure up the transport ramp, which rapidly closed. With a couple of terse directions from Bryluen, Dread Naught mopped up the remaining T'hròstag. She attempted to hail traffic control, but the transport had vanished—likely taking the opportunity to slip away amid the chaos of the destroyed city.

Runner stared up in the direction where the transport had departed. He had never truly expected to once again encounter the same being responsible for the direction his life had taken, for leaving him a young orphan. He was surprised he had even recognized nem. The experience left him cold and uncertain.

A cursory investigation made it evident nothing of note remained

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in the subterranean vault. An icon appeared on the HUDs of Dread Naught's helmets, instructing them to rendezvous with Bryluen at the rover.

"I've flagged the location for local authorities. Let's get out of here."

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Runner sat in his seat in the rover, still as death. The others were catching their breath and chatting while he simply brooded. His eyes burned with anger, the lid having been pried off a lifetime of quashed emotion. He was surprised by his own feelings, a mixture of powerlessness and seemingly bottomless loss he did not feel the strength to bear. He was doing a poor job disguising his turn in mood, his drooped shoulders and clenched fists giving him away.

"... Runner, hon?" Kirby's voice came to him through a private channel, and was uncharacteristically gentle, "I ... I'm sorry."

"For what." Runner had asked a question, but his inflection was flat and tense.

"I know you haven't talked much about it ... but that was nem, wasn't it? The, uh, person who killed your folks?"

He gritted his teeth, and growled out a response, "... yes."

"Do you know who ne is?"

"... no." He exhaled, feeling the sense of powerlessness overcome his anger for a moment.

"If you want to talk, or just vent or what-the-fuck-ever, I'm here. Seriously ... anything."

Runner thought for a moment. "... thank you. I'm going to talk about this with Bryluen. Something has to be done. She's seen who ne is. That has to matter."

"... Okay." Kirby closed the line.

Runner took a breath, then heard the telltale click of a new private line opening. It was Bryluen.

"Database told me who ne is. Akk'Duun Tuqth When Dawn Becomes Day, member of the Exalted Agricultural Council of Biun Okt Vouk."

Runner realized that Bryluen could likely tap into even a private

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channel between squad mates. After some months with Dread Naught, he found it easy to forget he was being watched at all times. He was certain she had listened to his talk with Kirby and simply waited her turn.

“Okay, so we t-turn that information in. The T’hròstag bring nem in, and finally they s-s-serve up justice.”

A stylized animation of Bryluen shaking her head populated the corner of Runner’s HUD, though she gave no physical sign that she was doing anything but driving the rover. “I’ll submit this to CSOE Intra-Sector Crime, who will quietly talk to T’hròstag Intelligence, but this isn’t a simple scenario. I know you want to get nem sorted and punished. Given that nirs actions are so dishonorable and reflect so poorly on the Agricultural Council, the T’hròstag will likely mark nirs name in all public records and execute nem very quickly once sentenced.

“But getting to that stage has complications. First: they’re almost certainly part of a group running illegal activities, not the sole head of an organization like Humans are used to. There’s no option to cut the head off the snake here: if you bring one down, the rest of whatever leadership group they have will scatter and the organization will remain intact. That brings us to our second point: ne will either have a plan to disappear when someone tries to bring nem in, or a plan to simply kill nemself. This has to be quiet, careful, and covert. If ne vanishes or dies, all the leads are gone because nothing else is known about nirs organization.”

“So ... no-othing is going to b-be done?”

“Plenty is going to be done, Runner, I just told you. But we might not be a part of it. For all we know, the CSOE may decide to simply use this information as leverage against nem for a while.”

Runner sighed. Rationally, he conceded the point that a far greater good would be accomplished with calculation and planning. However, his guts turned at the idea that he wouldn’t be able to bring down the T’hròstag himself. On some level, he couldn’t accept that simple fact. It spoke volumes for Bryluen’s steadfast leadership that Runner was able to keep himself from objecting then and there.

The team drove back toward the *Atet*, passing the same landmarks of destruction they had theorized about on the way in. Relief vehicles, both Human and T’hròstag, now swarmed further into the

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arcology than before. Ground transports, groups of firefighters and medical crew, and hovering lifters took the injured and fallen away to help. The T'hròstag had already managed to secure a large proportion of the damaged sections of the city, and by the end of the week would have almost all of the missing accounted for.

As Dread Naught returned to the staging area, they saw that the main bulk of the rescue fleet had made landfall. Large temporary structures, including T'hròstag-compatible living spaces, hospitals, a guard post, and a fire station had been erected. Dread Naught were directed through traffic by a T'hròstag soldier, arriving back at the *Atet* at last. They left the rover to a waiting T'hròstag and entered their ship.

The ride home was uneventful enough, the planetary orbit already being cleaned by the restored sections of the planetary particle net. The vast Compression Gate had drawn the nearby debris into a tight ring which a stationary T'hròstag transport was obliterating with a laser. The *Atet* closed in on the gate just as a large dilation phenomenon allowed a T'hròstag vessel passage. The ship was a battle cruiser, sent to prevent any instability in the planetary system. Like most T'hròstag vessels, it was primarily a hemispherical shape with its numerous weapons concentrated toward the front. Other nodular compartments and systems jutted from the back of the hemisphere in clusters of varying lengths. The vast ship was dozens of times larger than the *Atet*; fierce ships such as these were what the Dreaded had somehow destroyed so totally.

The *Atet* translated through the gate, jumping back to Human space. Gate travel was oftentimes not linear: though the gates bridged the gap between two points in space, they each only linked to the nearest gates. Thus, the trip Dread Naught experienced as passing directly from the Lurcqh Olnah gate to the nearest Human gate was actually a jump relayed through four intervening gates. An override prevented a craft from passing over the border between differing governments' territorial borders without stopping. This forced vessels to undergo a check by whatever security existed on either side of the border, before the vessel passed back through the gate to its' intended destination.

After both border checks, the *Atet* came home to the Corax system, swept down toward Aves Prime, and landed at Raven's Landing. Most of Dread Naught calmly gathered their discarded clothing from the

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summit and proceeded inside to begin removing their armor and store their weapons away. Runner lagged behind slightly, leaning against his armor rack as the others undressed and proceeded toward the lobby.

Bryluen had already entered her office in order to make her report to High Command. She knew what was likely coming next, and after about a half hour it happened. Runner loomed in the doorway behind her, hesitating as he tried to think of the words he wanted to use.

Bryluen broke the silence. “Come in. I know why you’re here, don’t worry.”

Bryluen motioned to an empty chair she had brought in from the meeting room. Runner took a breath, and then sat down warily as the door closed behind him. A shelf filled with volumes of legal precedent sat near his right shoulder. Runner sat in silence, simply unaware of which words to use—he had many things he felt like saying, but couldn’t decide which ones were for the best.

Bryluen turned toward him and crossed her legs. She could sense the nature of his hesitation, and opted to kick-start the conversation. “I know this is difficult. I know you’re holding your tongue, and I know you aren’t going to want to hear this right now: but I understand what you’re feeling.”

Runner leaned forward in his seat, his emotions welling up at Bryluen’s summoning. “How could you p-p-possibly understand?! I don’t th-th-think your family was fucking murdered—”

“—true, I could call up my ummi and baba right now. They’re lovely: my papa, at one hundred and ten years old, always makes it a point to hand-bake for guests, and my mama can still kick my ass at Shesh Besh.”

Runner paused. Bryluen almost never shared personal information without cause—he couldn’t remember a single time she had ever mentioned her family. Later, he would realize she had shared the anecdote specifically to give him pause.

“Runner, you aren’t feeling grief for your family right now—you’ve already grieved them. You’re feeling powerless, and like you’ve been cheated out of doing something about it.”

He wiped his forehead. “Y-y-yeah. Of course. But how do you understand tha-at? Wh-when are you helpless? You go from world to world saving everybody’s asses and single-handedly preventing dis-

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sasters?”

Brylueen chuckled bitterly. “Do you know what my job really is, Runner? It’s doing a limited amount of a specialist task, and having to hand the rest off to others. I do consultation, I make some diplomatic decisions, sometimes I help as much as one person can in large events, and sometimes I get shot at. The job is very important, but it comes with the constant reminder that I am only one person. I can only be in one place at a time. I have the knowledge of just how many dozens of awful scenarios are occurring at this very moment all across space, as they happen. But I don’t get to choose when or where I’m sent, I don’t usually bring in bad guys myself, and I usually don’t see justice dealt when I do. Many times I have spent blood, sweat, and tears on something only to never hear what became of it. Let me tell you something ... relevant.”

Runner sat back as she continued. “You know I was the one who brought in the governor for his part in what happened. But I was also there the day of the attack. Twenty years ago now, huh?”

“You mean ... oh shit. I ... hadn’t realized.”

“You were just a child, you’d just lost your family, of course you’re not going to remember one face. But I was among the first responders. I was there to do a situational assessment, to make sure it wasn’t an act of war. T’hròstag don’t usually do more than property damage in a raid, you know. I ... also helped find survivors and bodies while I was there.”

Runner’s eyes became distant, the mists of grief obscuring the shine in his eyes. “... I’ve never forgotten the smell.”

Brylueen nodded slowly. “Nor have I.”

They fell quiet. The following moment of reflection was incapable of sustaining meaningful words.

Brylueen spoke again, her voice ever-so-slightly softer. “Here is something the others don’t know. I have an implant in my head: tactical ware that integrates with my armor. If I turned it on, I could see your life signs and skeleton through these walls. With my helmet on, it’s much more powerful. The type of endemic implant illegal for a non-Operative.”

Runner nodded. “O-okay.”

“Well, when you work disaster relief, you have various tools that

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help you locate and save people. Normally you're shown an abstract ping, just a disembodied marker. But imagine what that's like when buildings have collapsed and fires are raging."

"I'm n-not sure what you mean?"

"When I'm in a situation like that, I have to help—both as my duty and as a moral imperative. So I have to keep the implant on. With my eyes closed, I can see crushed bones under rubble. I can see the last seconds of someone suffocating, and know exactly how much quicker I needed to be to save them. There is no buffer of ignorance: I know the precise margins of my failures."

Runner ran a hand through his hair. "Sort of ... off topic. Is the chip required?"

"No," Bryluen noted. "But it's saved my life so, so many times. My ability to save lives is intimately joined with my exposure to grief. I'm no super hero. There are severe personal consequences to what I do. I do know what it is like to feel powerless. Want to know one of my first thoughts when I was shown the specifications for the *Atet*? That it could have saved your family. I could have been there. I've done this job for over four decades. A slightly better tool, minutes more time: I can tell you so many ways I came so close to saving more lives. That's helplessness. That I've always done my absolute best and still watched people die.

"Anytime you need it, you don't have to talk to Operative Branok, vaunted icon of hope and heroism. You can just talk to Bryl, your friend who understands pain."

Runner looked down and took a slow breath. He nodded. "I'm ... awful at talking about th-things. But I'll think ab-b-bout it. It's good to know someone around can relate. You're ... pret-ty damn wise, Bryl."

She smirked. "Nah, just old enough to comfortably be your grandmother."

Despite himself, Runner smiled.

4. Visions and Visitations

That very night, the glowing capsule at Fort Salamis began to pulsate. Slowly, gently, the light crawled out across the chamber and then retreated back to the capsule. The glow washed over the impenetrable darkness of the massive Stone, like a lighthouse warning distant ships of the oncoming shoreline.

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Bel'Wa awoke much more violently than normal. Instead of the vibrant infrared wave that often transitioned a Qixing to wakefulness, she was assailed by a yawning darkness. As her eyes opened, a severe nausea washed over her and caused her stomach to clench; Qixing in general had greater difficulty with awakening suddenly compared to Humans, though they required nearly two hours less sleep per night.

She took a steadying breath and looked around the room, pitch black by Human standards. For Bel'Wa, however, the still form of her sleeping wife provided a soft, angelic glow of infrared light. Bel'Wa's fingers and toes gave off a soft light, as did the spot where she laid. Because Qixing were so much more insulated than Humans, they put off only a fraction of the infrared light.

Bel'Wa slowly left bed and slid open the drawer of her night stand, her long hair sliding off the bed behind her. She pulled an

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armored bodice from the nightstand and swiftly clasped it about her. As a member of the extended royal family, she wore the sleek armor beneath her robes whenever awake. Despite its purpose, the golden article bore iridescent embroidery along every seam. As the last clasp closed, the bodice ejected the air between itself and her skin with a soft hiss and, after a moment, it comfortably hugged her. She tied her hair up into a clasp as she strode to the screen at the end of the bed. Activating the screen at its lowest brightness level, she began a database query.

A few minutes later, Bryluen awoke suddenly. Years of awareness training and experience meant that in most circumstances she woke seamlessly, without moving or opening her eyes; should a potential attacker be in the room, they would not know she was conscious until she acted.

Bryluen realized she was alone in bed, and eased an eye open slightly. She was laying on her stomach, one arm hanging off the bed as if reaching toward her night gown. Her other arm was tucked beneath her pillow, fingers stroking the grip of her concealed pistol as she silently assessed the situation. Neither her thoughts nor heart raced, and she was in no way tense: readiness was simply as natural to her as breathing.

Bel'Wa was using the dimmed display to query personnel reports. Bryluen wryly noted the inherent allure she saw in an armored woman as she sat up, and recalled that Bel'Wa had not been wearing the bodice when they had fallen asleep.

Bryluen settled her mussed hair with a forward sweep of her hand. "Orchid, what's on your mind?"

The nickname was a reference to the closest Terran equivalent to the flowering desert plant—the belzxil—after which Bel'Wa was named.

Bel'Wa turned her face partly toward Bryluen, a tense look evident in the silhouette of her cheek and brow. "A nightmare woke me. The eye on the horizon. I can't shake it. I saw that great Stone, and I saw that 'orb' in the sky, and I felt the screams coming. But it's not ... I wasn't afraid of the destruction or war, it was as if something deeper was disturbing me and shook me awake."

"Some ineffable wrongness? Like some vital part of the order of the universe was being violated, perhaps?"

Bryluen slid out from under the bed-sheets, and Bel'Wa looked

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her over out the corner of her eye. Bel'Wa reached up and ran a hand through Bryluen's hair as she came close, sending it back into a state of disarray.

"Yes. You as well?"

Bryluen nodded, then motioned toward the screen. "Anything from the researchers on Fort Salamis?"

"No. Not yet. Postmortem on the Lurcq Olnah attack ... did confirm there was some sort of Dreaded Capital Ship, though. The Big One. This is the first time I've ever had a dream that felt this way. It just ... very much felt like something more. I know that sounds intellectually precarious, but here we are."

"I know what you mean. But we don't understand the Stones, we don't understand the Dreaded ... as far as I'm concerned, nothing's off the table. I say we ask the others when they wake, particularly Nico, if they've had the same experience. He's been ever-so-slightly more distant since Gru'Thiall."

Bel'Wa leaned on the table that sat below the screen and cocked her head. "How do you figure?"

"He's doing a great job hiding it, but he shifts tense slightly more often—like he's more distracted from the present than normal. He's slightly less wordy when asked about his journeys and he's eating about two-hundred calories less on average now, trending downward since Gru'Thiall."

"I'm impressed by the first two pieces of evidence, but the third is just because you check the Dispensary log every night."

Bryluen smirked. She casually hooked a finger under the lip of Bel'Wa's bodice, and tugged gently. "I do love my job. Did you just feel like you needed this on?"

Bel'Wa allowed herself to be pulled up to Bryluen, and wrapped her arms around her wife's ribs. "Helps me think—gives me a warrior's bearing. We've seen a lot so far, but we also know the worst is still to come. Given what we've already seen ... it's going to be bad, tye'tyito."

Bryluen gently wound Bel'Wa's long hair around one hand, causing Bel'Wa's head to tilt back slightly. She began to rotate the parallel rings in Bel'Wa's lower lip with one finger as they locked eyes. "Come back to bed: whatever is coming, you're going to want sleep beforehand. Also, I've become used to how warm you make it under the

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covers, so my toes get cold without you now. Thanks for that.”

Bel’Wa grinned. Her nictitating membranes flicked over her eyes as she tightened her grip around Bryluen. “Well, I can’t let your toes freeze off, now can I?”

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Kirby, Runner, and Vort reported similar dreams the following morning. While Vort’s emotional impulses operated quite differently, he expressed having experienced a sensation in sleep roughly analogous to the discombobulating fear the others had felt. Bryluen spoke with Nicadzim privately, assuming his experience would be altogether more important—and possibly informative.

The pair of them sat in Bryluen’s office, Nicadzim’s intimidating bulk causing the space to feel particularly confined.

“I do not ... dream, as you will. I, however, will be speaking to them again. The voice. We ... found each other, like before Gru’Thiall.”

Bryluen tapped a finger on the side of her coffee mug, registering no surprise at her squad mate’s admission to once again speaking with a mysterious disembodied consciousness. “Tell me everything.”

Nicadzim’s eyes unfocused. “They say ... we would meet soon.”

She shrugged. “They implied you might meet last time. Did they indicate what had changed? Or what that meeting would actually consist of?”

“Things ... moved so they were able to ... make contact. The Dreaded, I would believe.”

“The ‘Big One’, you think? This being is presenting themselves—or is only now able to present themselves—due to the Dreaded attack on Lurcq Olnah?”

“Yes.”

“Is the ‘Big One’ why we all had the same dream as well?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Why? Any ideas?”

“I ... do not know.”

Bryluen nodded. “Has the voice revealed anything meaningful or helpful about what in the hell they are?”

“The voice ... only said it was ‘A Warrior’. An ally, but not one

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accustomed to explaining themself.”

Bryluen sipped her coffee and stared into Nicadzim’s eyes. “That is ... spectacularly unhelpful. Go to the meeting room for a briefing, I’ll make a report to Command. Thank you, Nico.”

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“It’s that time again. We’ve got news on new Dreaded forms encountered at Lurcq Olnah. Tactical data has been compiled for our convenience. Read through the full details on your consoles after this meeting.”

Dread Naught was assembled in the briefing room, just like when they had first been gathered together. Bryluen cracked her knuckles.

“Two of the three new forms of Dreaded exist to provide battlefield control: one through air support, the other through—and I’m pulling a quote from the report I was given—‘being a handsy little shit’.”

Bryluen triggered the projector to show a hologram of the first Dreaded. It was a long, serpentine creature trailing feathery filaments behind it. Its body was made of round rigid segments connected by flexible membranes. It had no limbs, and its head appeared to be nothing but a bundle of eyes—each a different size—surrounding a hollow protrusion.

“Looks a little suggestive,” Kirby muttered.

Bryluen smirked. “This is what we are calling a Kukulkan. It has been seen flying at speeds upwards of four hundred and seventy kilometers an hour. Air superiority is something the Dreaded have utterly lacked before now. While they aren’t a match for atmospheric fighters or high-altitude drones, they are extremely maneuverable and spit acidic projectiles more than suitable for bringing down armored vehicles. They had no problems maneuvering through the ruins of Lurcq Olnah at high speeds, so traditional cover from air support may not be sufficient. They’re bigger than they look, as well: seemingly around nine or ten meters long. We haven’t seen any of them land, so we do not know if that is something they are capable of.”

Bryluen once more triggered the projector, bringing up a model

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of the next type of Dreaded. This creature had four armored crab-like legs surrounding a tall body shaped almost like a gourd, bearing a single hole near its peak. Within this hole rested a disproportionately large pincer.

Vort did his best wheezing imitation of a Human sigh, “IT SHOOTS THAT CLAW, DOESN’T IT?”

“Oh, not just that, it’s a grappling hook.” The rest of Dread Naught groaned. “I’m with you. This is being called an Ahuizotl. It does nothing except grab things with its huge claw, and then attempts to draw them in. The claw can not only snip infantry in two, but has a range of at least twenty meters, and can pry open armored vehicles, bulkheads, and the like. The tether connecting the claw to the Ahuizotl is almost as tough as the rest of it. I recommend any weapon usable against light vehicles. The Ahuizotl stands about four meters high and, yes, it has been seen using the claw to get itself to high ground.”

“Well fuck me if that’s not one of my least favorites.” Kirby leaned back in her chair, green eyes wide.

Bryluen triggered the projector once more, causing the entire group to lean in and concentrate. “Number three. This, is the Tauriz.”

The monstrosity on the projector was obviously huge. The thing was almost snail-like, a massive armored carapace resting atop a gelatinous mass. The gnarled and warped armor hosted two cannons whose width suggested truly nightmarish firepower. Dozens of pointed feelers protruded through a seam near the front of the armor. Unlike the others, the image of the Tauriz was static: information on it so far had not allowed a scan or other accurate three-dimensional representation.

“The Tauriz stands slightly higher than an Aeshma, meaning it’s bigger than a Ninurta by a substantial amount of mass. Good news: it isn’t an assault beast like the Aeshma, so it won’t come running at you. Bad news: it is a full-scale artillery piece. We mean a potential multi-kilometer engagement range, with some sort of crystalline ammunition capable of both wiping out infantry and blowing apart heavy vehicles. Up close its mostly defenseless but, since it can fire straight up, assume it isn’t above blowing itself up just to get at you.”

“Shit,” Kirby drawled, “spoke too soon, huh?”

Nicadzim’s brow furrowed. “What will we be doing about those?”

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“Avoiding them or running like hell. They’re tough: it would take a big effort to bring one down with our firepower on hand. Just ... hope we don’t have to. It’s unlikely they’ll send them to go fetch things given how slow they are. Alright, full information is in your quarters. Dismissed.”

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Later in the week, Kirby was again indulging her now endless engineering hobby. Her hair was crammed up into the ratty, faded green cap she kept in the workshop. Kirby had been clambering around on the Marduk, long limbs askew, and needed her hair out of her face. Currently, she was standing at her work table deep in thought. She brushed a hand across the clear healing pad that laid over a recent patch of tattoo work on her left hip. In a previously uncharacteristic show of confidence she even sported an emerald and platinum navel piercing, the gem’s glimmer giving away its presence among the rich colors of the surrounding skin.

By this time, she had tweaked the Marduk to such a degree that it was doubtful another pilot could ever decode her complex set of shortcuts, subroutines, and sliding sensitivity settings. A number of CSOE and Marine engineering teams had corresponded with her more and more frequently as she had experimented and explored further possibilities with the suit. At this point, she had been cited in several exploratory papers on near-future advancements in powered armor and potential exosuit technology.

Using both the insight of her erstwhile pen pals and assembled footage from CSOE databases, she was on the verge of formalizing an entire close combat style designed specifically for the Marduk to use against foes of a similar scale. The need had simply not existed prior to the arrival of the Dreaded: either an enemy was roughly Human sized and thus subject to standard close combat methodology, or it was some form of animal either too unintelligent or too large for such methods. Though the Marduk had previously been shelved, it was becoming apparent that the Dreaded provided an avid usage case for something between an infantry unit and a mech battalion. Zero-G mining equipment and deep sea hazard gear was already being retrofitted and

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tested by the Astral Marines as a suitable counter to En-Rabisus and Ur-Rabisus in a confined urban space or indoors.

The increasing number of Aeshmas presented another problem: it was a tank or mech-sized target able to simply grab and grapple its enemies. Walkers were not equipped to grapple, exosuits like the Marduk were too small for such an encounter, and War-Colossi were both few in number and sometimes too large to engage in areas an Aeshma could reach. The answer would require something custom-engineered to nullify an Aeshma's close-combat ability. The issue with that was the time required to do so.

Kirby found herself pondering her own ability to fight Aeshmas, fingers steepled as she gazed back and forth across the holo-blueprints "scattered" on her work bench. The mess was artificial, of course; a projected simulacrum combining the visceral pleasure of manipulating physical plans, with the ease of being able to summon them up and file them away in an instant.

Kirby consulted her assistant: the garish Marine action figure Nicadzim had gifted her on Brightstar. She had slowly taken up the habit of speaking to it on occasion, and by this point it would often respond. The action figure's voice sounded very much like Kirby's, albeit more high-pitched and whiny.

"Alright, Fatima: how the hell you gonna' punch an Aeshma?"

The action figure stood in an ambiguously threatening pose on the corner of the workbench, clutching its surprisingly detailed rifle. Kirby wiggled the figure with one hand, and affected her voice with an upward inflection. "With a bigger fist, hahahaha!"

Kirby glared at the mouthy toy. "Real fuckin' funny—"

Her gaze caught on the toy's pile of accessories further out in the room. They were various bits and pieces that stacked over the toy soldier's armor, almost none of which had any bearing in reality. Her eyes snapped back to the toy, mint green eyes bright and wide.

"Fatima, you goddamn genius."

She sprinted from the workshop, and down the hall to the lobby. "Bryl, Bryl, Bryl!"

Bryluen called out from inside the library. "Kirby, I already told you there's no need to show me every time something bursts into flame. Just throw it into the fountain if you've brought it with you."

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The jockey paused, then shook her head. “No, no, no, I’ve got something and I want you to tell me if it’s the craziest shit you’ve ever heard!”

A few minutes later, the pair of them were locked inside Bryluen’s office. Kirby had just explained her idea, and Bryluen was casually shaking her head.

“No.”

Kirby deflated. “Wait, no what?”

“Not the craziest shit I’ve ever heard.”

“Oh! Yeah, that kinda’ figures. But seriously, I’m onto something, right?”

“You indeed are. There have been some basic concepts, loose sketches and abstracts, but again there just hasn’t been a need before. Focus on making it efficient enough for our purposes so the concept can be field-tested. After that you can look into mass production. The Marduk is becoming a regular Ship of Theseus, isn’t it?”

Kirby shrugged. “Haven’t had to touch too many of the base elements, but I won’t be surprised if it gets there!”

Bryluen casually glanced toward the console above her desk. A notification indicated the CSOE had sent her a time-sensitive data packet. “Duty calls. Have a concept render by this evening and an estimate for initial testing materials.”

Kirby nodded and left, having been wordlessly dismissed. The members of Dread Naught may embark on CSOE missions, but it barely needed stating that every word they heard went through Bryluen first. If needed she would disseminate information to the team, but just as often she would hold onto facts and events until it was necessary to divulge them. The better to maintain their focus, as most people weren’t equipped to juggle numerous priorities of dire import in their heads at all times. Bryluen had been planning and plotting Dread Naught’s appearance at the coming Grand Council for over two months, and the team still only knew the most scant details of what that would entail.

Thus, as Kirby left Bryluen alone in her office, she barely spared a second thought to what it might be that the Operative was learning. She would hear about it eventually.

Despite this routine, details of that data packet became public knowledge almost the minute Bryluen had absorbed it. She summoned

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the team into the meeting room, her face betraying as little as it usually did. She leaned on the table and spoke in a level tone.

“As you all know, the Qixing have recently began to roll out a specialized scanner system able to force Sjorthursars to reveal themselves at long enough distances for combat. They’ll be on ships at every major Gate in Human and Qixing space within about a month and a half. Each works by detecting certain quantum fluctuations via a method pioneered by T’hròstag scientists. Similar technology has also been shown to be able to locate the Stones indicating clear ownership, or at least a relationship between them. Moreover, the recent dream we all reported ... anyone who has had enough exposure to a Stone experienced the same thing we did, at around the same time. Theories are running wild to try and explain that.

“Ultimately, though, that’s not what I need to speak with you about. I just received word that a T’hròstag ambassador will arrive here in roughly four hours. They wish to communicate the bulk of the matter in person, but in short: the T’hròstag received a distant signal more than a month ago. It was barely perceived over the cosmic background radiation, and was significant due to its bearing: the signal came from the direction of the galactic rim. After a great deal of effort, they were able to reconstruct the transmission and found it to be in an unknown language. Further more, they were able to determine that the signal originated from another galaxy. They have been able to mostly translate the initial signal, and have caught additional broadcasts since then.”

Dread Naught was silent for a moment. Runner shifted in his seat. “C-communication from ano-other galaxy. About ... the Dreaded-d?”

Bryluen simply nodded. “Be here in three and a half hours, semi-formal dress. This isn’t an event of some sort where you have to observe much etiquette. Just a meeting. Whatever the T’hròstag have learned, it’s got them spooked if they’re taking it straight to us.”

Bel’Wa’s eyes unfocused. “What do you think it might be?”

Bryluen’s eyes softened as she glanced at her wife. “I honestly don’t know. Information or a warning? That’s all I could speculate.”

Vort’s feathers rippled with uncertain greens and teals. “I ... HOPE IT HELPS.”

The T’hròstag dignitary arrived at Raven’s Landing as

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scheduled. Ne was a little over a meter high, with platinum fur and a glittering puce sash denoting nem as an ambassador. Being a veteran of communicating with other species, the dignitary needed only a moment to collect themselves before descending the landing ramp of their shuttle and approaching the inadvertently revolting Humans. A pair of armored legionnaires followed the ambassador only to loiter quietly around the shuttle, their tentacled shadows slowly stretching along the landing pad as the sun descended.

This was not similar to when Rur'Thu's Qixing delegation had visited Raven's Landing. There was to be no formality and ritual not only due to the urgency of the matter, but a basic facet of T'hròstag character. A lack of family and meaningful reproductive concerns made it almost inevitable that the T'hròstag had settled on communal forms of government. The strength of this mindset and their inherent lack of kin meant the T'hròstag did not value individual life in the same way Qixing or Humans did. To demand formal greetings between individuals was, therefore, a form of egotism they simply did not understand.

The moniker of the T'hròstag over-government as an "Empire" was symbolic. The appearance of strength and dedication was beneficial to their species as a whole, and thus they envisioned themselves as an imperial power whose emperor was not an individual, but the ephemeral will of the people. The T'hròstag were chiefly represented by an elected Chancellor. The numerous Labor Unions had interlocking duties and decision-making abilities where it regarded their production capacities, while the Chancellor simply acted as a chief delegate and representative of the collective interests of the Empire where a single personage was necessary.

The power of the "Empire" was perceived as its ability to meet the needs of its people, and Chancellors (as well as Union Chiefs) were frequently deposed or disgraced should they fall short in the duties to which the whole had entrusted them. This practical governing perspective meant the T'hròstag had maintained the most stable economy in known space for decades, and as a result the majority of inter-species trade routes passed through T'hròstag economic hubs.

Bryluen hurriedly walked the loping ambassador to the meeting room, nirs breathing apparatus hissing quietly and padded toes slapping gently on the stone floor. Though T'hròstag were already pre-disposed to

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a minimum of speech, the utter silence of nirs arrival had not gone unnoticed. Generally, it was extremely hard for a Human to read a T'hròstag's body language. Among themselves, the T'hròstag assessed the rhythm and angle of head gyrations, patterns of arm undulation, and even follicle vibrations near-imperceptible to Humans. Naturally, the T'hròstag in turn found Human and Qixing nonverbal communication an utter mystery: reading faces was, after all, difficult to learn for a species that did not have them.

Regardless, according to all Bryluen knew and had studied, the ambassador was nervous. Afraid, foreboding, grim—all things it was distinctly uncomfortable to see a T'hròstag professional express.

The ambassador sidled up the meeting table and, after a split second wheeze, nirs words formed into Mandarin. “I am Ambassador Tur'Kwu, Who Dances Among the iFriel-kithar.”

The ambassador made a conciliatory motion, in nirs case lowering its organ sack and bending its neck away from Bryluen. T'hròstag lacked family names for obvious reasons, but instead possessed a brood name and a personal name or title earned upon coming of age. This personal name was believed to carry a great deal of importance in assessing the character and intent of a T'hròstag, and as such Humans who were expected to interact with them often were assigned titles that served a similar purpose. As personal names were often lengthy, a T'hròstag could be organically referred to in any way that invoked the spirit or implication of their personal name.

Bryluen bowed and returned the Ambassador's greeting in kind, again in the specialized language the CSOE had designed for speaking with T'hròstag.

“I am CSOE Operative Branok, Mistress of Light and Shadow. Esteemed Dancer: present your information, please.”

5. Alone and Afloat

“As you were told, Shadow-Mistress, a long-ranged monitoring station detected a garbled signal from the direction of the galactic rim. Our determination is that the signal’s bearing correlates with a certain stellar phenomenon from another galaxy. We have summarily reconstructed the initial transmission. The translation of further recordings is underway as we speak.”

The ambassador plugged a device into the meeting table through an adapter. After a moment, the transmission began to play. Laden with some manner of whistling distortion, it was difficult to hear. That said, the language being spoken was so utterly unfamiliar in form, cadence, and tone that it made little difference. The speaker’s tongue was a cacophonous torrent of sound, like a trash compactor filled with zithers. The translation developed by the T’hròstag played over the original message, with ambiguous terms or equivalencies notated.

“Flee now. The [*High Place*] has fallen. The [*Cascades*] are obliterated. The [*Uncertain*] fleets are laid waste. The [*Untranslatable*] core worlds have vanished upon deployment of their Deliverance. All is lost. Do not return. The [*Lurid Tide*] overwhelms. Repeat: the [*High Place*] has fallen. Hope is gone. The galaxy is lost.”

Vort let out what could be generously described as a blaring

shriek. All in the room snapped around to face him. He cycled through dozens of seemingly random colors, some of which the members of

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Dread Naught had no names for.

“FUCK! THE GRAND PALACE! THE CASCADES! I KNOW THESE THINGS, THESE PLACES! I HAVE BEEN TO THEM! THEY ARE GONE?! MY PEOPLE! THEIR DELIVERANCE? WHAT IS THEIR DELIVERANCE?! VANISHED?!?”

Vort continued shouting in a panic. The gray swirls in his eyes quaked and shimmered like mirages. Bryluen knelt by the alien, making an odd cooing sound and brushing a hand over one of the vanes on his back—something Vort had once described as a comforting gesture among his people. This caused him to slowly calm down, his colors settling into a shimmering and weak yellow-green.

“I—I KNOW THAT LANGUAGE. IT IS SPOKEN BY THE ... WELL, I’M NOT CERTAIN HOW TO SAY THEIR NAME FOR YOU—BUT THEY ARE A POWERFUL PEOPLE. THE WORD THAT TRANSLATED AS ‘HIGH PLACE’? THAT’S THEIR SEAT OF GOVERNMENT. THIS ... THIS MESSAGE SUGGESTS THE ... COMPLETE DESTRUCTION ... OF CIVILIZATION ... BUT SURELY THEY CAN’T KNOW ABOUT THE WHOLE REST OF THE GALAXY?”

“*Couldn’t* have known,” the T’hròstag ambassador muttered.

Bryluen looked towards nem, a dire look crawling across her face. “Oh, my god. Vort, I ... do not have words for how sorry I am.”

“... WHAT ... WHAT DO YOU MEAN?”

Bryluen closed her eyes. Her voice was low, and as serious as Dread Naught had ever heard. “The ambassador has raised a vital point. The signal correlates with ASSASN-15lh, a supernova-like stellar occurrence observed in a distant galaxy a few centuries ago. ASSASN-15lh was over three million light years away. The signal was traveling at roughly light speed.”

The ambassador spoke again. “We know little of substance, but further message fragments seem to describe this Deliverance as a matching phenomenon.”

Vort’s eyes swung between Bryluen and the ambassador. “YOU ARE SAYING ...”

Bryluen sighed. “The energy pulse that transported you to our galaxy was likely the shock wave of that Deliverance. You were not only transported through space, but through time.”

The room fell into a profound silence as all breathing and motion ceased. Vort croaked out a few words as his color drained from his

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plumage, like rain washing chalk from a sidewalk. "... I AM THE LAST. MY PEOPLE, IF THEY LIVED ... WOULD HAVE ... EVOLVED BY NOW ..."

Vort slowly turned and left the meeting room without a further sound. Nicadzim moved to follow, a dour frown on his face. He stopped as he felt a light touch on his elbow. Bel'Wa looked up at him, gazing through the milky surfaces of her nictitating membranes. Nicadzim could perceive subtle glints and flashes among the scales just below her eyes. The effect was due to clusters of vestigial iridiphore cells: an evolutionary leftover of luminescent color-signaling that sometimes resurfaced when a Qixing was saddened.

Bel'Wa glanced toward the door. She took a step closer to Bryluen and laid the fingers of one hand along her wife's wrist. "Vort and I have discussed his grieving process and the rituals of his people before. I ... had a bad feeling, and broached the topic just in case. He will need someone to help him, but ... he will need time to himself. I think it best if I were to be with him alone when enough time has passed."

Bryluen nodded. "Very well. Let me know what I can do and I will ensure you two have privacy. All of you are dismissed. I will speak with Dancer about what this means for the rest of us."

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Vort sat inside his room. The compact space had a roof roughly thirty centimeters higher than his furled wings, and every surface had a soft, porous texture. A light-emitting device in the corner filled the space with a broad spectrum of rays, many of which only he could see. He sat with his legs furled beneath him in the cushion on which he slept.

He was alone. Not simply a stranded example of his species, but a wholly unique organism in all known creation. Others of his kind could have been similarly displaced in theory, but he doubted the odds. His survival entailed several occurrences so improbable they could easily inspire superstition. He had arrived with only the barest husk of what was once his ship, suggesting a form of destruction that must have very narrowly spared him. He landed close to the surface of a planet: not inside of it, not in the sky, not simply in the void of space. Even

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assuming the phenomenon that transported him to this galaxy was drawn to gravity wells, he was far more likely than not to have ended up somewhere uninhabitable.

He had even found himself somewhere that was occupied by intelligent life at the exact moment in time in which he emerged. Finally, that intelligent life happened to be willing and advanced enough to communicate with him.

In short, the odds that others of his species remained in any part of the universe were incomprehensibly low. For all intents and purposes, it was laughable to hold out even the vaguest hope that he was not uniquely, starkly alone. The very notion sent a maddened thrill through his consciousness, a looming hysteria only hemmed in by the burden of sadness that accompanied it.

In practice, every single thing he knew and remembered of his people was all the information on them that now existed. He was no historian: he only knew so much, and his memory was not perfect. In a single instant, he realized that almost every fact of his people's existence was almost certainly forever gone. If what had been his people still lived, they would be vastly different from what he knew. There was no practical difference between that and death.

Though he had not consciously grappled with the issue, the idea that his people were alive and well somewhere out in the universe had always remained in his head. Even if he never saw them again, the world he knew had still existed and thrived somewhere. Even that small crutch had been taken from him, exposing him to the untempered truth of his isolation.

His people were highly social and thoroughly ritualistic in their communal bonds. Even a lone explorer such as he had to return to occupied outposts and way stations with regularity to maintain a level mental state. He was not a being that performed well in prolonged loneliness and, in fact, the only reason solitary exploration occurred was a tradition borne of the scant resources of his people's home world. It was the type of cultural paradox brought on by millennia of development, and lack of a pressing need for change.

As a result, the suite of emotions he was left with included impulses and conclusions he doubted he could justify to his Human compatriots, but which made perfect sense in his mind. He trembled at

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the foregone conclusions left before him.

Previously, though bereft of ways to reunite with his community (that being the greater group to which his life's work contributed), he had been able to justify his continued existence by attaching himself to Dread Naught as a form of surrogate community. This was a concept he had only rarely intimated, realizing aspects of the notion would sound extreme to his Human allies. Bel'Wa, on the other hand, was possessed of enough of a traditionalist culture that she might understand some dimensions of his dilemma.

But the essential facts of the current issue were that no matter what purpose he turned to, he no longer had a people to benefit or represent. The situation in which he found himself was considered the most barbaric punishment by his people: an exile that prevented any attempts at redemption or social contribution was considered worse than death. The practice had ended at least three millennia before his galactic displacement occurred, but it was still well-known that those that had been exiled quickly took their own lives rather than endure what was regarded as a purposeless existence.

That unutterably grim fact now stared him in the face. One part of him realized he could just as well consider Dread Naught his new home community and be done with the matter. Another part of him had never even overcome the shame of wielding his natural defenses; thousands of years of civilization had been bought by the Peacestone, a radioactive mineral which suppressed his people's destructive abilities and permitted them to speak. That part of him knew that now being the sole representative of his species, he had in fact—rather than making do in an attempt at survival—continuously dishonored his civilization.

He was not aware of how much time had passed, and reacted with some surprise to a gentle knock on his door. Later, he would learn that he had been left alone for almost six hours. Activating the preview camera, he caught a glimpse of Bel'Wa kneeling at his door in peculiar clothing. He absentmindedly realized it matched descriptions of Qixing funerary garb.

Why answer her knocks, though? The cruelest of happenstance had excised him from all he had known. He was further adrift than even Nicadzim could comprehend. There was no place in all the universe where any part of reality as he had known it existed but inside this room.

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All thoughts and feelings of home and true familiarity ceased past the door. He felt compelled to remain, as if breaking the seal on his room would turn all his memories to dust.

Bel'Wa knocked again, the gentle sound feeling to Vort like the rumbling of an oncoming storm. A storm that threatened to wash away the last tethers he held to his life. To confront the knocking was to commit himself to truly facing his loss. Words and action felt utterly beyond him; he would sooner starve himself. What would it matter if this were his unheralded tomb?

As soon as he felt the conclusion begin to settle in his mind, one of his eyes caught sight of the one foreign thing around him: Nicadzim's gift. The snow globe of Roth'Bia's Retreat. He had, frankly, paid it little mind since receiving it; his people *had* recorded holidays and notable occurrences with much greater regularity and grandiosity than Humans seemed to. Yet, this simple object now transformed into the undeniable focus of his attentions.

The motion began with the slightest tremble of a wing muscle. With aching slowness and numerous pauses, he stretched out one wing. With its tip, he briefly tilted the snow globe. The fake snow rushed about its insides, and began to gently fall back toward the bottom. So unbelievably simple—an undeniably quaint item in an era of such sophisticated entertainment—yet it was that very simplicity that granted it a humble power. It sat in silence, weighed down by water and wisps of memory.

His train of thought shifted ever-so-slightly. It was correct that he did not have a community, not really. But that was not to say that a community did not have *him*. He would never see another of his kind, never again know his home or his culture or even the slightest familiar comfort from outside his room. But he already had friends. He had a stable place to live where, even if it would never be the home he knew, *was* a home regardless. Perhaps, rather than being weighed down by the burden of a civilization that had ceased to be, it was just as valid to respectfully free those burdens and accept new ones.

He did not have his kin, but he had something just as amazing: an utterly alien being from a distant galaxy, waiting patiently outside his door to mourn alongside him.

He rose and, after a moment, stepped forward. He pressed the

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button to open his door with a tremulous wingtip. Bel'Wa wore a full-coverage face mask honed from several pieces of glittering coral. The mask itself was a rendition of Bel'Wa's own face, bearing a blank expression. The masks came from an ancient tradition on Torva'Ang whereby funerals were considered a time when the worlds of the living and the dead were closest. The masks concealed the emotions of those who wore them, which was believed sufficient to ward away any spiritual beings that might prey upon the grieving.

Otherwise, she simply wore what amounted to sackcloth scraps. The contrast from her usual vibrant and detailed garments was shocking. Vort always found it so odd that Bel'Wa's people were so suited to their colors, though they always stayed the same. She stood on bare feet, and clasped her hands in a ritualistic pattern. She knew this was not a time for words.

Raven's Landing was dim and seemingly empty. Bel'Wa slowly walked Vort along a trail of candles out to the landing pad, where the *Atet* had been moved aside to make room for a large funeral pyre. She had never seen his colors so dim—a daunting grayness pervaded every tone, and they almost sluggishly slid from one shade to another as the two of them walked along. Though so much emotion played through him, all of it was perceptibly deadened and weighed down.

The pyre had been constructed by drones out of dead wood recovered from the nearby forests, and was laid out in a wide circle. Normally the fireworks used in a mourning ritual would be used to light the pyre, but this was a much closer rendition of the event than Vort might ever have expected. The following ceremony was quiet, as it should be; the only real sound was the pop and crackle of the fire and the clapping of the fireworks echoing down the mountain. Rites of mourning were one of the few times Vort's people were silent. He found it more fitting now than ever.

Bel'Wa knew better than to probe Vort's feelings. There were no words for the grief Vort felt, no interpersonal act that held any semblance of proportion to what had occurred. She could only hope that the act of ritual, the slight tinge of the familiar, and perhaps simply the gesture itself made the slightest difference at all. She glanced down at Vort, watching the fireworks flash and spark in his eyes. Normally he was effusive about his mental state. Now he was eerily still, the white

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swirls of his ‘pupils’ as slow as she had ever seen them. She sat down next to him, the surface of the landing pad cold against her scaled skin.

Vort was glad Bel’Wa was there. He had not been sure he could withstand being around others at the time, but in her silence there was an understanding and a respect. After a short hesitation, he moved and curled up in Bel’Wa’s lap. For a moment, he could swear her skin felt just like the foam coating of a creche back home. She silently stroked one of his vanes with her hand.

Vort’s dreams were particularly illusory and evasive that night. To be entirely fair, he wasn’t sure he wanted to see much of his own dreams regardless. He mostly remembered only phantom images and ghostly sensations. It was, he supposed, fortunate that he had not spent the night lost in nostalgia and remembrance. When he awoke, he was less surprised than expected to recall that his world had ended and passed unbidden into distant ages. He was more surprised that he felt a strong sense of determination. He decided he would awaken, he would eat in his quarters, and then he would speak to Bryluen.

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Runner and Kirby had spent the early morning quietly sharing each other’s company on the balcony. The soft glow of Runner’s chest tattoo and the tattoo behind Kirby’s ear gently gave way as the sun rose. Runner rarely put on a shirt before noon, Kirby had noticed—not that she found that fact particularly upsetting. She wore her usual attire: just a green sports bra and a matching pair of athletic shorts. Her hair was, for once, tied into a loose bun. For what they lacked in clothing, they made up for in the amount of caffeine they had already drunk that morning. Bel’Wa had got Kirby into a tea habit. She of course didn’t drink the same tea as Bel’Wa, given the differences in their respective digestive systems, but she had come to appreciate the more delicate beverage.

Runner had been slowly attempting to start a conversation about his feelings. Kirby found that it was like activating an old lifter; each status light blinking to life in sequence, a slow building of hums and crackles as the craft’s atmospheric drive engaged. It was somewhat painful to watch, but also endearing—as was often the case with Runner.

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“I ... hate ... ev-verything?”

Kirby nodded. “Sounds like a feeling, yeah. Hate everything because ... ?”

Runner put his face in his hands, the soft morning light dancing across him as he moved. “Because I-I didn’t-t think I cared anym-more. I’ve never gone after nem-m or even looked into i-i-it and suddenly I’m pissed I c-can’t.”

“Of course you still care, hon. It might not have been what you decided to spend your time on, but it’s not like everybody gets a good chance at vengeance in their life. Most problems aren’t shit you can shoot in the face a couple decades later. It’s a weird situation, I can’t blame you for havin’ feelings about it.”

“I g-guess. Just weird to feel all this cr-rap after so long.”

Kirby gave a thin smile. “I ... get that feelin’. Totally. From my ... experience, you gotta’ accept the feelings more than you gotta’ understand e’m. You didn’t spend your life waitin’ on this. Nothin’ changed except that you saw nem again, and it’s not like the CSOE don’t know. It’s weird, but life is weird all over. Just gotta’ keep livin’ it, hon, even if you do see someone that hurt you bad. They can’t hurt you again, and ... they’ll get theirs.”

Runner watched one of Kirby’s long, thin legs bounce up and down slightly for a moment. Her tattoos rippled with the subtle motions of her muscles, bringing the canvas of her skin to life. Runner nodded slowly. “... okay. I’ll work-k on trying to accept th-that. Thanks, really.”

Kirby grinned despite herself. Spending time up close with Runner had been an interesting experience. His reputation and public persona had little to do with the truth of the man. When you sat down and talked to him, he had a childlike exuberance and lack of surety. He was learned in a surprising number of subjects, but seemingly inexperienced in so many other more obvious areas. Runner was a man who could woo anyone he wanted to, but still struggled with the proper protocol for saying hello to someone when he entered a room.

She had once watched Runner bullseye a Gugalanna at seven hundred meters, then unsheathe his ax and decapitate a Rabisu without looking. She had also watched him struggle with his own door password for a full eight seconds, before realizing he was moving too quickly to press the Seven key properly.

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Kirby sighed. "Any time."

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Vort closed the office door behind him. "SO, I JUST HAD SOMETHING TO SAY."

Bryluen nodded. Her office was always quiet and calm, a perfect space for reflection and discussion. "Yes, I imagine so. Anything you want or need, I will do it. Anything."

"THAT'S ... THANK YOU. BUT WHAT I WANT IS TO BE HERE. I'M NOT *OKAY*, AND PERHAPS I WILL NOT BE AGAIN ENTIRELY. BUT I KNOW THE BEST THING TO DO, THE *RIGHT* THING TO DO, IS TO BE HERE WITH MY FRIENDS AND ... TO KEEP WHAT HAPPENED IN MY TIME FROM HAPPENING AGAIN HERE. I DON'T ... I'M NOT SAYING THAT BECAUSE I SEE NO OTHER WAY, I MEAN IT. IT'S WHAT I WANT, AND IT'S WHAT I'M GOING TO DO."

Bryluen gave a gentle smile. "I'm glad to hear that."

"ME, TOO, HONESTLY. IF THERE IS ONE THING YOU CAN DO FOR ME ... JUST KEEP BEING MY FRIEND."

The request was so earnest and innocent, even through the translator, that Bryluen paused for a split second. At first, she had wondered if Vort's apparent sweetness had been an unintended side-effect of his translator. Over time she had decided that, even if Vort's people had all been sweet and soft-spoken, Vort was assuredly sweeter still.

"I don't think that's going to be a problem."

"SO, WHEN WE DO HAVE OUR NEXT ASSIGNMENT, I WOULD STILL LIKE TO COME ALONG. WHENEVER IT IS. I FEEL READY."

Bryluen made a short, quiet humming sound. "What feelings do you think are motivating that?"

The saturation of Vort's color lowered slightly. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN?"

"I mean that vengeance isn't often a good thing to have on the mind in a battle."

"I DON'T MEAN I WANT VENGEANCE, BRYLUEN. I CAN NEVER CHANGE WHAT HAPPENED."

"I know, Vort. When we're sitting here calmly discussing things, I'm certain you aren't thinking of vengeance. You aren't exactly

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possessive of a vindictive personality. Survival instinct covers for a lot when the bullets start flying. I'm just concerned because you haven't seen the Dreaded since you learned what happened. We don't know how it will feel, what thoughts may overtake you, when you encounter them again."

Vort paused. "MY PEOPLE ... WE PROCESS EMOTION MUCH FASTER THAN HUMANS SEEM TO. IT IS PART OF OUR NATURE. WE COME TO DECISIONS QUICKLY. I PROMISE I WOULD NOT ASK THIS IF I SUSPECTED THERE WERE ANY CHANCE I MIGHT ENDANGER ANYONE."

A drone flew in through a small hatch in the upper wall. Bryluen took a cup of coffee from it without looking. She slowly took a sip, her eyes resting on Vort all the while. Vort always helpfully offered to do various research tasks so that Human scientists could understand him better. He found it entertaining and interesting to contrast his base impulses and responses with those of his other-worldly compatriots. As a result, Bryluen knew that what he had said was true: by any measure, he had a greatly increased capacity for emotional processing and organization, paired with a greater need for companionship.

Moreover, Vort had demonstrated what amounted to a biological incapacity to lie. He could bend or distort facts, but could not suppress his species' complex and revealing emotional responses to any meaningful degree. Bryluen, unbeknownst to Vort, had taken a great deal of care in memorizing and learning the rough meaning of his colors and body language. This task contained additional difficulties as Vort was never actually a singular color. He blinked in rapid color patterns too quick for a Human to process, like a spinning fan blade that appears still on camera. This meant Bryluen could only see one color out of a pattern, and had to conclude possible emotions based on that limited information. She had found she enjoyed the daily challenge of doing so.

"But you do understand that I still feel the need to fuss at you about responsibility and all, correct?"

Vort shifted to a warm brass tone. "BUT OF COURSE, BROOD MOTHER."

"Thank you for humoring me." Bryluen cleared her throat and began.

6. Fleets and Fears

***** COMBAT PRIORITY PSI *****

Time: 1437 UTC; Combined Arms Deployment

Response per CSOE Protocol 65.0.2
Action Approved by Councilman Ollivier

Condensed abstract follows. Full details attached.

A scanning array at Gate Normandy has revealed a massive Dreaded force. The garrison at the Gate confirmed the presence of a Dreaded craft matching the records of the Lurcqh Olnah attack at 1405 UTC. Automated reports indicate All Hands Lost by approximately 1407 UTC. Neighboring Gates are being fortified as we speak. Presumption is an imminent, large-scale assault on Fort Salamis. Dread Naught is to board the station, and observe these two directives:

1. Coordinate with Marine authorities on-site to ensure the Stone on Fort Salamis does not fall into enemy hands.
2. Ensure the safety of the Gru'Thiall capsule by any means.

Fort Salamis fleet dispensation is as follows: The H.S.S.B. *Mictēcacihuātl* (Serving as Flagship), H.S.S.Dr. *Vercingetorix*,

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H.S.S.B.C. *Lu Bu*, H.S.S.B.C. *Annan*, 10 Cruiser class vessels, 18 Destroyer class vessels, and 24 Frigate class vessels (all names attached).

Further information will be dispatched to the *Atet* as it becomes available.

Integrity and Strength,
Abel Rocco Ollivier

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Four days had passed since the ambassador had visited Raven's Landing. The hallway blared with loud klaxons and every wall was bathed in sinister red light. Bryluen and Bel'Wa were first into the equipment hall, outerwear dashed on the ground as they clicked their armor plates in place. Vort and Nicadzim, then Runner and Kirby arrived, donning their armor in turn.

Bryluen's helmet came online as it attached to the rest of her armor, HUD elements flaring to life and sliding into place as a slew of system diagnostics played out in microseconds. "Close-combat protocol, people. If we have to fight today, it's going to be tight."

After holstering her pistol and whip, she grabbed a complex-looking firearm from her wide collection of weapons. Most of it's length resembled a particularly hefty rifle with a box clip and an odd attachment along the side of its body, but the business end of the weapon consisted of a rotating X-shaped formation of weapon barrels. Bel'Wa loaded herself down with specialist ammunition, and mounted several devices to the inside of her shield. She briefly touched the rod Nico had gifted her on Brightstar before sprinting after her wife. Vort followed, then Nicadzim, then Runner bearing his ax, shot-pistols, and adjustable plasma weapon. Kirby took up the rear, sliding the Marduk's flak cannons to the ready position.

The *Atet* soon hurtled away from Raven's Landing. Dread Naught would power through the Corax Gate and relay through several more in order to reach Fort Salamis beyond Gate Siegfried.

Kirby's eyes darted subtly between HUD elements and data readouts. "So they didn't even bother with any Corvettes, huh?"

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Bryluen swiftly assessed the *Atet's* long-range communication settings. "It was an emergency muster. Had to cover a lot of gates. They actually had the Corvettes hauled to Gate Cyrus in a big swarm. Too many people in that system to risk being wrong about the Dreadeds' target. Kirby, Battle transmissions will be carried on Intra-gate frequency 359."

The jockey nodded. "We gonna' let everyone listen in?"

"No," Bryluen intoned flatly. "Runner, Nico, and Vort haven't been in a naval battle. I don't want to risk rattling their nerves with the comms. No simulation displays in the bay, either."

Kirby nodded. "You think it'll be that bad?"

"It's always that bad. Besides, you saw what happened at Lurcq Olnah."

Kirby simply nodded again. She knew that, at best, a naval battle was terrifying. It was as immaterial as combat could get, with each maneuver and shot occurring over inconceivable distances. To those not in command, it was naught more than a capricious clash of gods. Every microsecond carried forces of destruction that could de-molecularize a Human being so quickly they would not perceive their own death. Those who served on a ship in positions off the bridge were steely and fearless. They had to be, for any time their skills were needed they were utterly at the mercy of chance and the decisions of the Command crew.

The jockey shook her head. She did not look forward to approaching the Fort.

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Admiral Taussig tapped his fingers along the command console of the *Mictēcacihuātl*. Battleships were singularly mighty and impressive constructs, bristling with over one hundred large-scale armaments capable of laying waste to entire planetary systems. In the case of the Human fleet, they were one of the only classes of vessel with no purpose but destruction—a task they took to with gusto. The Human race had only three such craft: the *Mictēcacihuātl*, the *Ereshkigal*, and the *Yama*. The *Mictēcacihuātl* had the distinction of being the only one of the three fielded in direct combat twice. It was rare, after all, for a conflict to continue after the arrival of a battleship.

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Though Human military craft were typically averse to much ornamentation, the bridge of a Battleship was something of a sacred space. An individual granted captaincy of a Battleship had been entrusted with planet-breaking firepower. In honor of this dread duty, the bridge was decorated with carvings and images of the ship's namesake. A leering visage of Mictēcacihuātl, the Star-swallower and queen of the Aztec Underworld, loomed above the Admiral. Controls, overrides, communication equipment, projectors, and view screens filled the confined space. The bridge appeared oddly small and compact compared to the hulking size of the vessel, which was at least five times the void-displacement of a battle cruiser like the *Cybele*.

The minimal size of the bridge was, of course, a simple fact of starship design. The vast majority of a ship's mass was dedicated to thick layers of complex armor developed to counter not only the hazards of space, but the brutal weapons of enemy ships. Such was the focused efficiency of starships that a crew of only eight hundred personnel was required to operate the multi-kilometer battleship.

The Admiral, a pale man with shaggy gray hair and a thick beard, opened a line of communication to the fleet as he stood at his command console. On a ship this size, there was an artificial gravity system and, while weaker than Earth's, it was enough to keep someone on their feet. This feature was chiefly considered a luxury, in existence purely because crew spent more time aboard such large vessels compared to lighter craft. Cruisers were the smallest craft to have even basic living quarters, as all others could be boarded and moving in minutes.

Three hundred thousand kilometers to the *Mictēcacihuātl's* starboard side lay the long gray and silver shape of the *Vercingetorix*. Dreadnoughts were roughly the same size as battle cruisers, but were altogether less subtle. They were typically employed at the longest distances of any Human vessel, using their above-class weapon mounts in bombardment or precision fire-support roles. Though lacking in many secondary armaments and defensive emplacements, their sheer damage potential made them a feared adversary. The *Vercingetorix's* veteran crew of three hundred had served together for nine years, and were one of the finest in the fleet.

The *Lu Bu* and *Annan* lay at the far ends of the vast battle formation, each some eight hundred thousand kilometers closer to the

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gate. Battle cruisers held varied armaments, drone complements, advanced detection arrays, and tactical systems in order to both battle numerous enemies and command large forces. Beyond the two battle cruisers lay the cruisers, destroyers, and frigates in formation. Such was the scale of space combat that no ship in the assembled fleet was within one hundred thousand kilometers of another.

Taussig's defense plan was flexible and sensible. The expectation was that the Dreaded would perform a blockade run toward Fort Salamis, about half an Astronomical unit from the gate. This was a substantial distance to be under fire, and certainly one a fleet in motion could protect. The craft were arrayed in a vast net formation to ensure equal coverage of any course heading up to a seventy-five degree facing away from the gate itself.

Given the speed of light, lasers were always wielded at the longest range outside of stellar phenomenon, with particle beams and plasma weapons following behind, and at closer ranges cannon fire could reliably strike a moving enemy. Guided projectiles and drones were often used at medium ranges to limit enemy movement and corral them into predictable courses.

The sheer accuracy and speed of laser weapons meant that ships employed numerous countermeasures against them, from refractive armor coatings, to flak guns loaded with prismatic beads, to heat-resistant reflective structures built around subsystems and weak points. For this reason, plasma weapons had become more common as a way of countering these defenses.

The frigates were matched up with the destroyers in loose fire teams that were to protect their assigned cruisers, as well as reign in any Dreaded craft attempting to speed past the battle line. The small crafts' secondary weapons were slaved to the fire control of the cruisers, allowing instant focus-fire and automated suppression while leaving the crew free to focus on the targets of their main armaments.

The cruisers were to maintain fire control of overlapping areas of space, and to act on orders given by the battle cruiser to which they were assigned. The battle cruisers were to not only maintain and adjust the order of battle, but to obey orders from the Admiral, coordinate and organize tactical data for their command, and move to enforce the densest parts of the battle.

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The *Mictēcacihuātl* was to target any Dreaded that attempted to pierce the battle line, then turn its attention to the capital ship expected to lead the Dreaded forces. The *Mictēcacihuātl* would attempt to draw the enemy capital ship into a duel, or otherwise obstruct them with a wall of firepower great enough to force a retreat. On top of this, the Battleship would have final say in command decisions and was to order changes in overall strategy as the need arose. The *Vercingetorix* had the simple mission of lending its fire support to wherever the battle line slackened or the Dreaded were concentrated, or to otherwise pour its firepower onto the enemy capital ship.

Fort Salamis itself was surrounded by a network of automated weapon platforms controlled by the Fort, and the structure mounted massive anti-starship cannon emplacements. The enemy, no matter how numerous, inevitably faced an incredible challenge.

So far, the Dreaded had demonstrated space weaponry equivalent to cannon fire, laser batteries, and drones (insomuch as they sent black powder to create Dreaded on the surface of a ship). No equivalent to particle beams or missiles had been verifiably witnessed, though reports indicated the capital ship may have such capabilities. Adjusting his collar, Admiral Taussig considered this and addressed the soon-to-be embattled defense force.

“You all have your orders, and you all know your duty. I do not expect I must say much more than that. Regardless: you are our bravest and finest, and at this moment Humankind needs you. There are many unanswered questions about our enemy, but know that they will not hesitate. Those at Lurcq Olnah did not receive mercy. We will not assume the enemy will give us any here, nor will we grant them any. All craft ... Battle Stations. Peritus, Fortitudo, Spes.”

Every ship in the Human fleet rang with an all-encompassing whine of alarms. Helmets sealed onto space suits, main power systems and weaponry hummed to life. Shells slid into chambers, laser arrays charged, plasma batteries calibrated, missiles primed, drones ran diagnostics, and scanners began to sweep. Consoles lit with information, projections swam to life with trajectories, fire zones, and status reports.

The larger craft signaled for their crew to brace. Their anti-gravity systems deactivated, the bridge crew suddenly floating in their harnesses as all the ships' power was redirected to defensive armaments

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and engines. The entire fleet accelerated, beginning a complex dance to ensure they were in motion when the enemy arrived. A still ship was a dead ship, after all. Within five minutes the fleet was prepared, with weapons trained on the ominous Gate before them.

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Bryluen nodded at the message from the Admiral. “Kirby, we’ve just received word from the fleet. They have engaged the Dreaded.”

Kirby immediately told the *Atet* to run silent; all the *Atet*’s non-essential systems would be deactivated in an attempt to mask its presence from other vessels.

The *Atet*’s unique prototype Compressed-Space drive allowed it to translate through a Gate thousands of kilometers further out than normal. This meant it could arrive in-system at a distance where most Gate defenses would not likely see it when running silent. While even such a small Compression Phenomenon could potentially populate on scanners, the absence of a detectable ship would render the discovery mostly useless.

Kirby engaged the drive one last time in order to pass through Gate Siegfried. The battle had been going on for a mere four minutes, and already it was a living hell. The instant the Compression Phenomenon opened, local communications were flooded with status reports and panicked maydays.

“This is *Astarte*, engines two and four are losing power. We have no choice but to withdraw for triage. We require cover—“

“—that sector, *Laveau*, the *Talon* and *Vindicator* are en r—“

“—ptain Raju, formerly of the *Mark Antony*. Recovery is a no-go, we have lost the *Baradji*. I repeat: we have los—“

“—*ingetorix*, here. Confirmed kill. *Brekyirihunuade*, you are clear to evacuate.”

A small tactical simulation on the *Atet*’s HUD showed each craft as if it were close enough to be seen. The urgency and relative positions were real enough, it was just that the distance between each glimmering hologram appeared vastly smaller than it was.

The Battle of Gate Siegfried was spectacular and terrible in equal measure. Wretched hulks twirled in the void, rent in half by monstrous

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forces. The apocalyptic impact of cannon fire sent glittering shards of armor twirling in vast clouds. Blinding laser beams able to melt skyscrapers warped and twisted weapons and subsystems while missiles careened about, piercing into targets before bursting in violent detonations. Small munitions burst from every vessel as dozens, if not hundreds of automated turrets took aim at incoming projectiles, wreathing each ship in a halo of mini-laser flashes and flak. Drones swarmed and coordinated fire to protect surrounding ships from the unnatural black clouds—powder sent to create Dreaded on any vessels it touched. Each craft moved at immense speeds, their attitude thrusters fired in short bursts to compensate for weapons fire and impacts, while making numerous tiny course adjustments to avoid incoming fire. Each ship moved in complicated patterns of wavy lines, loops, and spirals that would look absurd for anyone with a frame of reference for their size and weight.

This battle had already entered the record books for its scale. Failure here would not only mean the loss of the Stone, but a catastrophic loss in life and material for the Human fleet. Even as the battle raged, debates occurred within the halls of civil servants across Human space about the risk being taken to hold onto a single object. Regardless of the uncertainties involved, the Astral Marines and CSOE had maintained a hard-line stance on the Stones' importance. Today would be a firm test of that commitment.

Hundreds of color-coded markers and detailed models appeared on the inner surface of the *Atet*'s cockpit as if it were a window. Indicators showed the source of the voices on the general battle comms, while simulated sounds and tactile responses on the ship's controls engaged the pilot's senses. Kirby exhaled as her shoulders and face relaxed. Her eyes began to calmly dart about the projection, building a mental image of the flow of battle and the best course to take. She deactivated several automatic steering and course-plotting features, and began to guide the *Atet* into the fray.

Kirby had a balancing act to maintain: though running silent, it was still possible for the *Atet* to be detected if they drew too close to an enemy ship—or, for that matter, if they were far enough away from the rest of the battle to be suspicious. If she remained far enough from the enemy ships for passive scanner checks to pass them by, but close

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enough that a direct scan would mistake them for debris or a false positive, they could pass through the battle unscathed. This all assumed the Dreaded had at least some rough parity with known scanner systems. She fervently hoped that was the case. On the other hand, if she was wrong no one on board would know—because they would all be obliterated before they realized what had happened.

Sjorthursars remained, as always, bizarre and disconcerting beings. Like stretched out horseshoe crabs Sjorthursars appeared chitinous, with a pair of thin claw-like protrusions sticking out of their fore like antennae. Dozens of tendrils and filaments waved and twitched from seemingly every joint, responding to unknown stimuli. Round growths dotted along their surfaces spat out hyper-accelerated darts or acidic globules like cannon fire, as well as destructive rays of light.

The defenses of these beings behaved like the energy fields used to bend and neutralize particle beams and lasers. Unlike those mostly very limited defenses, the field that surrounded a Sjorthursar was equally effective against other weapons.

Regardless, they were able to be beaten. The issue in this case was their number. Almost four dozen Sjorthursars had come through the gate and furiously engaged the defending Astral Marine fleet in surprisingly organized attack groups. They executed an evident flight plan, and targeted weak points in any Human formation they could. It was blatantly evident that something had changed—presumably the arrival of the Capital Ship had altered the Sjorthursar's behavior such that they now posed a significantly higher threat. While this eventuality was not entirely unforeseen by those at Astral Marine command, it was certainly a far cry from a good sign for things to come.

Bryluen admitted to herself that, despite her utter trust in Kirby's skills, sitting through this experience would be no picnic. If nothing else, the importance to the Dreaded of the huge Stone on Fort Salamis had been correctly estimated.

Whether it could be held onto would depend on the mettle and skill of the Astral Marines and the advanced technology they relied upon. Bryluen brought up a fleet status report to distract herself from the *Atet's* stressful flight. That said, the report held little comfort. Already, the battle had exacted a high price without even the presence of the capital ship to show for it.

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TOTAL CASUALTIES: 645 Confirmed (863 Estimated)

CRAFT CONFIRMED DESTROYED:

8 Unmanned Void Emplacements

Firebase Siegfried: ~9 Survivors (Estimated)

H.S.S.F. Luther: All Hands Lost

H.S.S.F. Nike: All Hands Lost

H.S.S.F. Glare of Procyon: 25 Survivors (12 Recovered)

H.S.S.F. Tesla: All Hands Lost

H.S.S.F. Servant of Tao: 34 Survivors (All Recovered)

H.S.S.F. Mark Antony: 18 Survivors (6 Recovered)

H.S.S.F. Baradji: All Hands Lost

H.S.S.D. Boadicea: 54 Survivors (48 Recovered)

H.S.S.D. Ibrahim's Defiance: 72 Survivors (60 Recovered)

H.S.S.D. Huángdì's Decree: 61 Survivors (All Recovered)

H.S.S.D. Legacy of Altair: All Hands Lost

H.S.S.C. Gobind Singh: 122 Survivors (103 Recovered)

H.S.S.C. Light of Zarathustra: All Hands Lost

H.S.S.C. Tarasque: 144 Survivors (121 Recovered)

CRAFT DAMAGED:

H.S.S.F. Providence: Weapons, Hull

H.S.S.F. Geirhardt: Power, Hull

H.S.S.F. Kichu-Fuda: Weapons, Hull

H.S.S.F. Marie Laveau: Hull

H.S.S.D. Ayanmo: Engines

H.S.S.D. Astarte: Engines, Hull

H.S.S.D. Šahrazād: Weapons, Engines, Hull

H.S.S.C. Hatshepsut: Communications, Hull

H.S.S.C. Brekyrihunuade: Life Support, Hull

H.S.S.B.C. Annan: Weapons, Hull

Kirby first passed within the edge of the passive scanner radius of the H.S.S.F. *Talon*. The *Talon* was providing supporting laser fire to aid the H.S.S.F. *Marie Laveau*, which was currently embattled by a pair of Sjorthursars. A shrieking alarm sounded as a pair of laser blasts

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flashed from the distant *Mictēcacihuātl*. A Sjorthursar some forty-thousand kilometers behind the *Atet* took a hit and twisted about as it died.

Kirby dove the *Atet* through the maimed wreckage of the H.S.S.F. *Luther*, allowing them to pass surprisingly close (in stellar terms) to a Sjorthursar currently embroiled in a shootout with the listing H.S.S.D. *Ayanmo*. The *Luther* had suffered a devastating blow to its starboard engines, and the reduction in momentum limited its maneuverability. This enabled a cluster of cannon strikes three seconds later to shatter it like a pane of glass. The ship's remains spun through space, wholly unrecognizable now but for the record of where it had once been.

The *Atet* spun and whirled violently, its attitude thrusters automatically adjusting the rotation of the craft to avoid nearby pieces of debris without interrupting the craft's course. The speed of the adjustments would not be possible in atmosphere. Without windows or gravity, however, those in the bay of the *Atet* did not even notice that their conveyance was whirling about.

A vast particle beam erased the center of another Sjorthursar fifty thousand meters ahead of the *Atet* in a shimmering atomic reaction. The particle beam was a flexible and dangerous compromise between lasers and cannons. They operated by striking a target with a stream of hyper-accelerated particles, like a building-sized sandblaster. Various types of molecules used in a particle beam required various forms of countermeasure, and a single beam could unleash multiple kinds of molecular ammo. Clearly, the Sjorthursar had not been prepared for that particular configuration of particle beam.

Kirby's next waypoint was the ship responsible for that attack, the H.S.S.B.C. *Annan*. Drones swarmed over the aft of the *Annan*, repelling Dreaded forms that had materialized on its outer surface. The battle cruiser's weaponry fended off three Sjorthursars at once, an expert cluster of cannon fire splitting one of them in two. A laser blast struck the battle cruiser at an angle, the special material comprising the outer layer of the *Annan*'s armor refracting much of the beam in a burst of wave-shifted light.

The proud ship had waded into a particularly dense part of the shooting that had already claimed the *Boadicea*, *Nike*, and *Legacy of*

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Altair. Tactical readouts indicated the *Annan* had successfully stabilized the line, and the main bulk of Dreaded pressure was now back in the direction of the *Lu Bu* at the far side of the battle. A trio of Sjorthursars moved to attack the *Annan*, but were met with overwhelming force: the *Vercingetorix* had unleashed its siege array.

Dreadnoughts typically had one or two weapon-clusters slaved to a single firing mechanism. Each weapon in the cluster identified a trajectory toward its target, and then varied that trajectory slightly every shot until told to stop. This was known as a siege array, as it allowed a vessel to passively bombard an area or large target without ceasing. The effect in this case was the annihilation of all three Sjorthursars as particle beams, cannon fire, and flashes of lasers tore them apart.

Passing the *Annan* meant that Kirby had navigated roughly half of the battle without getting herself and her compatriots slaughtered. The remaining distance featured a lot less combat, but by no means did the threat of being erased go away. From here, it was a sprint past the *Vercingetorix* and *Mictēcacihuātl*, then a hurried zig-zag through the defense platforms. Afterward, they would park at Fort Salamis, where they would have a much higher chance of survival.

Unfortunately, at that particular moment a large amount of black powder was assaulting the defense network around Fort Salamis. At this point, it was inevitable that some amount of Dreaded would successfully reach the Fort and begin to attack.

Bryluen sat forward slightly as she appraised the overall tactical simulation on the HUD. "... there it is ... The Big One."

7. Salamis and the Serpent

A new Compression Phenomenon opened in the center of Gate Siegfried. It rapidly stretched to an absurd size—nearly that of the vast Gate' aperture itself—and began to accommodate something so massive as to boggle belief. First came four horn-like shapes, each further apart than the length of three cruisers. The horns were mottled and ever-so-slightly crooked, as if hurriedly formed from half-cooked clay. These horns extended at least two kilometers out of the Gate before the being's body emerged.

The main mass of the creature began with a cluster of vast, pointed shapes that overlapped messily at its tip. On sight, it was difficult not to rationalize the shapes as the shattered teeth of some maw vast enough to swallow a battle cruiser. Seemingly random tendrils and feelers adorned a surface replete in thick shapes like irregular armor plates. Small domed protrusions like those on the Sjorthursars dotted it in groups and clusters, suggesting a massive number of weapons. Large, pyramidal growths at key points could be rationalized as large-scale weaponry like that on a dreadnought or battleship.

The being's body continued tapering wider for several kilometers, until it began to slowly become thinner toward the rear. As the thing exited the Compression Phenomenon in its full horror, the end of its body was visible. A four-sided hooked "tail", almost like the

overlapped ends of two earwigs, capped off the strange and frightening

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thing.

In total, there was no single artificial object in space which approached the scale of the horrid monster. It could hardly be imagined that such a thing truly existed. At least three times the length of a Battleship and as heavily armed as an entire battle group, Jörmungandr had arrived.

The H.S.S.D. *Astarte* was sent spinning as a burst of cannon fire tore its flank asunder. The H.S.S.F. *Talon* and *Masauwu* followed closely behind as vast lasers pierced their valiant hearts. The Admiral immediately ordered the various elements of the fleet to shift in a controlled fashion to remove the smaller ships from Jörmungandr's stellar vicinity. It was immediately evident that the front line was no longer a place for Frigates and Destroyers.

Taussig ordered the *Vercingetorix* to accompany the flagship as they engaged Jörmungandr with all available firepower. Particle beams, missiles, drone complements, lasers, cannon fire, and searing bolts of plasma rushed from the combined weapon mounts of the two vast ships. Jörmungandr returned fire. As suspected, the Dreaded Capital ship was armed with particle beams.

"Dread Naught," Bryluen calmly stated over the team comms, "when we land aboard Fort Salamis, we may need to sprint straight for where the Stone and capsule are stored."

"Another r-r-race, huh? Like Tāwhiri?" Runner, like he always did inside the disembarkation bay, bounced his feet.

"I'm thinking that this time we get there before most everyone on hand is dead."

"THAT WOULD MAKE THIS A LITTLE BIT BETTER, YES."

For Kirby, speech was not currently a possibility. Though the majority of the battle was far behind them, she still had to maintain a clear picture of the ongoing conflict in order to avoid any salvos or projectiles that missed their intended targets. A series of security checks flashed on the HUD as the remaining weapon platforms scanned and approved the passage of the *Atet*. More and more of the platforms had succumbed to Dreaded swarming over their surface and disabling them. The plan was a good one, and ensured that all nearby weapon platforms were too busy to catch all of the black powder that simply rushed by. The presence of abstract strategy and tactics was more visible in this

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battle than it ever had been before, and as a result the Dreaded were already aboard Salamis.

Even were she not busy piloting the ship, Kirby couldn't imagine speaking to the others without betraying any emotion regarding what was occurring around Gate Siegfried. Bryluen was giving orders and appraising the team of conditions aboard the Fort, with no hint that they had just flown directly through a battle whose casualties were already the highest suffered by the fleet in a century.

Numerous Marines were left floating in escape capsules, hoping to avoid notice long enough for rescue. Some that hadn't died when their vessel was breached were still floating in the void, spinning wildly and hoping some stray particle or object didn't open a hole in their armor.

As part of Marine void training, there was a section on being stranded in space. Kirby still regarded it as the most challenging, and certainly most frightening aspect of becoming a Marine. Trapped inside a sealed armor suit, you were left floating with limited air. Your suit was fitted with malfunctioning systems and enough momentum that you couldn't stop from spinning wildly. The entirety of the challenge was in simply maintaining a sense of calm long enough to set off your rescue beacon. You never knew exactly how long you'd be left afloat, utterly alone with your thoughts as the drop ship vanished into the distance.

In open space there is no up or down, no reference for distance or direction. So many things your brain assumes should be there simply aren't. This factor alone meant that numerous would-be Marines washed out when they hit void training. The claustrophobia of knowing there was nothingness outside the armor less than two inches from your skin, the utter darkness of open space, and the hopeless distance were enough that many simply fell into an absolute panic. It was a sure thing, then, that even the freshest Astral Marine was someone who could suppress some of their core fears to get a job done.

Still, nothing about the experience was fun. After a large battle, it could take up to six hours to find and gather up stray Marines.

Kirby did exactly what her training taught her: she set aside the thought of her lost comrades and expertly pulled the *Atet* up to berth E-4, where they had been given prior clearance. Even as the ship settled down and deactivated, signatures populated on her armor HUD. The Dreaded aboard Fort Salamis were gathering up and advancing from

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various points of entry on the outer hull of the fort. Fortunately, berth E-4 was as close to the Stone and capsule as the *Atet* could be.

Rather than a bay where a small ship could be sealed inside, the berth was an exposed docking point on the outside of the hull. For an instant, Kirby thought about how pissed off she would be if something shot the *Atet* off the side of the Fort while they were inside.

Bryluen shot out of her seat, grabbing her rifle from the weapon mount next to her. "Come on people, up and at e'm! Form up!"

The team members in the bay were released from their harnesses, taking a split second to adjust to the artificial gravity inside the Fort. Bryluen rocketed past her team mates and out of the ship. Runner, Vort, Nico, and Bel'Wa hefted their weaponry and dashed outside. Kirby launched herself into the opening cockpit of the *Marduk*, clenched her mechanical fists, and followed behind.

The *Atet*'s ramp had opened into a featureless gray chamber; the team stood in a line as the ramp lifted up and closed behind them. The *Atet* had parked its belly against the side of the station at a ninety-degree angle from the orientation of the station's interior. This intermediary chamber existed to correct that. As they stood, the chamber rotated to align with the inside of the station. A door across from the team slid open, revealing a corridor howling with klaxons. Red running lights and an officious voice recording informed the occupants of the situation.

"BAYS TWO AND SIX ARE BREACHED. QUARTERS THREE AND RESEARCH ONE ARE HOSTILE."

"Good, we've got some time. Hold!"

A plasma blast and a flurry of shotgun pellets flew past the open door. A squad of Marines moved into sight, weapons tracking for further targets.

The squad leader, Sergeant Major Elissar, was the ranking Marine aboard the station itself. She was a towering woman with tanned skin and a shock of dirty blonde hair. She looked toward *Dread Naught*, fierce gray eyes visible through her visor.

The members of *Dread Naught* had become fairly iconic at this point. The hulking *Marduk*, the colorful winged Vort, Runner in his eigengrau armor and shoe lifts, Nico in his heavy cerulean assault plate, Bel'Wa in her stunning red Qixing panoply, and Bryluen before them all in bronze and blue.

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Elissar nodded. “Good to see you, ma’am. The Stone and Capsule are still safe, with two squads at each approach. Checkpoint One is holding but embattled, Two is seeing sporadic action, and Three—which defends our escape route—has remained quiet.”

Dread Naught fell in behind Bryluen as she began jogging. The Marines, in turn, fell in behind them. Bryluen checked the status and armaments of each checkpoint on her HUD. “Excellent. I want another heavy weapon at Three, and pull Two back to the next corridor. Hard seal Quarters Five, get your squad to Checkpoint Two, and send the other patrol squad to Checkpoint One through the maintenance corridors. We already know what they’re after, no need to pretend like it’s a mystery. The mass down there is going to come through the path of least resistance, so put every gun we’ve got in their path.”

“Yes, ma’am. All else is already sealed up tight. Four losses, three with serious injuries so far.”

“Well done. What hostiles have we seen so far?”

“Gugalannas, a few Ogumos, all three Rabisus.” Elissar paused for a split second. “Turns out the big ones can crawl pretty fast.”

Bryluen grunted. “Nothing new?”

“Not so far, but the main mass is due in only three minutes.”

Salamis was large but well organized and the jog from berth E-4 to Storage Two was short and simple. Storage Two was a large chamber normally filled with scientific equipment and neatly organized crates of supplies or ammunition; however, those crates had now been arranged into walls and cover for heavy weapon mounts, in order to fortify every entrance. The Stone and Capsule were contained in heavily shielded translucent containers which had also been surrounded by heavy crates. They were placed together at a position equidistant to the three large entrances. The Stone was secured by industrial tethers, to prevent it from moving toward the Dreaded.

The shutters at each entrance had been lowered to funnel the Dreaded into a narrow firing line, with two redundant positions closer to the Capsule and Stone. Elissar had not made Sergeant Major by being careless.

A single Marine manned each of the three mounted laser emplacements overlooking the shutter doors, accompanied by a squad of Marines in heavy cover. If the Marines at the three checkpoints in the

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corridors were forced to withdraw, they would depend on cover fire provided by the emplacements as they moved into their fallback positions inside the storage facility.

Bryluen knew what she wanted her team to do before they had even arrived. “Kirby, make yourself a firing platform right there. Cannon out, and overwatch. Runner and Nico, Checkpoint Two and conserve ammo. Bel’Wa, Checkpoint Three, but be ready to pull back. Vort, you’re with me at Checkpoint One. No flames.”

The team signaled affirmation on Bryluen’s HUD and split up without further word. Kirby quickly pulled a few crates together, hopped on top, and hunched down. The Marduk’s leg armor locked into position, and stabilizers emerged from her torso as the cannon atop her cockpit extended and locked into place. She settled into a joystick-based control scheme that provided the necessary precision for her weapon. The first thing that entered her sight would quickly regret it. That said, she was less than enthused that Bryluen clearly anticipated the Dreaded reaching the storage facility.

Bel’Wa jogged up the corridor toward Checkpoint Three. She seemed out of place, her vibrant colors, embossed filigrees, and traditional aesthetic standing out sharply among the functional grays and silvers of Fort Salamis. Checkpoint Three consisted of a group of Marines behind makeshift barriers, attentive but relaxed. There were no Dreaded nearby and, if anything at all went according to plan, that would remain the case unless the other checkpoints were unable to hold. If the Stone and Capsule required evacuation, this checkpoint defended the route to the waiting transport. Every bulkhead and shutter leading here from anywhere but Storage Two had been shut and sealed, meaning the Marines were staring toward a closed bulkhead. If the Stone and Capsule needed to be evacuated, however, the Dreaded would surely attempt to break through the bulkheads in order to open up an easy approach.

The assembled Marines bore shotguns, ripsaws, and a single shotcannon. Within the confines of a space-borne Fort, accuracy meant little. In corridor combat, there was simply no better friend than a military-grade shotgun.

The two Marine squads shifted, passively expressing interest as Bel’Wa settled up next to them. The squad leaders saluted Bel’Wa—

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while it was unusual to encounter Qixing military assets on the field, any Astral Marine Officer would be familiar with insignia and other denotations of rank necessary to coordinate properly. Bel'Wa curtly returned with the Qixing equivalent to a salute, before settling into the formation behind her tall shield. Checking one last time that her gauntlet cannon was loaded properly, she took a deep breath and began to keep watch.

Runner trotted alongside Nicadzim as they wound toward Checkpoint Two. A single shotgun blast sounded out as they rounded the final corner. The assembled Marines were hunkered behind barriers that extended from the walls of the corridor, checking ammo counts and settling their formation. On Bryluen's orders, they had just shifted back an intersection and were now one corner away from the entrance to Storage Two. As with Checkpoint Three, the majority of their weaponry were shotguns, though their Shotcannonier was accompanied by a Marine wielding a plasma cannon. Runner and Nicadzim fell into position alongside their compatriots as a pair of Gugalannas thudded into the hallway ahead. The Dreaded never ceased being awful to behold. The horned Gugalannas roared, their tentacle-filled maws writhing as four thick legs powered them onward. Controlled, careful shotgun fire brought the pair of them down long before they reached the Checkpoint. The Marines were being sure to conserve as much ammo as possible.

Due to the active fire situation, the Marines did not particularly react to the presence of the two famous Dreaded fighters among them—a war zone was no place for fawning. Runner set his plasma weapon to a low rate of fire and high accuracy. He figured an accurate weapon—paired with his uncanny aim—would complement the group well, even in such tight quarters. He nodded to Nicadzim. “So wh-wh-at'll it be: the frost wheel, the cone thingy, what have we got-t today?”

Nicadzim shrugged. His fists were bound in contraptions of an oblong—if otherwise difficult to define—shape. They appeared to be made of something like amber, with small pieces of ghostly green matter gently floating inside them. There was a jagged opening above each of Nicadzim's thumbs, but there was no other indication of their function. “Whatever these would have been, I supposed.”

Runner paused. “W-well ... huh.”

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Vort stayed close to Bryluen's heels as she trotted out to Checkpoint One. The task would have been easy, even without their HUD maps: one simply had to follow the sound of gunfire. Bryluen crouched low across the hall ahead of them, smoothly straightening up behind an interior support. Three fireballs rushed past, two of them quickly slapping against the walls with a whoosh of expiring thermal energy.

Bryluen waited a moment, then waved Vort forward. He sprinted into the hall, taking cover behind the support ahead of Bryluen. Checkpoint One lay about fifteen meters up the corridor. Three full squads of Marines fired from cover at oncoming Dreaded. A composite map of Dreaded sightings from the various cameras and sensors inside the Fort showed that a large mass was just starting to feed into the corridor from deeper within Salamis. Before the battle the scientists, technicians, and other non-combat personnel had been evacuated. Elissar had pulled all Marines aboard into a defensible formation, and closed every bulkhead and shutter in order to slow the Dreaded as much as possible.

The plan had worked well. The Dreaded had a habit of destroying loose objects, including any cameras they spotted, but this made their location evident. Their intended course had become quite clear, so that when Elissar established the three checkpoints she knew where enemy pressure would be greatest. There was currently about a minute and ten seconds before the main mass of the enemy flooded the corridor and assaulted Checkpoint One en masse.

The Marines—and Dread Naught—were to fight until Elissar or Bryluen gave the order for their Checkpoint to fall back. This meant that certain Marines would cease firing and move to the corner, then cover the next Marines to move back, and so on and so forth until the entire Checkpoint had moved back to the next set of barriers at the intersection. Checkpoint One had two fall back positions like this before they would take up a defensive posture within the Storage facility itself. Currently, Bryluen didn't rate the chances of their first position lasting long once the main force struck.

Bryluen had said Vort could not know what he would feel when he first saw the Dreaded again. She was right, of course. But, as he had told her, he was not struck by any insensate anger or sense of vengeance.

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It was deeply sad to think what these beings had done to his people, but in the moment he was clear and purposeful. Now even his sense of shame over weaponizing his song was gone, leaving only utter focus and steely will.

A decent stream of Dreaded hurled themselves up the corridor toward the Marines, disciplined fire taking them down five or six at a time. Gangly, twitching Rabisus, their petaled heads vibrating with their ululating squawks, were dismembered and sundered by the dozens. Gugalannas and the occasional hulking En-Rabisu fell victim to the unavoidable storm of shot that filled the hall.

Apparently Checkpoint One had managed to down three Ur-Rabisus so far, thanks to their two Shotcannons. One Shotcannon was loaded with traditional spread shot, while the other had breaching rounds intended to penetrate large targets. The evidence of their use lay in the warped and twisted panel at the end of the hall, which looked like it had been hit by a rocket.

As Vort and Bryluen reached the front, they fell into position. Vort huddled against the end of a barrier, reaching his trunk around the corner in order to present as small a target as possible. Bryluen took a confident position crouched at the front-most barrier. The Marines gave as cursory a recognition of the living legend among them as possible, no one's eyes leaving the corridor for an instant. She gingerly tapped a button on her bulky rifle, and the four-barreled front of the gun began to spin soundlessly.

Vort spoke to Bryluen over a private line. "BRYLUEN, I ADMIT I WOULD HAVE EXPECTED YOU TO BRING THE DISC-GUN. THEN AGAIN, YOU DID TELL ME NOT TO USE FIRE."

"Sure enough. We've got oxygen for a couple months, but it could be a mistake to use it up pointlessly. Have to think of worst case scenarios."

"WHAT'S THAT GUN DO?"

The Operative smirked inside her helmet. "Oh, you'll see. Need to wait for when it's needed, though. Hold until we are preparing to fall back. Let the ammo do the talking until they're too close for comfort. You and I will be the last to fall back."

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND, WHY WAIT?"

"The Marines have crates of ammo available. We just need to

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ensure the line holds as long as the ammo does.”

Soon after—startlingly soon, by Vort’s reckoning—the Dreaded had gathered in great enough number and carved large enough gaps in the Fort bulkheads to pour toward Checkpoint One at full speed. A swarm of Rabisus filled the hallway ahead, rushing against the rhythmic wall of shotgun fire as if struggling against the wind.

Corpses burst into powder and dark ichor, each Dreaded rushing through the dissipating remains of its fellows without regard. There were clenched teeth and white knuckles beneath every suit of Marine armor. The occasional group of Gugalannas would snort and roar as they pounded up the hallway. No matter how quickly the Marines brought them down, the Dreaded behind them gained ground. After only a minute, the Dreaded had closed the gap halfway. At that point, Bryluen signaled the Shotcannonier with spread shot to fire. They drew a bead, took a breath, and squeezed the trigger of their over-sized weapon.

The sound and sight of a shotcannon discharge remained impressive. The hallway flashed white for the faintest instant, and every visor darkened to shield their wearers’ eyes. A layer of paint and metal was evenly shaved from every bit of wall and ceiling not currently obscured by enough Dreaded bodies to absorb the blast. A thick black cloud materialized in the hall as a solid three meter thick group of Dreaded were obliterated. Though this regained some ground, the Dreaded were closing the gap faster and faster.

Bryluen intended this fight to last as long as possible, but it was not clear how long that needed to be. If the space battle outside lasted more than a few more minutes, it was likely a very bad sign for those on Fort Salamis. If the Human fleet could repel the enemy, however, it begged the question: would the Dreaded aboard the Fort give up and retreat? Bryluen doubted that was the case.

The Shotcannonier fired again, but the reprieve provided was nearly non-existent. Bryluen signaled for Checkpoint One to fall back. The Marines withdrew in pairs, those in the rear covering for those sprinting toward the intersection behind them in a smooth flow of bodies and bullets.

Just as the last Marines left the first position, Bryluen nodded to Vort to finally attack. He braced for the slightest instant.

His ability to project harmful emissions was the result of several

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glands which produced chemicals or gases that reacted violently under the right conditions, as well as an organ that induced those conditions and shot the mixture out his trunk at an immense velocity. It was believed that Vort's species had evolved a great deal of control over this bodily function as a part of mating displays. As a result, Vort was able to influence what balance of chemicals he ejected. It was through this method that he could produce flame or lightning at will.

The Peace Stone his people had once used was a peculiar mineral which had produced a form of otherwise harmless radiation that suppressed the brain's ability to signal the glands to act. This meant that the organ that mixed the chemicals would simply seize and displace air, producing sound but no action. The high amount of control Vort's species had over the organ meant it was their best method of vocal speech—his people were otherwise limited to various chirps and hums, like a Human with no tongue.

Vort “sang” as an easy way of inducing the muscular contractions and glandular responses he needed to create the emissions he desired at a particular moment in battle. Certain chords or note progressions could produce tighter flames or more accurate bolts of electricity, but required practice. This was roughly analogous to a Human singer training their voice to reach higher and louder notes.

The Dreaded in the hallway had little time to appreciate the history that led to this moment, as Vort gushed forth a fan-shaped gout of acid for almost three full seconds. Every Dreaded that was struck collapsed into nothingness with a loud hissing sound—and a surprising amount of the Fort walls followed close behind.

In the spare moments granted by the attack, Bryluen and Vort withdrew to rejoin the Checkpoint One Marines.

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Space battles rarely went on this long, and almost never did they involve sustained fire from the same ships for a consecutive period of this length. There was no time for repairs or reorganization—Jörmungandr had been unable to be slowed or cowed near the gate. The monstrosity had easily advanced to the center of the battle, and Human casualties had doubled.

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Taussig had done his best to ensure Jörmungandr understood that the *Vercingetorix* and *Mictēcacihuātl* were its greatest—and possibly only—threats. Both ships were already paying the price in terms of lost weapons and hull damage. The *Lu Bu* and *Annan* had valiantly rallied the rest of the fleet and were notably thinning out the remaining Sjorthursars, albeit at an uncharacteristic risk to the battle cruisers. Each had sustained far more damage than had been expected, to the degree that the Captain of the *Annan* was preparing for evacuation.

This tactic had freed up squads of frigates to concentrate fire on some of Jörmungandr's larger weapons. Each time Jörmungandr responded with multiple weapon mounts, a frigate was likely to be lost. However, they had successfully reduced its firepower enough that the capital ships could continue fighting. The dreadnought and battleship continued to coordinate fire against the beast but, aside from the destruction of weapon systems, Jörmungandr seemed to care little regardless of how much of its mass had been chewed away. It kept moving forward toward Fort Salamis, only adjusting its course slightly as it rushed onward. Taussig ordered *Vercingetorix* to stay on an intercept course—while Jörmungandr demonstrated a surprising acceleration rate for its size, even a dreadnought could still outrun it.

Taussig sighed as he watched the latest major update: the *Annan* was gone. Three hundred and six crew members had been able to evacuate before a final cannon salvo had shredded its engines and burst open its hull. That meant a majority of the crew had lived, but the ship's loss would be felt keenly. The Admiral realized they may not win this battle, as mind-boggling as that possibility was. The Dreaded were down to a mere nineteen Sjorthursars, but with Jörmungandr on the field it was doubtful the remaining force could triumph.

At that moment, he received an intra-gate communication: a Qixing relief force had been cleared for passage, and was on its way that very moment. At the same instant the flotilla of Qixing destroyers, frigates, and corvettes translated across the Qixing-Human border at Gate Zhi'Hoth, a peculiar thing happened: Jörmungandr began to turn away.

Upon later review, this was clearly not a coincidence: the Dreaded somehow knew the Qixing were coming, and were choosing to withdraw rather than potentially be trapped in-system. Not only did this

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mean the Human fleet would survive the day—albeit at less than half its original strength—but that Jörmungandr had a reasonable fear of defeat. Intense analysis of the implications of the Dreaded’s knowledge of Gate translations would occur soon after.

Taussig slapped a hand on his command console. “Advance and stick to its flank. Make. It. Bleed.”

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Runner hummed as he pulled the trigger. It was a good first shot: a tight bolt of plasma shrieked down the corridor in an unerring line towards an Ur-Rabisu’s head. The shot struck dead center. A man-portable weapon would rarely kill such a monster in one blow, but it was enough to slow it down. The following storm of fire was able to finish off the creature before it came much closer.

“Alright, h-h-ate those. Bryluen, just downed an Ur-Rabisu.”

“Probing for an easy opening. Keep your guard up.”

“Roger.”

The Dreaded had begun to file into the hall in groups, with the timing between them steadily shrinking. The combat here was practically leisurely compared to Checkpoint One, but the Dreaded were not sending mere Rabisus. They intended to make an opening.

A trio of Ogumos flung themselves into the corridor ahead, one on each wall and the third on the ceiling. It was difficult to tell what precisely constituted an Ogumo’s body. The central mass where their elastic limbs met seemed to shift and reshape in a fashion that did not appear to accommodate whatever organs they might possess—not to mention whatever source the nozzles between its limbs drew their ammunition from. Though encountered far less than the Rabisu variants and Gugalannas, Ogumos had become a vital part of Dreaded assaults. They could damage vehicle armor, were able to outright kill infantry at distances comparable to a standard rifle, and they could simply disregard most terrain. On the occasions where the Dreaded had them strictly provide fire support, they had proved extremely dangerous and useful.

The Ogumos in the hall fired the instant they could, jets of acid causing the Marines’ cover to sag around them before the return fire tore them into pieces. Another two followed almost immediately afterward,

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employing the same tactic: shoot once in the general direction of the opposition, then immediately get eviscerated.

“That will be a good idea,” Nicadzim mused.

“What d-do you mean?”

“They did not have to hit us, only will they destroy our cover.”

Runner sighed, and spoke over team comms. “Bryl, Og-g-gumos doing bullshit to yo-our cover?”

“No. Guess they saved it for you.”

As Dread Naught had gained experience fighting together, Bryluen had become increasingly brief during combat. Now she needed few words, knowing she could trust the tactical sense of her teammates to handle the details. When they fought as a unit, she often used Qixing combat lingo. Bel’Wa had tutored the team on tactical phrases, almost like sports plays that could communicate an entire plan in a few syllables. The system the Qixing had developed had long been studied by Human military authorities, but was usually only adapted for use by individual squads. Due to a lack of the highly sub-divided Qixing military hierarchy and their near-monastic dedication to a strict tactical doctrine, it was not a system that translated well to the Astral Marines.

In the case of Dread Naught, however, the usage of code phrases indicating specific actions for specific individuals was an extremely useful tool.

Were Kirby less of a professional, she might have taken to twiddling her thumbs. A distinct advantage of being inside the Marduk was the ability to display all of her teammates’ visor cameras at once. She was vicariously watching all three Checkpoints both in order to ensure she was aware of potential targets, and to give her something to do. It was not uncommon for her to be given the duty of overwatch when needed: She had the biggest guns, after all.

This additionally gave her the unique opportunity to watch her allies at work. In a first person view, it was evident how differently each of them approached combat. Runner was hyper-focused, snapping from target to target in quick motions. He was rhythmically entrancing, and his life signs showed that his heart-rate actually lowered slightly while he lined up a shot. Identify, align, squeeze, and identify again. Sometimes she worried he would sprain a muscle in his neck, but his way seemed to work just fine for him.

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Bel'Wa's expertise and calm was clear. She only ever made smooth, calculated motions, with only as much movement as was strictly necessary. She never appeared hurried or surprised—she simply glided from deft maneuverings of her sword to pinpoint arm cannon shots and back. It was easy, almost pleasant to watch her. From the outside she was unrelenting and fierce, crushing and dismembering as she went like a woman possessed. From inside her helmet, however, it was almost like she was dancing.

Vort had three eyes, and his brain could composite a usable image from whatever they each observed. As a result, the simple front-facing camera feed wasn't always helpful in illustrating his actions. What was evident, however, was that he was never still. He tilted, turned, and otherwise shifted about to ensure his roving eyes had as complete an image of his surroundings as possible. The unending, twitchy movement looked exhausting, but Vort never had any issues with endurance. She supposed there was a metabolic reason behind his capacity for constant motion. At any rate, Vort patiently waited for the perfect time to attack, carefully consuming as many enemies in each elemental blast as possible.

Nicadzim's camera seemed to provide an even less complete picture than Vort's. He only sometimes actually looked at enemies before he attacked them—sometimes he appeared to just stare at the floor or wall before suddenly aiming straight at a target. Knowing what she did about Nicadzim, it was clear that he had extra-sensory perceptions to work off of. He was aware without visible effort or eye contact, and in melee his camera feed often broke down into nonsensical flashes as he teleported about. The camera feed always lost signal in the instant between locations.

Bryluen's camera feed was ... eerie. Since they had settled into an operational rhythm together, Kirby had gained an ever-increasing respect for—and more than a little fear of—her commander. Kirby was a Marine, and most of the people she had known in her adult life were Marines. All of them had the capacity to kill, and many had. But none of them moved like Bryluen. It took a number of missions before Kirby realized what it was about the Operative that made her camera feed feel so different, so visceral.

It wasn't a matter of surety and smoothness, like Bel'Wa, or due

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to intense focus like Runner. Beyond speed, precision, confidence, and survival instinct, Bryluen was a killer. The word sat uncomfortably in Kirby's mind, but it was undeniable: Bryluen was a killer. Kirby had seen hundreds of hours of post-mission footage reviews in her career and, in all of it, noticed an unbroken thread. From the subtle twitch of a soldier's line of sight when they shot an enemy close range, to the gasps and grunts of being startled, to a thousand other inconsequential reactions, there was always a palpable sign that the soldier being watched had normal tendencies and emotions.

Bryluen seemed to lack them. Kirby had once seen her bisect a Dreaded with her whip, then pulp its head with a pistol round as its momentum carried its remains forward. Bryluen did not twitch or react in the slightest as black ichor splashed across her visor. She simply carried on to the next target, killing as she went. Her combat style was not elegant and clean, nor was it simply fierce and belligerent. No overall technique or stylistic edge was evident except for one detail: Bryluen uncannily used whatever motion or skill would most reliably do the greatest amount of damage to her target as quickly as possible. She was a machine.

8. Chaos and The Capsule

At the moment, Bryluen was demonstrating her inhuman steeliness with the fact that she was motionless and still. As the Marines around her ferociously emptied their shells into the endless alien mass, she waited patiently. Her hands rested on her weapon at an angle where it could be brought to bear if needed, but otherwise she remained still no matter how close the Dreaded seemed to get.

As if thinking of her had attracted her attention, Bryluen spoke on the team comms, “Dread Naught: Jörmungandr has turned back and a Qixing relief force is inbound. We are no longer stalling. We’re going to consolidate the defense in order to ensure no losses. Kirby, prep a suppression solution on entryway one to cover our withdrawal. Estimate fallback in about fifty seconds. Bel’Wa, shift to Storage entrance Two. Checkpoint Two, fallback to Storage in one minute or less, at discretion. Checkpoint Three assumes standing orders.”

Icons along the edges of the team’s HUDs flashed as everyone acknowledged Bryluen’s orders. Bel’Wa wordlessly whirled about and jogged from Checkpoint Three back to Storage Two. She took up a position at the forward barricade, just beneath the laser battery that would soon watch over the withdrawing Checkpoint Two Marines.

Runner fell back in an orderly fashion, the Marines in the rear of their formation ensuring the Dreaded did not draw too close as they filed

into position inside the storage facility. Bel'Wa nodded subtly at Nico as he appeared in cover next to her. The strange objects enveloping his

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hands began to glow softly, prepared for whatever assuredly violent thing they did. Runner leapt up onto the gun platform and laid prone next to the laser emplacement, bracing his weapon and breathing slowly. As the scope on his weapon focused, he caught sight of an explosive round from Bel'Wa's arm cannon turning a cluster of Rabisus into strings of black tar.

Runner removed the head from an En-Rabisu with a casual squeeze of the trigger, its body twitching as if startled that it was no longer alive. Momentarily considering his surroundings, he wondered if anyone had ever thought that the galaxy's storage facilities would end up as important battlegrounds.

The gunfire at entrance two remained sporadic for the time being, but was gradually accelerating as the Dreaded gathered and began to fill the corridors. As the Marines from Checkpoint One sprinted into the facility, however, there was a far greater urgency. Jumping over barriers and spinning about, the Marines aimed around their allies to fend off the veritable wave of dark limbs and claws behind them. Vort fluttered over a barrier, again extending his trunk around the corner to hose down whatever drew near. With a calm, deft motion, Bryluen slid over the neighboring barrier on one hip and rolled into a firing stance. Her pistol was clutched in her left hand, her rifle held to the side. After a single beat, she used an eye motion on her HUD to signal Kirby.

As a storm of flailing black shapes crashed against the turn in the corridor and surged toward the narrowed shutter, two dozen streaks of smoke vanished into their midst. A millisecond later, a great burst of flames briefly and violently emptied the hall. Kirby's missile rack clattered loudly as it reloaded.

Following her salvo the laser emplacement opened fire, the bulky weapon lashing out in staccato bursts of light as it chewed away at the horde. The woman manning the weapon grimaced as they held the trigger and calmly swept the weapon. The Marines begin to fire in turns, a constant sound of thunder that began to be echoed several seconds later at the second entrance. The main horde had finally mustered itself and engaged, and was so numerous that both main entrances to the storage facility were now being swarmed. Kirby's second payload of missiles raced over the heads of the defenders and detonated just past the shutter of entrance two.

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Kirby's raised arms each bore a whirling rotary cannon. In a pattern of short bursts, she assailed the Dreaded with dense salvos of hyper-accelerated bullets. All her weapons were currently slaved to the same control input, the Marduk functioning as a heavy turret as she swung back and forth between the two shutters pelting the dark mass of foes with bullets and rockets. At entrance two, the broad shape of an Ur-Rabisu clawed its way around the corner, beginning to straighten up as it approached the narrowed shutter. Kirby gingerly tapped a button on her joystick. The extended cannon atop her cockpit slammed back and, with a harsh crunch, the shell blew the Ur-Rabisu open from chest to neck. Heavy mechanisms speedily reloaded the cannon.

They were getting closer. Bel'Wa watched the powdered form of a Gugalanna billow against her shield. Her rate of fire was slowly increasing as she picked off the nearest targets and braced for impacts. The occasional rush of Ogumo acid was widening the shutter gap, and the pressure was increasing at a steady rate as a result. The Dreaded showed no signs of slowing down soon, which meant that melee was a certainty. A final fallback to the opening in the barriers around them would involve a minimum number of people holding the opening in close combat while allies fired above them. The situation would not be ideal, nor was it likely to be tenable for long.

With a smooth motion, she sent sent a Rabisu bouncing away from her, a fresh hole in its abdomen from her arm cannon. A second later, she cleaved another in half with her blade. Above her, Runner had continued to rapidly pick out tough targets, tight pulses of plasma bursting among the Dreaded five or so meters ahead of her. Nico, still questioning the function of his new-found armament, shrugged and extended his arms over the barrier. The amber shapes howled like the wind through a tight canyon, each projecting a wispy projectile like a fist-sized cluster of thin green vines. Each trailed a haze of glinting green particles behind them which lingered in the air.

On impact, the projectiles seemed to do little but splash against the Dreaded harmlessly. The trails, on the other hand, proved more effective. As the onrush of Dreaded passed into the lingering particles, they began to fall apart as if they had strode through a cloud of invisible razors. Nico, with little reaction but a subtle raise of his eyebrows, began to fire to the left and right ahead of the Dreaded. As the enemy came into

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contact with the line of particles, most of them became grievously lacerated and slowed or fell.

Bel'Wa grinned. "The universe seems to have quite the interest in you, Nico. I feel like you should get it a present!"

As she spoke, a great claw burst from the horde aimed directly at Nico's torso. Bel'Wa leapt in front of him with her shield drawn close, knocking aside the great appendage with timing so uncanny that even Nico was surprised. The hefty pincer bounced from the top of the barrier and drew back with alarming speed toward the Ahuizotl that owned it. Ahuizotls were notably more functional in appearance than most of the Dreaded, and lacked much in the way of apparent biological trappings. Clearly these were beings intended for a singular purpose. The Ahuizotl was shielded behind the dense crowd of its compatriots, and rapidly aimed once more. It fired again, this time toward Bel'Wa. The claw flew through the ragged shutter with a loud crack like thunder. Above her, Runner pulled his trigger. The very base of the Ahuizotl's tether broke loose as a hyper-dense plasma ball burst directly inside the opening.

The claw continued unhindered, and the rest of the tether followed behind like a snapped spring. Bel'Wa threw herself flat on her back, the edge of the weighty claw screeching up the length of her shield and clattering into the barrier behind her. She sprung to her feet a beat later, bashing a Rabisu into oblivion and firing her shield cannon to regain her space against the horde. She cut down at an En-Rabisu that charged her while sending a thank you ping to Runner. He replied with a wordless ping of his own as the battle continued.

Vort had done a great deal of ensuring the Dreaded horde remained as far back as possible. Acid had rendered the space ahead of the barriers at the first entrance an uneven expanse that any other creatures might have found difficult to traverse. Despite Vort's success, Bryluen knew from the tactical feed that he could not continue at this rate long enough to handle the whole battle. She signaled him to rest behind the barrier. Holstering her pistol, she finally aimed and fired her odd rifle.

The body of the large weapon was shielded against scans of all sorts, and its precise nature was so experimental that none present aside from Bryluen had clearance high enough to know how it worked. When the trigger was pulled, each of the four barrels on the squared, rotating

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front of the weapon screeched in such an alarmingly sharp tone that a couple of the Marines twitched. From each barrel was unleashed a wave of orange, flashing projectiles possessed of some exotic form of energetic reaction.

So potent and numerous were these projectiles that, as Bryluen quickly swept the weapon from one side to the other, the Dreaded before her were brushed away like leaves in the wind. Bryluen smiled impishly. After the short burst, Bryluen paused for several seconds and then swept back the other way. The weapon did not have the ammo capacity for much in the way of sustained use, but it did not need to given how little time it needed to eliminate a large swathe of enemies.

Regardless, the Dreaded mass edged forward over the next several minutes. The Marines had been moved back to the final position inside the storage facility to prepare for a last stand. There had been a dozen injuries, from minor to the loss of one Marine's arm to an Ogumo. A portion of the barrier at entrance two had been wrenched open by an Ahuizotl, nearly toppling the laser emplacement there. Even the Ur-Rabisus warranted less of Kirby's attention—Bryluen had ordered the tagging and immediate elimination of any Ahuizotl that appeared at either entrance.

There had been at least five close calls as barriers were damaged, Marines were nearly killed, or Ur-Rabisus nearly reached the defenders. The remaining station sensors painted a half-formed picture that was just enough to make it clear the battle could still go either way. As Bryluen considered the scenario, a great rush of Gugalannas plowed the shutter of entrance two wide open, allowing a much greater simultaneous volume of Dreaded to rush the defenders there. Bryluen immediately signaled for Vort to fly to Bel'Wa, Nico, and Runner's aid. A rush of acid rained down as he flew overhead, washing away the vanguard of the rush. The time afforded by the attack was momentary, however.

Just before Bryluen could give a new set of commands to stabilize the defense, a monstrous white flash came from behind the defenses. As the flash of light faded, a potent scent overpowered the smell of battle: a musk of ancient incense and decadent perfumes wholly incongruous with the present surroundings.

The capsule had opened, its front rotating aside to unleash its contents. Of all the things Dread Naught may have expected to be inside

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the Gru'Thiall capsule, what appeared to be an armored person was not among them—though in truth, “person” was a surprisingly inadequate way to describe them.

The most obvious thing about this person was that they were gigantic, standing almost a meter taller than even the Marduk. The second most obvious thing was that their armor appeared distinctly Pharaonic.

The ornate suit of armor was forged of some shimmering silverine material, mirror-like as it rebounded countless beams of vibrant color. Across the armor were accents and characters like those found upon the Gru'Thiall tomb, each etched in golden starlight. The shape of the suit was precisely fitted to the giant's figure, demonstrating a powerful frame. Their bodily curvature and proportions gave the unshakable—and disconcerting—impression that they matched some ideal ratio both indescribable and undeniable.

The mysterious titan's helmet was shaped like a tall pharaoh's crown, and was adorned in intricate angular designs. The seamless faceplate was marked only by an eye slit which glowed an intense white. At the helmet's highest point was a stylized rendition of a rope knot, through which a serpent emerged. Elaborate jewelry of gold and turquoise hung from their neck and limbs in heavy clusters.

Without hesitation, the great warrior sprinted toward the second entrance, and leapt over Nico and Bel'Wa. As they hurtled overhead, a vast blade materialized in their hand in a rush of bright light like white flame. The sword took the form of a runed khopesh, its length equal to Nico's entire body. The weapon appeared to be crafted from the same material as the giants armor, it's honed edge sparking and glimmering in gold.

The advanced alloy that comprised the floor of Storage Area Two dented as the weight of the towering being landed gracefully. With an easy sweep of their blade, they rent the rank of Gugalannas asunder. The Dreaded bodies ignited and blew away on an unseen wind as they were struck, with the return swing reaping a similar toll. With a free hand, the figure casually backhanded a nearby En-Rabisu, sending it cartwheeling hard enough to plow through a couple dozen of its allies and flatten against the shutter door.

An Ahuizotl fired its pincer at the giant, who calmly raised a

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hand. The claw—which could bisect heavy infantry like paper—clacked harmlessly around the giant’s arm. The warrior gingerly flicked their wrist, yanking the Ahuizotl forward and causing it to crash through its allies and land at the their feet, before stomping a hole through the Ahuizotl’s body as if flattening a cardboard box.

The massive warrior glanced toward an Ur-Rabisu that rushed through the widened shutter. A howling disc of light shot from the giant’s visor, cleaving an arm from the monstrosity. The warrior’s blade removed a second, before a vicious kick to the chest sent the Ur-Rabisu sprawling. As it scrambled to it’s feet, the giant fired three more discs of light in rapid succession. The trio of shots struck the Ur-Rabisu’s torso, carving into it deep enough that it promptly spasmed and died.

The furious figure of light continued to slash through the swarm, no Dreaded able to slow them as they pushed the foe back past the shutter. Nico, Runner, and Bel’Wa, having overcome their initial shock, followed close behind to pick off stragglers. The pressure of the enemy attack at entrance one soon started to slacken as well as the one-person assault drained more and more resources from the Dreaded attack force. Bryluen ordered Vort and Kirby to advance into the hall ahead.

The clean-up operation was simple and by-the-numbers, taking a little over forty-five minutes before Bryluen sounded the all-clear. The badly maimed Human fleet had slain or run off the remaining Dreaded with the arrival of Qixing reinforcements some twenty minutes earlier. The battle for Fort Salamis was won.

Bryluen, Vort, and Kirby rendezvoused with Nico, Bel’Wa, and Runner, still following the massive warrior through the corridors of the fort. The titan had become still, their blade vanishing to wherever it had come from. Bryluen sent a silent signal to her team mates to disarm and remove their helmets. She walked up to the giant, removing her own helmet and briefly wiping sweat from her brow.

Even standing in her thick armored boots, Bryluen’s head was below the figure’s waistline; a single one of the giant’s thighs was greater around than Bryluen’s torso. Were this a lesser star base, they surely would have been forced to hunch over to fit within the hall. The massive person stared into the distance, as if they had turned off in the absence of a threat. As Bryluen drew near, however, the giant’s helmet receded or folded away from sight in a peculiar fashion. Bryluen found

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the disappearance of the helmet surreal, not to mention its apparent violation of the Law of Conservation of Mass. Immediately, she felt heat palpably emanating from the towering individual's skin.

The appearance of the great warrior's face was so alarming that it caused Bryluen to involuntarily gasp. Their skin was a flawless, metallic gold illuminated by a warm inner glow. The titan's face was as feminine as their figure, and as thunderous as their stature might suggest. They were not only unabashedly regal in appearance, but were so beautiful that it was somehow difficult to look straight at them. Their angular nose and sharp cheek bones would be equally at home glaring down from a stone monument.

Their eyes were a luminescent silver, with what would appear to be their pupils and irises delineated by a fine line or indentation. All of their hair, from the top of their head to their luxuriant eyelashes and arched eyebrows, appeared to be made of thin strands of obsidian and lapis lazuli.

Their eyes were rimmed in what appeared to be broad strokes of kohl, with their right eye painted like the Eye of Ra. Their lips were a vibrant red, and their upper eyelids were shadowed in blue-green malachite. Their hair was worn in long braids and tight ringlets that, released from the confines of their helmet, hung down their back and shoulders. The strands scraped softly upon one another, as if made of a hard material.

For a moment, Bryluen could only think about how impossibly gorgeous the stranger was in every detail. She noticed their gold skin was marked by beauty spots like garnets, each hypnotically pleasing to the eye. Though normally prone to understatement, Bryluen instantly perceived the giant as the embodiment of some ideal form. Oddly, this seeming aesthetic perfection came at the cost of the unconscious sensation of presence provided by most living beings—it was as if they were an object rather than a person.

Some primal urge in Bryluen's mind told her to avert her gaze; that in even looking at this person, she had passed some unspoken boundary of the Human experience. She found herself more than willing to deny this impulse for the same reason, but had not failed to notice that despite herself she had found no better word to summarize the being than "deity".

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The deity then spoke. Their voice was deep enough that their words vibrated in Bryluen's chest, and their speaking volume was much louder than that of a Human. Much like the etchings on Gru'Thiall, their silken voice rumbled and thundered in a fashion that could not be explained by the empirical auditory qualities of their speech.

“Do you know how long I have laid in wait, Dame?”

Bryluen later surmised that the deity's enthralling accent had not been heard by a living Human in thousands of years. She paused at not only the deity's recognition of her, but the fact that they spoke in English. Bryluen had an increasingly clear idea of who she was speaking to. This was the being which Nicadzim had encountered twice now.

The radiant titan did something like taking a breath, the sound broad and heavy like that of a sleeping dragon. “Over three and a half thousand years. I have strode upon worlds now dead, immersed myself in water untouched by the artifice of sapient life, and have gazed upon stars that no longer grace the sky. All of those sights, those sensations, are now kept only within me. It was not to be this way, young ones. I was not to be alone. I do not envy your fear, but it is warranted.”

Bryluen blinked and took a calming breath, maintaining composure in the face of the divine being. “I am Bryluen Branok, of the Human species. I am an Operative of our Colonial Special Operations Executive, and by the authority of the Planetary Arbiter's court do I speak on behalf of my people. You are not being detained, and we are of no threat to you. May I ask who you are?”

The deity finally looked down at Bryluen. As the gaze of the figure focused on her, she felt a strange sensation—like the air had been charged with static—and heard a tinnitus-like ringing in the back of her head. For a split second, Bryluen was lost in the giant's eyes; each an incandescent well behind which lay an alien mind that regarded Bryluen in the same way they might briefly note a leaf blowing in the wind.

The titan spoke, utterly perfect lips forming each syllable with precision, “A warrior.”

“What is your name?”

The warrior paused. “... in past times, Humans would have bowed down at the merest sight of me in mistaken worship and terror. Has this unenviable affliction passed, then?”

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“I myself believe in no gods. That which is unknown only has yet to be learned.”

The following silence was interminable. “...it has never been used, but my creator titled me as Neferneferuatn Setepenre Meketaset.”

Bryluen took a breath. Despite the immediate ability to understand one another, this remained a First Contact encounter with a foreign entity. The tension was palpable. “Might there be a ... briefer way to address you?”

“They. Them.”

“I mean, name-wise.”

The deity shrugged, causing their hair to rustle. “Employ a convention you find efficient and respectful. Should you be beyond superstition, I see no need to maintain further airs and pretense.”

“I often shorten my own name to Bryl. Would ‘Nef’ suffice?”

The deity paused again, their face unmoving and stoic. “I will permit it. The trajectory of this conversation, as well as your apparent stature among the other Humans, suggests you intend further interaction with me. You are a leader of warriors. I am a warrior created only to do battle against this very enemy. There is one wise conclusion for you to make.”

“Indeed, there is. Before that, however, we would wish to speak with you further. We want to learn about you, about who you are and anything you know that could help us. Would that be acceptable?”

“You may ask what you will, but you possess no means by which to compel answers from me. Should I be unduly prevented from my purpose, I will most likely lack a reason to spare my interrogators.”

Bryluen smiled gently. “That you delivered a warning tells me that you might.”

“My creators imbued in me a value of the relativity of perception. For now, I am bereft of practical reasons to oppose your wishes. I will not be a danger to any of your kind should you show me that same respect. I will not deceive or be indirect with you. Afford me that courtesy in full.”

“I will ensure that is the case ... Nef.”

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The giant rapidly closed and opened their eyes in a motion much like blinking, as if they were drinking in the moment they were first referred to by name.

Giving a brief glance around, Bryluen assessed the reactions of her teammates. She was proud of them for masking their awe as well as they were—aside from Nico who, in an uncharacteristic display, gawked openly at the towering figure. “Dread Naught, return to the Atet and make for Raven’s Landing. Nef, I would like to speak with you in private.”

On direction from Sergeant Major Elissar, Bryluen and Nef were soon alone in a meeting room. The chamber was suitably appointed for the task, though by no means ostentatious—after all, it was aboard a military station that oversaw no diplomacy. Nef had to duck and crouch to get inside the door, but did so without prompting and with surprising ease and fluidity. Bryluen sat at the nearest chair around the long, black stone table. She felt like a doll with Nef crouched over her.

Bryluen initially laid out the terms of their conversation: matters of consent and legality as declared in the CSOE’s Contact charter. Bryluen began to ask Nef questions of various import: about their initial contact with Nicadzim, their origins, their knowledge of Human affairs and of other species. Through a long and winding series of prodding inquiries, Bryluen determined that Nef’s story was consistent with all that Nicadzim had related, and moreover consistent with details of the various messages and carvings at Gru’Thiall. Furthermore, Nef claimed their understanding of modern languages, culture, and technology were all a result of “touching” Nicadzim’s mind—essentially scanning him and noting what they identified as relevant information.

As Bryluen could best understand, Nef had once been a normal Human, taken up in ancient times by the same alien lifeform responsible for growing the Tomb on Gru’Thiall. They had been an infant, ill with some common disease that regularly claimed lives in the ages before vaccinations and home auto-meds. The tale matched numerous bits and pieces of folklore from various Human cultures, but Nef assured Bryluen that there had been no extra-terrestrial influence in other Human affairs.

After numerous changes were wrought to their mind and body the giant warrior had emerged, little more than a desperate experiment

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intended to combat the Dreaded. Before others like them could be made, however, Nef had been sealed in the capsule and left in the tomb complex for uncertain reasons—possibly something as simple as a loss of hope, given the fact that their creator appeared to take their own life in the story recorded in the tomb. The following period had been silent and undisturbed until Nicadzim had, somehow, intruded upon the state of rest that had held Nef for several millennia. The warrior denied actually being present inside the capsule, but that they were rather dematerialized and kept *elsewhere* until the capsule had released them. The very notion was dizzying, to say the least.

Nef knew little of substance about the being that had created them, and admitted as much. They further stated that they knew some of the principles and sciences behind their own existence, but calmly hand-waved this as being little more than a series of sub-molecular quantum manipulations requiring calculations beyond that of a third dimensional understanding of matter and the universe.

Bryluen proceeded to ask Nef about the Dreaded themselves. Again, the titan knew little—and intimated that even the god-like beings that had created them were themselves unaware of the origin or true nature of the endless hordes that had engulfed them. The story was the same as what was told in the tomb: what may have been the greatest stellar empire in the universe had been obliterated in a remarkably short time by ... something. Entire stellar bodies began to cease existing in an area around an unidentified phenomenon, and soon after the god-like beings set off a desperate weapon in an attempt to save life in their galaxy. This weapon was so inconceivably powerful as to have produced a stellar void, but soon after its detonation the Dreaded began to appear in vast numbers that overwhelmed all before them as surely as the Dissolution had done before.

The lack of detail and helpful knowledge about the Dreaded was frustrating, but Bryluen quickly realized that the being that created Nef may have felt they simply lacked the time to enlighten them. Still, though the deity was created to fight and their very consciousness was molded into a persona their creator felt was ideal for an endless war against an unbeatable foe—they had been left a philosophical bent and profound curiosity. Bryluen idly pondered on how well that reflected on the advanced society responsible for the super-warrior.

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After several hours of discussion, Bryluen had shifted the topic gradually toward more personal questions about Nef himself. The deity did not visibly react—their face hardly ever changed or moved in a way one could consciously describe. Bryluen was convinced Nef had what one might term emotional impulses—they had insisted on being respected, after all—but in a fashion vastly divergent from that of Bryluen’s own consciousness. Later observations of the warrior would demonstrate subtle fluctuations in temperature and radioactivity in response to certain conversations, proving the theory to some degree.

Bryluen intentionally betrayed a slight note of sadness about Nef’s single-minded purpose, probing for an emotional response.

The giant paused, as they were wont to do before speech. “Do not labor under an illusion regarding what I am. I do not weep, I do not sleep. I do not require sustenance nor breath. I do not sicken, I will not age. Shall you prick me, I will not bleed. I am many things, but ... nostalgic for a Human nature from which I was divested before I could speak is not one of them.”

Nef paused once more. “But I ... do regret that I cannot provide you more hope.”

9. Doubts and the Deity

Though her cozy office was a peaceful place where Bryluen did a great deal of work, she always had a soft spot for her bathroom. The natural stone walls were hewed only enough to adequately define the space, creating the illusion of a cavern of dark gray and black rock. Dramatic lights, cowled so as to be as unobtrusive as possible, gave the bathroom a comforting warmth. Bryluen sat on the edge of her tub, itself neatly shaped from the same rock as the floor and walls. It stood in the center of the room like an altar, crystal water quietly flowing through it from hidden pumps.

During the day, shafts in the ceiling allowed the sunlight of Aves Prime to pour into the room like warm honey. In the depths of winter, they permitted the mesmerizing auroras to dance and play along the walls. In the far corner of the bathroom was a shower, given away only by the broad stone seat carved from the wall, and a small black haptic interface. When activated, the shower sprayed water from hidden apertures set at varying heights around the control surface as if the user was standing beneath a waterfall.

Within the shower area, Bel'Wa had erected a handsome shrine; a small coral sculpture atop a brassy pole about half a meter high. The sculpture took the form of a stepped pyramid shape, intended to resemble the traditional communal homes that had dotted the surface of Torva'Ang in past ages. The front facing of the pyramid was open, and

within it lay a group of devotional items. Among them were a small basalt effigy of three figures representing Bel'Wa's parents, neat

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sheafs of oceanic grasses bound in embroidered cloths, and a small tub of a cream Qixing used to occasionally treat their scales. The cream, while a modern variant of a very ancient folk remedy, had a not-insubstantial weight among the more esoteric of Qixing spiritual beliefs.

Bel'Wa was sitting next to Bryluen on the edge of the tub, her short cyan and ivory robe rapidly drying from her shower. Bryluen had stripped off her armor and promptly bathed upon reaching home. Now she wore the unremarkable black swim suit she reserved for the occasion. Bryluen winced pre-emptively as Bel'Wa tenderly touched an area on her outer thigh. A faintly-visible dark blotch beneath Bel'Wa's hand marked where an impact had shuddered the leg plate of Bryluen's armor in the last battle. Bel'Wa made a series of soft clucking sounds in the back of her throat as she surveyed the minor injury.

Material sciences had made great leaps forward in the past couple of centuries, to the point where an infantryman could endure firepower and conditions far in excess of what would previously be survivable. Regardless, any soldier would typically walk away from an impact bruised or scraped via trace kinetic or thermal energy that made it through their armor. Against an enemy as numerous and mindless as the Dreaded, it wasn't much of a possibility to avoid being hit entirely.

After a battle, Dread Naught (with the obvious exception of Kirby) nursed a number of abrasions, bruises, light burns, and other minor wounds. This last battle was no exception. Bel'Wa and Bryluen had organically developed a routine after battle of inspecting each other's injuries. Given the existence of the auto-med it was far from a necessity, but neither of them had fooled themselves into thinking it was.

The act was pleasantly cathartic, and the type of daily physical affection Bryluen had been without much of her life. Her daily conditions had changed immensely since Bel'Wa came to live with her. Bryluen had an exceedingly low maintenance personality, but even so she had lived her entire career alone. Settling in with Dread Naught had taken time and a huge adjustment of daily expectations, and living with her wife involved even further private changes than that. Fortunately Bel'Wa was as used to understated living as she, and had adapted rapidly to Bryluen's patterns and rhythms. Bryluen had regardless consulted Bel'Wa on many minor decisions and pieces of daily life, desiring her counsel as a partner and spouse. The extremely direct fashion in which

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Bryluen broached such issues amused Bel'Wa endlessly, causing her to purse her lips and chuckle each time. A Qixing, after all, was used to more or less seamlessly negotiating relationships with an entire additional person compared to many Humans.

Balancing the marriage with the fact that Bryluen was Bel'Wa's superior was a feat only accomplished through the life-long dedication and professionalism of both spouses. In matters of combat or duty, their depthless affection for one another was rarely visible. This was admittedly more natural for Bel'Wa than Bryluen, given her life-long expectations as a member of the royal line.

For Bryluen, the situation was unique: Her adulthood had never featured much in the way of what others would consider a personal life. That simple fact was only one of many reasons why few rose to the rank of Operative: to even be considered for Operative status, someone had to live a few years under near-identical conditions to judge their potential for the role. From her perspective, Bryluen had plenty of time to herself reading and learning as she wished. She had taken numerous remote courses on various subjects, maintained a number of correspondences with acquaintances and friends, and more than kept up on popular culture. It was not so evident to her that, in being on duty at all times, she kept almost seven times the effective working hours of most modern Humans. Still, she had never had to share a room since the academy.

The first nights with Bel'Wa were extremely peculiar. Bryluen had never shared her bed at home, though it was of course out of the question for Bel'Wa to sleep elsewhere. What didn't help matters was that Bel'Wa snored at times—the sound a higher, whistling staccato in contrast to the Human equivalent. There had also been negotiation on closet space, organizing personal items, and other sundry things, not the least of which was the shrine in the shower area.

Bryluen had at first found herself surprisingly off-put by the small changes, despite the fact that she regularly altered her own living patterns and organizational schemes to keep things fresh. But after the initial shock, she'd rapidly become accustomed to the simple pleasures of having her wife at hand. She felt it had softened her off-duty demeanor, a glimpse of green in her peripheral vision causing gravity to ever-so-slightly weaken its grip on her.

Bryluen blinked as she returned from her brief reverie. Since the

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instant she learned of Nef's origin, she had been profoundly troubled by a single, unassailable truth. Bel'Wa looked up from the bruise she had been staring at, large dark pupils slowly contracting as she made eye contact. Light glimmered from the gently stirring surface of the water, making Bel'Wa's eyes sparkle like amethyst.

"What is it, tye'tyito? You're bothered."

The low tones of Bel'Wa's voice hummed from the stone walls. Bryluen hung on her words for a moment. "The species that created Nef. They were a species so advanced that a lone individual—on the run, without resources, and likely fearing they had little time—was able to reshape a living creature into a being who defies our basic understanding of how mass interacts, and perhaps even the anatomy of consciousness."

"That's true. We know it was a matter of advanced technology, and yet Nef is still ... magic."

Bryluen nodded slowly. "That species died. Not from the collapse of an empire, or from gradual population decline, but from a violent purging. At the hands of the Dreaded."

Bel'Wa lifted her legs, swinging them into Bryluen's lap. Bryluen absentmindedly wrapped an arm around Bel'Wa's calves. Bel'Wa reached up a hand and stroked Bryluen's ear with the back of her hand. "You wonder what chance we have, then?"

Bryluen blinked slowly and nodded. "Moreover, I wonder why we're still alive at this point. How long before we are struck with the same force as those that created Nef? Jörmungandr's behavior doesn't suggest it's powerful enough to do that."

"So something else happened, perhaps? Maybe the Dreaded have ... some sort of super weapon."

"I've considered it, and luckily I'm not the only one. Plenty of our best minds are bent toward learning and doing all we can to protect ourselves."

Bel'Wa paused a moment. "So then, what does worrying now matter?"

Bryluen made a quizzical expression before Bel'Wa continued. "We're doing all we can. Either we will find the way and succeed, or there was nothing we could do."

"From someone else, I would think that somewhat fatalist."

Bel'Wa shook her head. "All those seminary lessons on

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embracing the scale of existence and the tides of time do come in handy sometimes. Here's what you and I are going to do tonight: We're going to have dinner on the balcony until it's dark. After that we're going to go into the library with as many cushions as we can muster, turn the lights off, and finally watch a couple of those ancient movies you wanted me to see—like a couple of young folks.”

Bryluen leaned her head against Bel'Wa's hand and smiled. “I'm not sure I've ever really been young, to be honest. The films are some of the last scored by Ifukube, but I do think you'll enjoy them.”

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After Bryluen had departed from Fort Salamis, Nef had been spoken to by a number of other individuals. Nef was housed at the fort for a day or so as Human authorities decided on the best course of action. Nef repeated their offer to fight the Dreaded and, after much discussion (as well as a legal agreement binding both parties), Nef was sent to Raven's Landing. They made it clear that while roof clearance would be no obstacle (indeed, they seemed more than capable of simply contorting themselves into and through tight spaces with no discomfort), they could just as easily stand out on the landing pad until they were needed. With time, CSOE High Command members Ibragimova and Ollivier were able to convince the ancient warrior to agree to a private room inside Raven's Landing.

Nef was currently due to arrive within the hour. At this point, Bryluen had been the only member of Dread Naught to have spoken with Nef. She took a few minutes to brief the others.

“S-so, uh, they ... they're not Human.”

“Not in any way that could possibly matter. Their origin lies with a Human, but in some fashion there is no longer a biological relation.”

Runner blinked. “I ... don't really know how to imagine that.”

“Ship of Theseus!”, Kirby called out excitedly, “Damn Bryl, you were right, that's a useful metaphor.”

Bryluen smirked. “Do what you can to be ready for their presence here. Hopefully all will go well and we will have a powerful new ally. Just ... don't act overly disturbed, for the sake of politeness. Nef is aware they have a unique effect on us, but the experts don't think

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it will give anyone space cancer. Be at the landing pad in forty-five minutes.”

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Dread Naught stood beneath the waning sun as the shuttle delivering Nef settled down. Most of Dread Naught wore casual clothes, in line with Bryluen’s intent to make a statement of comfort and familiarity after the multi-day ordeal of interviews Nef had gone through. Bel’Wa, on the other hand, wore an orange robe tied so that it extended to her ankles in descending waves of embroidery.

The warrior unceremoniously unfolded from within the hold, extending to their full height and surveying their surroundings. Their gaze lingered on the setting sun for a moment, then at the name of the *Atet* emblazoned along the ship’s nose, before they looked toward Bryluen as if remembering there were other people around.

Bryluen—and all her Human teammates—felt the same strange impulses from before as they stared at Nef: a near-religious feeling of awe and a pervading sense of wonder. In the rays of sunset, Nef’s gleaming armor bore a kaleidoscopic sheen. Their helmet was gone, the heat of their auric skin and the pure glow of their depth-less eyes somehow all the more stunning in the dimming light.

Bryluen spoke, decades of training and experience drawing her smoothly toward the correct course of action where her conscious senses had faltered. “Welcome, Nef, to Raven’s Landing. I will give you a tour of the facility as well as of your room. But first, I would like to introduce you to the members of Dread Naught.”

She motioned to herself. “Again, I am Dame Bryluen Branok, CSOE Operative, and the Commanding Officer of Dread Naught. Next we have Sergeant Kirby Furcotte, Astral Marine Corps. Veteran.”

Kirby’s eyes were as wide as they could get, her pasty face reddened. After an instant of shuffling, she blinked rapidly and haltingly bowed her head. Bryluen suppressed a smile and directed Nef’s attention to the next member of the team in line.

“This is Runner, formerly a vigilante best known for anti-organized crime directives based on Earth.”

Runner cleared his throat and waved one hand as if embarrassed.

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“This would be Vort. He is a member of a previously unknown species from another galaxy, and a valued member of the team.”

Vort, far less vulnerable to the uncanny sensations his Human team mates suffered, made a smooth curtsy with extended wings.

“This is the member of our team whom you first spoke with. Nicadzim Alexievich Kuzmako, living scientific anomaly.”

Something inscrutably changed in Nef’s face, some micro-detail that could be felt but for which words did not provide. Nicadzim bowed to Nef, who spoke in response. “Anomaly, indeed.”

“Lastly, this is Olyuxanag’E Fong’thith’ja Belzxilenth’Wa Ho’Xal, Qixing Storm Mother and my wife. She is our liaison to the Qixing, our closest allies.”

Bel’Wa made a smooth motion, wrists bent back with one arm ahead and the other at a ninety-degree angle. She turned her feet outward and bent her knees, the gesture somewhere between a bow and a squat. The smooth fabric of her robe hissed against the surface of the landing pad as she dipped and rose.

Nef had given each team member the briefest glance as their names were spoken and greetings were offered. Their eyes moved back to the horizon line—Bryluen was unsure if this was a personal affectation or simply what Nef considered a default position for their line of sight. “I believe this is when I say it is a ... pleasure to meet you all.”

Vort tilted his body slightly. “IS IT *NOT* A PLEASURE?”

“As a matter of politesse, I would deem it so. As a matter of sensation, I cannot say I properly comprehend the meaning of the word.”

Runner took a breath. “You mean you d-don’t ... o-oh, yo-o-u aren’t like us at *a-a-all*, are you?”

The deity swiveled their head toward Runner. “Physically, I was crafted in an image that reflects my origin. Your sense of aesthetics may mistake me as some form of ideal, while I am in fact so alien from you that I doubt your brain instinctively perceives me as alive. There are more meaningful contrasts between my physiology and yours than between you and Vort. At all moments I am bending my best effort toward remaining comprehensible to you, but I am in fact feigning emotions and mannerisms in order to be best understood.”

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Vort flicked through several shades of purple. “I ... ACTUALLY DO SOME OF THE SAME ON A REGULAR BASIS.”

Bel’Wa laughed. “I do play along with the Humans occasionally. There’s a learning curve. Bryl and I have each had to read a decent amount of literature on one another over the years.”

Nef nodded. “Now perchance imagine if that gap in understanding were expanded by multitudes. After all, the being that created me was vastly more ... *layered* than you.”

Nef looked toward Bryl. “By observation, I assume it is customary to remove one’s armor when here?”

Bryl glanced around at her team mates. “You could say that, yes.”

“Yet it is additionally customary to wear clothes, is it not?”

Bryl pursed her lips. “... are you not decent, Nef?”

“... By context, I believe the answer is no.”

“W-w-why ain’t you wearin’ clothes under your armor?” Kirby had mustered the ability to speak over the past couple minutes of staring unblinkingly at the massive figure.

Nef answered without turning, “... I have no reason to wear clothes. Clothes are unnecessary.”

Bel’Wa and Bryl shot a look at one another. “As I have always insisted,” Bel’Wa smugly interjected.

Kirby shook her head. “Y’all got to see me in my skivvies once, and I’m still pissed at the bug tumbleweeds for doin’ that to me.”

Bel’Wa tilted her head. “Why? You’re cute.”

Kirby’s mouth fell open. “Oh damn, that’s so sweet! Bryl, you should marry her!”

Nef patiently observed the exchange, and then spoke again, “As for myself, it matters not if I remain in my armor. I ... need no comfort.”

Bel’Wa froze for a split second. Bryl gave her a sardonic side-glance. Bel’Wa was very well-mannered overall, but the occasional error gave her away. For a Qixing as steeped in the traditions of her people as Bel’Wa was, it was essentially unthinkable for someone to wear garments of warfare in a place of peace.

Most Qixing had no real concept of what a Human would call modesty, but had a thoroughly codified belief in where specialized

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garments or equipment were proper. A simple exemplar of this mindset would be that, while an unclothed person would be permitted almost anywhere in public, an athlete wearing hard-light gauntlets outside of a holodrome would likely not be allowed inside a business.

The concept was somewhat more complex than that—members of the royal lineage had their own unrelated cultural expectations of dress and personal presentation to meet—but in general, the rule held true.

“I think it would be best for everyone’s comfort if we had clothes made for you. It may not feel proper for everyone here if you were forced to lounge about at home in armor.”

“I have no reasons to object to this. I ... appreciate that you are willing to apply your own effort toward ensuring I adhere to your social standards.”

“I do suppose that is what’s happening. Well, let me show you around. Later we’ll discuss how to clothe someone the size of a parade float.”

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Kirby, Nef, and Bel’Wa were en route to the Sirius Giga-Bazaar, the largest and most famously elaborate shopping center in Human space. A mixture of ancient commercial aesthetics and thoroughly modern theatrics made the local gate one of the busiest in known space.

The Giga-Bazaar had begun life as a Stellar Architect’s magnum opus, intended as a meeting place for fellow artists and a monument to Human artistic achievement. However, it just happened that the Bazaar was so successful as a practical structure that many of its design precepts and infrastructural innovations (such as a cunning method by which the exterior supports had been printed on-site) had been adapted to countless structures built for orbital or free-floating environments. The architect recognized the intrinsic value of their creation and seized the opportunity to establish the structure as a permanent place for artists to create and present their works.

The Bazaar was, on a very basic level, an utterly massive space station. From a distance the Giga-Bazaar resembled something like a

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two-sided chandelier. Crystalline supports held great gleaming plates of green-hued alloy on which had been placed vast mosaics and paintings, so that the entire object resembled some delicate ornament. Each half of the station rotated around a static central docking platform which, paired with more orthodox gravity-flooring, provided a degree of gravitational pull near-enough to Earth standard that the inhabitants did not experience the typical ill-effects of low gravity environments. Typically, few structures necessitated anything near the size or length of occupation of the Giga-Bazaar—even aboard major installations such as Fort Salamis (which was less than a fifth the size of the Giga-Bazaar) personnel typically vacillated between a station and solid ground with regularity.

While various materials were constantly brought in from elsewhere in Human space, great Hydroponics installations—themselves the subject of quite a bit of artistic endeavor—generated a sufficient level of food and oxygen so as to minimize the need for external aid.

Whilst Humanity had its share of idealized Bohemian retreats over the ages, modern technology allowed the Sirius Giga-Bazaar to function flawlessly as a place of entertainment and commerce for the masses without losing its value as a place of elite craftsmanship. Hundreds of millions came to and fro year after year to acquire the finest of products that could be manufactured and, in some instances, even hand-made. Drones perfectly copied brush strokes laid by master hands, or printed perfect renditions of sculpture and furniture carefully forged by a flesh-and-blood artist. What would have been elite and singular commodities in past ages were now available for any with the taste and wherewithal to acquire them—though no few prospective customers associated a value with something created specially for them.

At Bryluen's request, the CSOE had arranged for part of the Fashion District to be cordoned off so that Bel'Wa and Kirby could take Nef to get clothes made for them. Nef's existence had not yet been leaked to the public while Humanity's governing bodies debated the best way to do so. A CSOE cleaner crew had ensured a lack of surveillance equipment present on-site, but it was more than unusual for part of the Bazaar to be blocked off—making it fairly evident something was going on for which higher authorities were responsible.

Over time, the CSOE had learned that cover stories were better

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for spawning panicked conspiracies than fooling anyone. The results were never worth it. Rather, there were notices put up around the cordon that dryly explained that protected CSOE personnel were to be on-site to acquire clothing. This was followed up by an estimated time frame and a polite apology for the inconvenience. This was entirely true and indeed accurate, while omitting the fact that the personnel in question included Egyptian divinity.

“Alright, have you, uh ... ever been ... shoppin’? Shit, it didn’t take me long to feel like a dumbass talkin’ to you.” Kirby sighed to herself as she guided a shuttle toward their assigned docking point. While around Nef and having a conversation with others, she found it oddly easy to forget Nef was there—but speaking *to* Nef was an entirely different prospect. In her time with Dread Naught Kirby had discovered herself to be surprisingly easy to embarrass, and interacting with the deity was no exception.

Acknowledging the presence of an eerily flawless immortal with the most earnest and soul-piercing gaze imaginable had turned out to be fairly nerve-wracking.

“Any idea what the hell kinda’ clothes you’d want? You even care?”

Nef, speaking through the microphone in the shuttle’s cargo hold. “I would ... desire clothing as unobtrusive as acceptable. It must both flex and bend, as well as be proof against sustained heat.”

Kirby became quiet for a moment. “... okay. Um, what about, like, colors and shit?”

“... violet, in what is deemed a complementary aesthetic.”

“Ah,” Bel’Wa said. She sat in the co-pilot seat next to Kirby. “Bedlahs, touthais, some adapted Ly Aulth sail garments. All easily made from elastic materials without fasteners—I feel like it would take little for you to snap a buckle or burst a button hole. Comfort does not matter, so we need only find a material that can withstand fire. We will acquire five regular outfits, one formal outfit, and water-appropriate clothing for the Grand Council.”

“Well damn, lady, why didn’t you handle the questioning? And wait, why water for the Grand Council? And when are we gonna discuss that? Does that matter for us?”

Bel’Wa smiled. “Clearly because you are so eager to ask

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questions today! We will be at the Council, yes, but the date is not entirely finalized so Bryluen has not had us discuss it as a team yet. It will be on Torva'Ang at the palace, in the Temple of the Great Mother. Thus the water."

"That ... doesn't help me as much as you think. Water? Temple? These words make me nervous."

"You know how you people are tree-climbers and like building tall things?"

"We ... we're ... god, Bel'Wa, okay. Bit of a simplification, but yeah?"

"So's this: I'm covered in hydrodynamic denticles and have to stay moist. There's a reason all of my clothing is waterproof."

Kirby parked the shuttle along a docking point on the central ring of the station. From there, a private rail car sped the group to the cordoned-off section of the Giga-Bazaar's Fashion District. Due to being vacated, the space was less bright and lively than normal—but was still impressive. Fluted columns, marble buttresses, and pearlescent domes adorned this particular stretch of stores. A pair of CSOE personnel overcame their shell-shock at the sight of Nef long enough to direct them, Bel'Wa, and Kirby to the guide drone that would provide the necessary services to clothe Nef.

Under Bel'Wa's direction (and with the aid of a digital catalog), teams of drones rapidly sewed several sets of clothing of a vast scale. After Bel'Wa explained how each clothing item was intended to be worn, the deity emerged from behind a wall in an ornate violet bedlah, densely embroidered and trailing airy layers of lighter fabrics. With it, they wore a short matching skirt. With their armor gone, it was evident that Nef was thickly bound in powerful, perfectly defined musculature. Hauntingly beautiful designs like henna tattoos sprawled down their neck, around and across their torso and abdomen, and among the muscles of each limb, glowing like molten brass.

Kirby and Bel'Wa stared up at them. Kirby's mouth opened for a moment before speaking, "God damn, I could mistake your abs for brickwork. Can you, uh, flex your arm muscles for me?"

Nef paused, then rotated one palm upward and flexed. Their massive biceps and triceps shifted with the motion.

Kirby cursed under her breath. "Fuck, what's your workout

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routine?”

The deity tilted their head. “... none.”

Upon returning to Raven’s Landing, Nef settled into their room. It was, by request, little more than an empty chamber large enough for Nef to sit in and a communication console. Nef had repeatedly insisted that the odd full-body motion they made to crouch and sidle through doors was no inconvenience to them. Indeed, they were able to do so almost as rapidly as a more regularly-sized person could simply walk through a door. The feat was a mixture of incredible strength and inhuman flexibility, their hair whooshing through the air as they easily swung themselves through doorways that appeared far too small for them. This was an extremely fortunate trait, as otherwise their leaving Fort Salamis may have proven far more complicated.

Kirby had nearly completed her latest—and most grandiose—project involving the Marduk, having run tests and simulations as well as a dry-run in the woods outside Raven’s Landing. She chuckled mischievously at the prospect of its deployment a bit more with each refinement, and was excited for an actual field test. Brylue had supervised the latter stages of testing and development, and judged it was due for just such a test.

Throughout that week, there were fifty-two confirmed conflicts on land and in space with the Dreaded across Human and Qixing space, a sharp rise from the average before the battle at Fort Salamis. Due to the increased volume, High Command had rapidly established a firm policy on situations that merited Dread Naught’s deployment at this stage of the conflict. Full-scale battles were simply not the best use of an elite strike force when discrete objectives like the Stone at Fort Salamis could come into play at any moment.

During this time, Brylue drilled the team on communication and coordination to ensure Nef was up to speed. Curiously, their immaterial armor had no issue interfacing with Dread Naught’s communication systems. It was also revealed that Nef had what appeared to be a perfect memory: if they were told something once they could repeat it in exactly the same tone and intonation as it was said, down to verbal pauses, and gestures. For this reason, it took less than an afternoon for Nef to fully understand and memorize the entirety of Dread Naught’s specialized communication forms.

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Near the end of the week, Nicadzim and Vort sat together on the balcony. The pair of them often spent afternoons this way, though since Vort had learned the fate of his home their regular time together had taken on a different character. Even through the vagaries of his otherwise alien mannerisms, it was evident that Vort was putting a great deal of effort into putting forward an upbeat facade. Nicadzim could perceive—in ways within and without the normal Human experience—that Vort hurt a great deal. His colors had taken on the cast of an oil painting left in the sun too long. Even through his translator unit there was the tinge of an unusual waver at times. Vort was struggling and, regrettably, Nicadzim had little idea what he could do to help—especially given the weight on own his mind since Gru’Thiall.

He wondered if Vort was sitting next to him, thinking some of the same things as he was: concern for his friend. Then again, Nicadzim supposed, Vort had more than earned a preoccupation with his own struggles. Their conversation had been light but earnest, a small bit of comfort in a world coming undone. That, at least, was of some aid to the two of them. Nicadzim quietly rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. The air around his hand quavered and rippled as he calmly pulled a thin sprig of some pale yellow bush from an adjacent reality. His constructs were becoming slightly stronger, his ability to warp and predict motions sharper and easier. He did not know what about him was changing, but he felt that the revelations at Gru’Thiall were a key part. Ever since that day his perception of the Dreaded had become subtly more *real*, as if the hordes of monsters had somehow heightened their presence in this reality. Nef was the only other being who now seemed so ... perceptible. He was uncertain whether all else had dimmed, or if his ability to perceive had itself expanded. He never was particularly familiar with frames of reference.

He sighed deeply. Vort looked over with two eyes, and twisted the end of his trunk slightly. “THINKING?”

Nicadzim looked back and nodded slowly. “Thinking.”

10. Suspicions and Skin

The devastation wrought during the battle against Jörmungandr was still being cleaned from the system around Fort Salamis, with bodies being recovered and catalogued. Moreover, the loss in ships had been notable. The Astral Marines had taken command of a number of private security craft and fleets of Monitor ships to aid against the Dreaded, while ships involved in the battle were repaired and new ships were built. Several vibrant Qixing warships graced Human space for the first time as well, in order to help compensate for the loss of heavy firepower to the Human fleets.

One assignment that was not a matter of firepower, however, had already been pre-destined for Dread Naught: the Grand Council. This was to be a large-scale diplomatic event where a true plan of action for the overall conflict with the Dreaded was to be determined between Human, Qixing, and T'Hrøsttag authorities. Even several Ly Aulth representatives would accompany the T'Hrøsttag delegation, making this the first time in history that all four species had been represented at a single political event.

The Council was being hosted in almost a month's time by Queen Ho'Xal herself, in the most important location in Qixing space: The so-called Temple of the Great Mother, a truly ancient building that had served as a place of Governance for time immemorial. Dread

Naught was to arrive as part of the Human contingent and, with a date now set in stone, Bryluen gathered Dread Naught in the meeting room to

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brief them fully on their purpose there.

Bryluen reclined at the end of the table, holding Bel'Wa's hand. She wore a red athletic skirt Bel'Wa had bought for her at the Bazaar, and one of her many gray athletic tops. Nico and Vort had assumed their standard positions. Nico wore a simple blue shirt and athletic shorts, and was barefoot. Nef knelt in the corner of the room in a graceful, ethereal garment, looming over the proceedings like a great effigy. They had not emerged from their room for the last two days, but had otherwise made a conscious effort to occasionally emerge and observe Dread Naught going about their business for hours at a time.

In most circumstances Nef would not focus their gaze on an individual near them, instead staring into the distance as if deep in thought. Nico, it would seem, was the exception. He had admitted Nef had seemingly expressed some surprise upon touching his mind in their initial meeting—a feat Nef had never again brought up. Now whenever Nico was in the room (and within Nef's eyeline without them needing to move their head), Nef would fix their gaze on him with a cool intensity. Nico had not commented, and Bryluen had chosen to only observe their interaction so far.

Her initial thought after the first time Nico and Nef had spoken were that, in being exposed to the then-unknown entity, it was possible that something about Nico had been changed or effected by the mind-interface experience. He had indeed been slightly colder, and his face seemed permanently inhabited by the ghost of a frown ever since. This could, of course, be as much an effect of the lessons etched within the tomb at Gru'Thiall—except that the normally unassuming Nico would return Nef's gaze with constancy whenever he did not think anyone was looking. Covert observation was one of Bryluen's most well-practiced skills, and so whether via her own experience in subtlety or a careful study of Raven's Landing's cameras, she had accumulated a great deal of knowledge on the way they interacted.

As would be obvious to most anyone, they rarely spoke to one another. Nico had always been a quiet sort whose idea of small-talk was affected by the fact that he had few normal life experiences, and Nef had effortlessly sat in a pocket dimension for millennia in silence. What was not so obvious on its face, but was apparent to Bryluen given the known facts, was that they *were* communicating, possibly frequently.

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It was now known that Nico experienced what other Humans may perceive as multiple forms of extra-sensory perception. Nico himself had been quite unaware of this for a while, seeing as he had no other standard to judge his own senses by. Mostly this manifested in the ability to perceive things that should have been outside his field of vision, and sometimes picked up on sounds not simply before others would, but milliseconds before they had actually happened. Since being informed this was entirely unusual, he had made it known that he got occasional impressions of emotions and concerns in others that could not strictly be a matter of intuition, tone, or body language.

As such, it was entirely possible that between his own unique capabilities and Nef's apparent ability to link or touch minds, they could share some form of speech outside Human capability. Nico silently betrayed his communication with Nef via slight motions, posture changes, and minute facial movements. Bryluen, long accustomed to identifying threats, had been keeping a close eye on the two of them since Nef had arrived at Raven's Landing due to the fact that Nico had been clearly hiding the fact that they were speaking. He was not a shy man, so within his attempt at secrecy was surely some indication that something was amiss.

Runner and Kirby were still not present in the meeting room, and Bryluen had a strong suspicion why. Nico, after all, was not the only person she kept an eye on.

"Nef, would you mind retrieving Kirby and Runner from the workshop? Just ... pull the door open."

Her tone was effortless and casual, and as she spoke she noted Nico's stance and posture in her peripheral vision. Bel'Wa gave her a look—Kirby was a career Marine, and Runner was too twitchy to be late somewhere. Despite only having been about two and a half minutes since Bryluen had summoned everyone, their absence was odd.

As Bryluen expected, Nico shifted slightly as if interrupted mid-sentence. Nef nodded after an instant. "Very well."

They reached out one arm, hooking their fingers under the top of the door frame and contorting through the door in a single unbroken motion. It was more than a little impressive that they were able to do so from the wall opposite the door. In only a few steps, they had crouched their way across the lobby and moved up the hall to the door of the

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workshop. The sound-proofed shutter of the workshop was sealed shut, which normally meant machinery was being used inside.

Nef wrapped the edge of one of their fingers around the handle on the shutter. They paused: the shutter was sealed and thus locked. Yet Bryluen had not only asked Nef to retrieve Runner and Kirby, despite not having previously requested them to do something so trivial, but specifically mentioned pulling the door open. Nef felt they understood her intent and, with no visible effort and only a brief shriek of metal, sheared the industrial locking mechanism and slid the shutter aside.

Several tools and mechanisms were strewn on the floor, and in their place atop a worktable was Kirby. More to the point, her lanky arms and legs happened to be wrapped around Runner. He grunted ignominiously as Kirby constricted about him in fright. Even further to the point, they were not wearing any clothes.

It took a moment for Nef to recognize the act they were witnessing. Fortuitously, Bel'Wa had explained much of the concept to them by request a couple days ago. The couple was frozen in place, craning their heads toward Nef in the unique brand of paralyzed, wide-eyed shock chiefly reserved for unexpectedly naked people.

Kirby's hair silently slid off the edge of the table as the moment stretched out into infinity. Runner's face was unreadable, his conscious mind having fled his corporeal form the instant the shutter had begun to move. Kirby's pale face deepened into a blush that threatened to starve her organs of blood.

The deity paused, perceiving but not entirely understanding the mortal's reaction. "Bryluen has dispatched me in order to summon you to the meeting chamber."

Runner and Kirby remained frozen. Nef paused. "If you wish to continue, I will convey—"

"OH MY FUCKING GOD!"

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Runner and Kirby, mercifully dressed, slinked into the meeting room. Runner's head was hung like a dog that had been caught relieving itself on the floor, while Kirby's expression remained the startled terror

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of a horse fleeing a wildfire. Bel'Wa flared her nose, looking back and forth between the two of them. Nico was slightly confused by the atmosphere of the room, while Vort made a quiet gurgling sound of realization. Bryluen's chair was turned away from the door.

Runner and Kirby silently sat down. Behind them, Nef eased into the room and settled back into a corner. The room was utterly silent as Bryluen smoothly turned her chair around. Her face was serene and, in the intervening minute and a half since Nef had left the room, a drone had delivered a cup of coffee to her hand.

"Runner, Kirby. I'm glad you could make it. In exactly thirty-seven days' time, Dread Naught will be attending a Grand Masquerade Council hosted by Queen Ho'Xal on Torva'Ang. The meeting will be attended by many of the most powerful individuals in this part of the Galaxy.

"On the part of the Qixing, that means Queen Ho'Xal, two of the four Commanders in Chief of the Gate Sentinels, four of the six senior Ministers of the Interior Guard, and the head of the Interior Ministry. Representing the T'Hròstag will be Chancellor Fated for the Earthen Tide, and the representatives of fourteen Stellar Unions. The Ly Aulth have eight cartel representatives. For the Humans, we will be present alongside Terran Prime Minister Tuazon, four of the the Planetary Arbiters of the core systems, Commandant Prime Penashue of the Astral Marines, and the entirety of CSOE High Command."

The holo-projector in the center of the table activated, showing a detailed map of a large structure. "This is the Temple of the Great Mother, where the council will take place. The greater part of the Temple consists of pools and waterways, so be prepared to get wet. Kirby, Nico, Runner, and Nef, you will each be assigned an appropriate outfit to wear. Vort can go as-is.

"As for our actual role at the council, so far we are there to do little but be seen. Any more specific directives will be relayed to you through me, as per usual. A more thorough breakdown of the basic expectations has been forwarded to you all. Honestly, that's most of what you need to know—there will be good food and you get to dress up. Alright, that's all."

Dread Naught rose from their chairs. Runner and Kirby badly hid signs of relief as they prepared to slip away. "Well, one more thing,

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actually.”

Runner and Kirby froze, the momentary thought they were to be spared some deserved embarrassment rapidly diminishing beneath the weight of a certain reckoning.

“So, uh—”, Bryluen began with faux-hesitation, “I could be wrong, but I believe my machining tables in my workshop in my home are not entirely intended—for both sanitary and comfort reasons—to be used for fornicating while ignoring a summons.”

Bryluen made eye contact with Runner, then Kirby, and then glanced down at the chairs they had previously occupied. They sank back into their seats. “Nico, Bel’Wa, Vort, and Nef, you may go about your business—or stay, for that matter. It makes no difference to me.”

There was a whoosh of air as Nicadzim blinked away, assuredly relieved to be granted an escape from Bryluen’s suddenly caustic glare. Vort, rippling in shades of rich amber, hastily padded out of the room. Nef remained, likely out of curiosity, while Bel’Wa gently settled further into her seat.

Bryluen turned off the holo-projector. “To be entirely clear: do you understand the basic principle behind cameras?”

The only response was a quiet sound in Runner’s throat.

Bryluen nodded to herself. “The cameras here know when to turn off for privacy’s sake—funny story how they figured out how to make that work—but it doesn’t necessarily take someone who has spent their entire life picking up on patterns and studying behavior to piece together what’s been going on.

“To put my thesis up front: I’m not stupid. I knew before you two had even met that this would be a possibility, and within two minutes of you meeting felt that it was a certainty. I’ve been around the block, I’m not confused by the results of people who are attracted to each other being given a modicum of freedom and privacy.

“But that’s sort of beside the point. I’m here with my wife: clearly there isn’t any general opposition to frolicking here. But see, while I love Bel’Wa very much, there are a number of reasons you aren’t going to walk in on us splayed over the bar. For one, other people live here.” A hissing venom entered Bryluen’s tone. “But mostly: the continued existence of the species shouldn’t be relying on senseless children.”

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Bryluen stood up and walked around the edge of the table, pointing at Kirby and Runner as she approached. They both flinched slightly, having never been subjected to the slightest measure of wrath from the habitually calm Operative. “Between the two of you, you have two entire rooms where none of this would have been a problem. But instead, over these past months, you’ve used three public rooms and the balcony and, to top it all off, you apparently thought I hadn’t known literally the entire time.”

Bryluen pressed a button on the table, causing a list of time stamps to appear. “From just before our first encounter with a Stone to fifteen minutes ago. I can prove every inch of this is accurate. Camera deactivation windows, drone schedule variations, temperature readings, god damn door timing triangulation—take your pick. Are you both entirely outside of your fucking minds? Sergeant Furcotte, I know you have every idea how insubordinate this is. You think any commanding officer you have ever had would tolerate this shit? And you, Saint-Runner?”

She fixed Runner with a brief look not of anger, but of disappointment. She knew it would hurt him worse than words. Then she clenched her teeth. “Now get the hell out, and pray I don’t do any of the many things I could do to you for this.”

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Kirby sat down hard on her bed. She tore her hair tie free—removing several ruddy strands in the process—and hurled it against the wall. As her hair scattered, she buried her face in her hands. Runner sidled through the door, having spent the entire walk across the lobby adjusting his speed as he silently debated whether or not he was supposed to follow Kirby to her room. After a moment, he gingerly tapped the button that closed the door.

The instant the door sealed, Kirby began to make a groaning sound. Runner’s hand twitched—he found himself confused enough about his own feelings at that moment, not to mention the difficulty in assessing Kirby’s state. Kirby froze a moment, as if coming to a similar conclusion.

She took a shuddering breath and looked up at him. Her brows

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were low, a mixture of raw embarrassment and the defensive anger that came with it causing the telltale shimmer of tears to build in the corners of her eyes. Even through the chaotic wave of her hair, the unmistakable wildness of someone utterly overwhelmed by their situation was evident in her gaze. That much, Runner could understand.

He sat down next to her and put his hand on her back. At this point, he was more or less sure that was the correct thing to do. Every muscle in Kirby's back seemed to squirm of its own volition for a moment. Then she breathed out and leaned slightly toward Runner.

"Hon, we fucked up. We're not dumb asses. We knew ... shit, we fucked up."

"I-I mean ... yeah."

Kirby snorted. "How the hell have we been so ... like *this* about it? None of this was okay, we knew that!"

"W-w-well, not *all* of it was n-n-not okay."

Kirby turned her head slightly to glare at Runner. "You know what I fuckin' mean. And you know what? If—"

Kirby's eyes snapped shut, and she tensed her jaw. "... I need some time alone."

Runner unsteadily removed his hand from her back and stood up stiffly. He made a tiny nod before swiftly letting himself out of the room. He stood in the thankfully empty hall for a minute, lost in thought. He shook his head, and then walked into his room. He closed the door behind himself and, in mirror of Kirby, sat down on his bed. He realized he had never been beholden to any authority or expectation outside of himself for the majority of his life. A large part of him wanted to immediately rebel at the notion of this occurrence, while the more sensible portions of his mind knew very well he had chosen to be in this situation for good reasons. At the bare minimum, he owed Bryluen the assurance of his freedom. Not many received pardons for what amounted to dozens of felonies, to say the least.

That said, years in social rehabilitation and community service sounded much better than the hideous feeling in his gut. On some level he had always known he was not entirely the normal sort when it came to emotions, so it was not so much a shock that upsetting Bryluen and putting Kirby in an embarrassing situation was vastly more daunting for him than shooting someone between the eyes. The depths of the

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confused and unpleasant sensations in his head, however, were rather disquieting.

Given the fact that he had seemingly turned his world on end, he resolved to a course of action antithetical to the desires of every bone in his body: he was going to wait a few hours for nighttime, apologize to Bryluen in pers—

A thought struck him so hard it made his head hurt. He suddenly understood one of the core reasons he felt so distraught which, in hindsight, should have been rather obvious. He took a gasping breath, realizing most of his bodily functions seemed to have stopped for a few seconds. At least he had another reason to talk to Bryluen.

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Bryluen reclined imperiously in her office chair, one leg over the other. Runner sat across from her, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees—and looking appropriately uncomfortable. His apology had been a stalwart attempt. Bryluen recognized how far out of his comfort zone this was for someone who had, for a majority of their life, literally run from the problems they had encountered. For her part, the sincere contrition was more important than the details.

A silence had fallen in the aftermath of the conversation. As usual, Bel'Wa had gone off to the bedroom an hour or so earlier to prepare for the night and allow Bryluen to work on whatever seemingly endless amount of labor she always tended to. Most such work was a mystery to the others: a mixture of numerous coded missives, lengthy investigative write-ups, legal transcriptions, and other such matters where various agencies and individuals sought Bryluen's input or expertise. Sometimes years-old incidents from her career became renewed matters of interest, or seemingly cold-cases were thawed out. In short: she was terminally busy, and quite enjoyed it.

Kirby had not been seen since the meeting earlier in the day, while Vort and Nicadzim had each wandered off to their rooms in time. Nef had remained seated in the lobby after the meeting for what they assumed was an appropriate amount of time before shifting to their own room. Now the only lights visible within Raven's Landing were the dim floor lights around the fountain, and the warm glow of Bryluen's office.

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“S-so, uh-h, this might be w-w-weird, but—“

“I love how you change topics during conversations, Runner.”

He made a brief face of confusion.

“You just click on over. Sometimes it’s just funny, but it is often respectable to get to the point. Anyways, I’m done, go ahead.”

“It’s, uh, ac-tually ab-bout K-Kirby.”

Bryluen raised her eyebrows and smirked. “You’re about to ask me for relationship advice. That’s ... adorable.”

“W-well ... b-basically, yes. Y-you are ... you hav-ve me really figured out t-tonight, don’t you?”

She shrugged. “I always do, but politeness normally restrains me. You do you realize you are soliciting romantic input from someone who has spent the past forty-one years living in a building classified as a secure government facility, yes?”

“U-u-uh, y-yeah.”

“And you also understand that in my professional life I already use a whip, which could color some of my advice on the finer points of romance?”

Runner paused.

“I might be kidding. Alright, Runner, I will indulge you despite the fact that mere hours ago I made it very clear that you’ve spent most of a year pissing me off.”

Runner slowly folded his hands together as he willed himself to not be rendered unconscious by Bryluen’s effortlessly cutting tone. He was frequently cowed by how easy she made even the most difficult conversations appear which, combined with his habit of becoming unwittingly flirtatious when nervous, made having serious conversations with her particularly trying.

“W-well, I, uh ... I don’t kn-know if Kirby and I are in a r-r-relationship?”

Bryluen slowly leaned back in her chair. “I’m old, so I’m going to open this up with a story. Back in the academy I was fooling around off and on with someone. I mean I almost never saw her otherwise, didn’t even know her family name. But she asks me one day: ‘Bryl, we’ve never, like, gone out or anything, but ... are we dating?’”

“What’d y-you say?”

Bryluen shook her head and sighed. “I laughed, really hard.”

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Runner's eyes went wide in empathetic horror.

"I know. I've softened a lot since I was young."

Runner's eyes widened further. "You have?"

"Oh, god, yes," she said, as she alternated the position of her legs, "I was a terror in my academy years: All the ladies wanted to be emotionally scarred by me. Okay, so my point is that relationships are a two-way thing normally denoted by something other than casual carnal interactions. So—"

"—Iiiii love her."

Bryluen immediately spun her chair and hurriedly tapped a button on her desk. "I tried, but Runner just busted out the 'L' word. You have to help me."

An excited gasp came from a hidden speaker, "Tyi-oh, tye'lin!"

Seconds later the door to the office slid open and Bel'Wa side-stepped inside. Her fingers darted nimbly behind her head as she finished re-securing her hair.

"Bel'Wa," Bryluen drawled, "You've probably noticed, but you seem to be wearing my nightgown."

"This was urgent, and it was right there. Besides, it fits. Well, lengthwise." She shrugged. For the moment, the nightgown dutifully stretched with the motion. "See, Bryluen called me in here because she's ultimately out of her depth on this subject. When she became an Operative, her dating prospects narrowed severely."

Bryluen had already begun perusing a report. "Most people don't have enough of a security clearance to talk to me about work. Makes meeting for brunch tough. Also, having everything recorded is a deal-breaker for most."

"So, Runner, let's see. You think you love Kirby? Do you have any dating experience?"

"Y-yes, and n-no, respectively."

"O...kay. Let's start with feelings. How do you know you love her?"

Runner's face contorted. "What? I don't know, I just do?"

Bel'Wa paused for a moment. "Alright, let's break this down some. What do you feel when you look at her?"

Runner's mouth opened slightly. His eyes darted frantically between the two women. "... W-w-warm?"

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Bel'Wa placed the tips of her fingers along the edge of her chin. Her tone softened. "Am I going to regret asking you what kind of warm you mean?"

Bryluen chuckled. "No, because Human men don't have the organ you're thinking of."

"Oh, okay. Wait, then how do they—"

"—They're on a cord. They just pull up inside when it's cold."

Bel'Wa's eyes unfocused as she thought, her dark pupils swallowing up their violet rim for a moment. "You know what, I actually cannot express the degree to which I simply do not need to think about Runner's insides. Alright, so 'warm'. Anything that isn't a temperature? A cogent thought, or perhaps a word more readily applied as an emotion?"

Runner pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes, like he was aiming a bow. "Well ... w-when I look at her, I f-feel like I never want to look away. When she laughs, i-it makes me smile, a-and when she smiles, i-it-t makes me laugh."

He took a breath as he gained momentum. "I w-want her opinion on everything, and I just wan-nt to hear her voice all the t-time."

"Rowwwwh!" Bel'Wa purred, "That's so cute, you are a simply precious man. That said, this is going to be a long conversation."

She extended a hand to him. "Come on, dear, let's have some tea and you can tell your mom all your feelings. Ummi has work she needs to do in here."

Runner looked stricken at the sudden familial terms. Bel'Wa began to wiggle her fingers at him, urging him to grab them. He suddenly felt much shorter. He shot a pleading glance to Bryluen, who made a sweeping motion with her free hand. "I mean, ummi *does* have work she needs to do in here."

11. Forbearance and Frost

Less than a week later, the deployment lights in Raven's Landing activated; not in the usual stark red, but a pulsing amber tone accompanied by a low alarm. This was not an immediate combat deployment, but an urgent briefing. Dread Naught rapidly reported to the Meeting room, where an image of one of the members of CSOE High Command awaited. They were a woman roughly fifteen years younger than Bryluen, with dark hair and narrow eyes. Her tanned face was unexpectedly soft for someone of their station. She wore a high-collared periwinkle blouse, a hand heavy with rings poised under their chin.

The instant the last of Dread Naught entered, she began to speak. "This is councilwoman Eun-Byul Ibragimova, CSOE High Command. Operative Branok: High Command requests that you and your team report to the planet 324;Skađi. A research facility has allegedly come into possession of information that may help indicate an origin point for the Dreaded invasion. Before any details could be gained, however, the facility went silent. The local Gate lacks a scanner able to reveal Dreaded, but automated monitors in orbit above the station detected a sporadic orbital presence about four hours ago. Regardless, the facility possesses no Stone and as of the last report three hours ago, no signs of Dreaded had been reported by the drones outside the facility planetside. About forty-five minutes ago, the H.S.S.D. *Šahrazād* arrived to secure

the Gate and will remain for the duration of this operation.

“We want you to determine the whereabouts of the researchers,

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then secure them and the facility. A shuttle from the *Šahrazād* is available to provide extraction for the scientists. In all other aspects, we leave the operation to your discretion. All other relevant information has been forwarded to you. Pack a coat, and good luck.”

Councilwoman Ibragimova ended the call without further comment. Bryluen made a slight hand gesture, and the team left the Meeting room and proceeded to arm and armor themselves. Kirby’s new piece of equipment was already loaded into a cargo pod on the underside of the *Atet*, ready in case of the necessity of its deployment.

Naturally, Dread Naught had no reason to actually pack coats. Their armor, as with most any set of combat armor, was void-proofed and had heating mechanisms to prevent the extreme conditions of 324;Skaði from turning them each into a block of ice. Having no need to put on their equipment, Nef waited for the others by the lowered cargo ramp in their gleaming panoply—they were taller than the cargo ramp entrance. Each member of the team assumed their normal position within the *Atet*, after which Nef swung inside, sitting across from the Marduk with their knees pulled up to their chest. The glow of their otherworldly visor illuminated the hold in stark white.

This was to be the first deployment alongside Nef, whose unknowable nature lent an uncertainty to the operation. Bryluen and High Command had agreed to a number of contingencies in the event of anything unexpected—in truth, the data recovery team was part of such a backup plan, ensuring the mission succeeded regardless. The move was risky in several ways, and subject of no little amount of debate, but the payoff of an ally such as Nef was too great to ignore.

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Kirby had not spoken to Bryluen since the meeting. She quietly ran through the *Atet*’s launch procedures, bringing the craft up off the platform and accelerating rapidly away from Aves Prime. In the dusky summer sky, the gleaming craft was a subtle point of light streaking upward like a warning flare.

Kirby would have been perfectly content to sit in silence for the following seven hour transit. Bryluen, however, had other plans.

Despite the privacy of the cockpit, Bryluen opened a private

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channel to the pilot. Her tone was firm, but soft, “Kirby.”

Kirby’s green-hued shoulder plates shifted, betraying a subtle wincing motion. “Ma’am?”

Bryluen rolled her eyes in her helmet. “What, did you think I was going to give you seven hours of the quiet treatment just before a deployment?”

“Well ...”

“I’m not going to be sending out demerits for something that doesn’t effect missions. Living condition discipline is not the same in a small-team operation with the eyes of the the entire species on us. So yes, you messed up—and it upset me. But I also get why it happened.”

Kirby looked slightly in Bryluen’s direction. “You do?”

“I know you better than you think. You’re embarrassed because this hasn’t been like you. Things are starting to feel different in your heart. You’ve done something you would never have believed you’d do in the line of duty, and because of that you’re afraid you’re losing something—like you’re fading away and someone else is taking your place.”

“I ... how ... yeah, that’s what I was gonna chat up my therapist about, shit.”

“Then as she might end up saying: The mind is a funny thing. It’s an adaptive mechanism: it keeps us sane through terrible times by trying to adjust expectations and form habits and feelings that align better with our reality. Sometimes it does that job too well and doesn’t know when to stop, so when your conditions undergo a big change it feels terrifying—even if the change is good.”

Bryluen paused a moment. Kirby’s posture was relaxing and she was breathing deeper. “You’re not losing yourself at all. This is you, even if it’s not the same version of yourself that you’re used to.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you did something embarrassing and foolish and unsanitary ... because you’re *happy*, Kirby.”

Kirby became still, the magic spell of Bryluen’s words momentarily turning her to stone. “I’m ... ?”

“You need to talk to him. He’s even more clueless about what’s going on than you are, and he would really like to hear that you aren’t supremely pissed at him.”

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“Wait, why would he think that?”

“The same reason he quickly gets flustered when he’s looking for me while I happen to be in the bathroom.”

Kirby gave out a short, high-pitched laugh. “Fuck, he’s a mess.”

Bryluen smiled. “He is, but he cares about you very much.”

“Ha, yeah. It’s ... fuckin’ weird to think about.”

Bryluen put out a hand, gently grasping the edge of Kirby’s shoulder plate. “But as someone else who cares a great deal about you: I promise it’s a good thing, and that you deserve it.”

“Hell,” Kirby muttered, blinking her eyes. “Dunno why you wanna make me tear up, but alright ... Thank you, Bryluen.”

Several minutes later, Bryluen’s HUD registered a private line open from Kirby to Runner. Satisfied that all was well, she let them talk as she sent an update to High Command.

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324;Skaði was not an inhabited world, but merely the site of a single research outpost. While 324;Skaði was within reasonable distance of a Compression Gate neighboring the reasonably populous Alighieri system, it would be difficult to find an atmosphere-bearing world less suited for Human habitation. 324;Skaði was not simply cold, it was abominably so: the average temperatures on the planet commonly fell below negative one hundred degrees centigrade. Compounding this, the atmosphere and overall composition of the planet was primarily ammonia-based. The fact that the world still bore life made it an attractive subject of study by the biologists there.

That biologists had come into possession of information regarding the disposition of Dreaded forces added yet another question mark to the scenario. As detailed in the supplementary information relayed to Bryluen, the biologists had chosen not to relay the information remotely due to its sensitivity. Furthermore, they had ceased communication before they could intimate how they had come to possess such information at all.

The research outpost was little more than a modular habitat housing thirty-two researchers with the equipment they needed for their work and a minimum of comforts. A fleet of drones of various size and

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function tended to the surveillance and maintenance of the facility both inside and out. The lack of external disturbance suggested two main possibilities: a system failure bypassing the numerous redundancies built into such habitats, or an incident occurring within the facility itself. Given the available information, Bryluen considered the second possibility vastly more likely than the first, though the vagaries of the situation left no meaningful hints as to what such an incident might be.

The entire situation was surprisingly high-stress for what was otherwise intended to be a reconnaissance mission. An untested ally, an uncertain objective, and one major environmental concern: deposits and indeed entire formations of ammonium nitrate (among other similarly volatile chemical concentrations) were common on 324;Skaði, meaning explosives or other potential fuels were not able to be deployed in open terrain without a degree of peril. Bryluen bore the rotating cannon she had wielded aboard Fort Salamis (the phenomena responsible for the weapon's effect being incapable of ignition in this instance), her pistol, and her whip as usual. Runner had his ax, tri-pistols, and rifle. Kirby would only be able to use her cannon, rotary cannons, flak cannons, and her blades, while Vort could only use his recently mastered technique of emitting acid. Nicadzim was to forego the use of his one-handed ranged construct or his needle cone, both of which employed some manner of heat that was best not tested in such an environment.

Though they were on orders to report any status changes, Bryluen contacted the captain of the *Šahrazād* roughly an hour out from the final Gate translation, requesting a status update. In such matters she was typically curt, the digital CSOE letterhead of such a message providing all the needed urgency. The captain rapidly responded, confirming that orbital surveillance had identified five additional orbital anomalies in such a pattern as to suggest a search. The *Šahrazād*, though possessed of a scanner capable of revealing a Sjorthursar, could not risk leaving its post near the gate lest whatever Dreaded forces were in-system be permitted to escape elsewhere.

Bryluen confirmed the readiness of the *Šahrazād*'s rescue and recovery teams as Kirby guided the *Atet* through the local gate. They emerged close to the *Šahrazād*—in Stellar terms, of course. Large tracts of the Destroyer's surface still bore scorched paint and long patches installed over ragged tears in the hull—aftermath of its involvement in

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the battle at Fort Salamis. A repaired primary thruster and two new laser arrays shone in the light of the *Atet*'s small Compression phenomenon. A pair of monitor craft towed through the gate via the *Šahrazād*'s cargo clamps prepared to descend on 324;Skaði at Bryluen's all-clear.

The *Atet* raced past as Bryluen confirmed their arrival with the local forces and 324;Skaði soon loomed before them. It was a near-featureless orb encrusted in vast plains of white crystal. Even from orbit, the world looked cold and uninviting. The majority of the planet's liquid content was in cavernous hollows beneath the world's outer shell, naught but lifeless deeps of liquid ammonia and other caustic chemicals which occasionally breached the surface in great geysers. That which lived on this world, far from it's local star and utterly deadly to most any other form of life, were creatures of surprising variety and number. Amid an environment even a trained eye would perceive as desolate and inhospitable, clouds of shell-cracking predatory fliers, herds of filter-feeders, and vast burrowing things which digested mineral deposits roamed the world's surface.

Kirby assessed atmospheric conditions on a trajectory to their intended landing zone. Storm conditions necessitated that the *Atet* land on the lee side of the mountain range the research outpost was located on. After landing, Dread Naught's course would take them three-fourths of a kilometer along the range and into a pass halfway between two peaks. About a half kilometer into the pass was a naturally occurring cave, inside which the research facility was built. The location had been selected for being far enough from local creature populations so as not to disrupt any migratory or feeding patterns—this did not, however, make it particularly easy to reach when conditions were poor.

The *Atet*'s thrusters adjusted rapidly as Dread Naught descended into the atmosphere. Such a craft had to account for air density, gravitic variations, and the composition of the local air. The atmosphere itself was not volatile in a way that would much concern the *Atet*'s atmospheric thrusters, but Kirby would still be making a light and slow landing due to the slick conditions of the target site.

As the freezing wind howled around the hull, Kirby made a series of complex motions. She manipulated her controls with surety and grace, settling the *Atet* down one foot at a time without removing her eyes from the radar projections of the ground density beneath them. The

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thrusters were lowered slowly and gently, allowing the *Atet* to ease its weight onto the landing surface. Kirby sat up and briefly clenched a fist in a silent self-congratulatory motion. Bryluen rose from her seat and signaled for the team to rise and arm before striding down the disembarkation bay. Nef slid up the wall, standing out of the way in a bent fashion that drew the length of their body up the wall and across the ceiling. Bryluen continued on by and stopped by the button which would open the interior to the outside. Making one last check of the armed and armored team, she nodded and slapped the button with one fist.

Dread Naught's visor filters compensated for the blinding glare as the ramp opened. A small HUD symbol indicated their helmets were throttling the overwhelming shriek of the wind to acceptable levels. Bryluen confidently strode down the ramp, her revolving rifle on her back and one hand resting on the handle of her whip. Nef followed behind, slowly extending to their full height. Their armor glowed eagerly as they came free of the ship's confines. Runner, Vort, and Nicadzim followed afterward. Runner cradled his antique rifle which, like the rest of the team's firearms, had been sealed in protective casings to ward away the frost. Nicadzim clenched his fists, purple-green energy dancing about his digits as he did so. Kirby followed them all with her rotary cannons passively whirling. She moved several meters up the gentle slope of the mountain, the sensor array of the *Marduk* scanning the density of the surrounding terrain to ensure there was no risk of avalanches.

Kirby had landed the *Atet* on a thick shelf of white and gray crystal, possibly part of a larger formation rooted deeper in the mountain. Even in the wan light of the pale local star it glittered and glimmered, casting beams across the hull of the ship and the team's armor. Nicadzim held out an arm, watching frost develop along his hulking cerulean plate. Sparkling flurries of snow buffeted about them in whorls and spirals of pure white, hissing across armor plate or briefly settling into seams before hurtling away once more.

Bryluen addressed the team, "Keep your eyes up. If there's a Stone here, let's hope it isn't close. Kirby, anything we need to know so far?"

Kirby was surveying a record of recent animal movements recorded by the research drones. "Nothing of note. We shouldn't run into

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any wildlife on the way in.”

“As usual: if it doesn’t look like a Dreaded, don’t shoot it. Nothing much to do for now but walk.”

Dread Naught trudged through the snow—a task made easier by the lower gravity on 324;Skaði. The sky above was a thick blanket of gray-green, swirling in constant turmoil overhead. Here and there were groups of flying predators, roughly triangular creatures with green undersides. Like most creatures on this world, their bodies were protected from attack—and the elements—by a shell. A needle-like protrusion rested along the top of the body, an extremity used to pierce the shells of their prey in order to feed. They were each held aloft by four gossamer-thin wings, and a cluster of four arthropodal legs hung beneath them. The high sound of their vocalizations could be heard carried on the wind.

The team continued on for twenty or so minutes in relative silence. Kirby continuously monitored her readouts and pinged for a response from any research drones nearby. Unfortunately, it seemed they were either too far from the base to respond, or were currently inactive. As she continued to monitor, she was alerted to a new sign of motion in the skies above—a dark shape, long and serpentine.

“Shit, got a possible Kukulkan sighting.”

Bryluen signaled for the team to speed up. Their armor plate appeared to ripple as it rapidly matched the white and gray surroundings. About three dozen meters ahead, several large formations of crystal and stone provided some measure of cover. “Move into the rocks ahead. When we know where it’s heading we’ll get moving again. Hopefully it hasn’t seen us, but we’re not exactly hidden out here either way.”

Dread Naught observed the pattern of the aerial Dreaded from concealment for several minutes. The Kukulkan rapidly swept to and fro over a large area: an obvious search pattern, but not one headed their direction.

Kirby sighed, “That’s less than eighteen clicks. What are the fuckin’ odds?”

Bel’Wa drummed her fingers against the top edge of her shield. “Remarkably low—they can sense the presence of the Stones, so why the search?”

“We’ve deduced that their Stone-sense is a more vague than first

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thought,” Bryluen noted dryly, “Sjorthursars spend quite a bit of time covertly observing a planet, possibly scanning in some capacity. But not an outright search party like this.”

“The at-tmosphere? Upper-atmosphere st-torms or the composition or someth-thing?” Runner leaned casually against a crystal formation, shrugging as he spoke.

Bryluen looked back toward the rest of the team, her eyes resting on Nicadzim. She quickly passed several scanning filters over her HUD. “It’s a thought. Kirby, link up to the *Atet*’s sensors and keep track of that thing. Let’s move, double-time.”

“Double-time?” Nicadzim’s rocket-launcher construct, a long glossy shape with a pentagonal opening on the end, flickered in and out of existence on his shoulder. He squinted in the direction of the distant Kukulkan, the interior of his helmet subtly lit by an unnatural glowing in his eyes.

“Call it intuition. We are on imminent combat alert. Be ready and watch the skies.”

The team continued on at a markedly more urgent pace and, before long, they reached the mountain pass. The path was narrow, waning at points from its average of thirty meters to a mere twelve. Sheer rock walls reared ninety meters overhead, filling the depths of the pass with a blanket of inky shadow. Bryluen curtly directed the team into a new marching order: Kirby was up front, Bryluen and Bel’Wa just behind her, Vort in the center, Runner and Nico together behind him, and Nef taking up the rear. Were they to be caught in the pass, the largest and toughest team mates would be on the front line while Vort—the most mobile member of the team—would be able to take flight and engage at either end of the formation.

Bryluen had rapidly memorized the rough pattern of the team’s walking as their armored boots crunched through the thick layer of snow that blew through the pass. Kirby’s titanium-shod feet pounded along to the sound of whirring servos. Bryluen’s own confident strut interlaced with Bel’Wa’s determined march. The quiet patter of Vort’s numerous feet provided a backdrop to Nicadzim’s easy stomp and the light-footed hiss of Runner’s boot lifts. Behind them, Nef slowly and calmly strolled along so as not to overtake their comparatively pint-sized compatriots.

Nef had been silent the entire mission thus far. They had stayed

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in formation and followed orders so quietly that it was possible to forget they were there. Regardless, the first and only hesitation in their gait instantly caught Bryluen's attention: as did the sound from Nicadzim a moment later. The big man gasped and made a strained sound of combined discomfort and surprise. He stopped short, a hand reflexively placed against the side of his helmet. The air around him seemed to stretch or contort for a moment, as if something was pressing against it like a curtain. The team halted and turned.

"Nico, what is it? Are you okay?"

Nicadzim shook his head. "I was ... alright. We should be moving."

"Nicadzim." Bryluen's tone was steely.

He paused. "... I will feel ... something like ... being bumped into on the street?"

"You felt something pass close by your mind?"

Nicadzim paused, surprised by the acuity with which Bryluen understood his metaphor. "Yes, that was it."

"Has that happened before? Kirby, check our friends for me."

"N-no, it won't happen before."

Kirby checked her HUD readouts. "Pattern change! The Kukulkan has changed course this way, and we've got other possible readings in sensor range."

Bryluen nodded slowly, a quiet growling sound in her throat. "Pick it up, we need to get to the facility before the Dreaded close in. If those scientists were having a bad day before ..."

Dread Naught jogged the remaining quarter kilometer until they arrived at the cave containing the research station. Within, thick walls of ice and crystal growths wound into the mountainside. The tunnel was some fifteen meters wide—more than enough for whatever transport or supply vehicles the scientists might need. Lights mounted along the walls of the tunnel gently came to life as Dread Naught approached, illuminating the glittering crystal all around them.

Bryluen made a final assessment of the facility's layout on her HUD. There was an emergency escape tunnel that wound up and out of the mountain, but was too narrow for Kirby and Nef and didn't leave a safe place for the *Atet* to lift them away from danger. While Bryluen had long ago acquired a taste for leaping into moving vehicles, the tunnel

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was not likely a good option. No matter what, the way out would entail a fight back up the pass.

Dread Naught approached the entrance of the research facility. A simple keypad provided all the security not granted by a void-proofed hatch capable of withstanding a tsunami. The hatch was undamaged, and to this point there had still been no broadcasts or other signs of life from within. Bryluen raised a gauntlet to the keypad's scanner.

“Kirby, Nef, guard the cave entrance for our exit. Have the *Atet* drop off your wardrobe change in the pass, Kirby.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

The hatch slid open as her armor verified her identity and clearance. “We go in quiet, with weapons at the ready. Stay tight.”

12. A Probe and a Pursuit

The interior of the research facility was light-less and silent. Bryluen's HUD confirmed the life support was still on. The entry was a sterilization chamber and airlock, overlooked by a transparent security booth. Bryluen triggered the cleaning and air cycle on a nearby console as the team looked around. There was a dent in the far hatch, evidence of an impact from within the facility. With a howl, the air was ejected from the chamber, to be replaced with a loud hiss several seconds later with an atmosphere altogether more friendly. Nozzles and emitters along the walls and ceiling began to bombard the team's armor with various forms of radiation and chemicals.

Bryluen walked over to the booth and looked within. The door to the security booth was open, its lock mechanism torn apart. Several small personal items were scattered about the room—and there was a dark swathe of still-damp blood smeared down the wall across from the door. She glanced downward to confirm what she already knew: the guard stationed there lay twisted and shattered, like they had been beaten with a fire extinguisher.

She tapped the fingers of her gauntlet on the thick glass. Runner sighed next to her, "Damnit-t. This isn't going to be a resc-cue, is it?"

Bryluen shook her head and made a one-handed motion toward the door as the cleaning cycle wound down. She drew her pistol and

began to access the station's systems to locate anything living as the door slid open. Bryluen edged forward into the entryway, scanning to

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and fro as she advanced.

“All guns free. Vort, stick to lightning—we want minimal collateral.”

Nicadzim’s glowing baton-construct lit the room in a pallid blue glow, his strange block-shaped projectile weapon clutched in his other fist. Several more torn bodies were strewn about, a table overturned, shattered glass crunching beneath their boots as they crept along. The big man blinked to the threshold of the hall extending from the entryway toward the living quarters. “Should we have split up to search?”

“No, if anyone is alive they’ll gladly stay in hiding. We stay sharp and use our numbers.”

Bryluen received a ping: movement had been spotted. She accessed one of the facility’s few remaining cameras in order to see it for herself. She had a slight notion of what she was looking at, but forwarded the feed to Bel’Wa. “That what I think it is?”

Bel’Wa took a breath. “Go’eil! Yes, that’s a *Hassallcötallān* probe, but what’s it doing *here*?”

The *Hassallcötallā* were an obscure species—or perhaps even a group of species—first encountered in Qixing space some twenty-three years ago. Little was known about them, as they had performed little in the way of diplomacy. They first appeared as a cluster of craft clinging together in a large mass, not unlike smaller ships being towed through Compression Gates by larger ones. The difference was that they had simply floated into a Qixing border system from elsewhere, implying a transit time of unknown length. Later theories posited that they had used their own equivalent of a gate to project this mass near the system in order to build a corridor of some sort connecting back to *Hassallcötallā* space.

The problem with this unexpected arrival was their reaction to the Gate Sentinels who went out to meet them: battle erupted immediately. Several more such masses of craft appeared along the border of Qixing space in the following weeks, resulting in a brief war that sent the invaders—or colonizers, or explorers—fleeing back toward their own territory. It was believed that a massive home fleet, mobile colony, or other such central location lay in the void between stars outside of Qixing territory, evidenced by the occasional drones or probes the Gate Sentinels still had to ward off to this day. They never responded

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to transmissions or any other attempts at communication, and would either flee or fight to the death seemingly at random.

Ĥassallcōtallā craft were capable of limited self-repair and seemed to be grown in some fashion, or were simply made in some way so utterly alien as to seem organic. The passengers or crew came in various shapes and sizes and were similarly disinclined to do much but attack anything they perceived as a threat. The lack of differentiation between technology and life forms on all levels meant that to this day there was doubt about whether they were a single species, or even if all that had been encountered so far were merely some sort of engineered forms controlled by unseen entities.

Bel’Wa loaded a magazine of armor-piercing rounds into her arm cannon. “Far as we know they’re effectively mindless, just playing out biological programming to record data and return home. The only caveat is that they’ll kill whoever they have to that gets in the way. These things are tough—usually takes anti-vehicle weapons to down one. They can squeeze through a door, and will crush an unprotected person like a, uh, well, a chicken egg. They have a long reach due to their tendrils, as well. The cutting ridges on them shouldn’t bother our armor, but that won’t stop the thing from swinging you around by a leg or pulling you towards the grinder on the bottom of the body. We think that’s for fuel consumption, but they’ll use it in a fight.”

Runner took another breath. “S-so, they eat p-people.”

“No; usually plant fibers, certain kinds of aquatic life. They’re picky, but we’re not sure what the criteria are.”

Bryluen signaled for the team to gather up and advance. She holstered her pistol and pulled her rotary cannon from its mount on her back. “Stay on me. Let’s put it down, and figure out how this happened afterward.”

Bel’Wa gave a last, curt suggestion. “We can recover information from it’s central core as long as it is intact.”

Bryluen sifted through data feeds as she panned her eyes back and forth for sign of the probe through the facility walls. “So no disintegration. Big tungsten-based lifeform shouldn’t be hard to find otherwise. No one get ground up, please.”

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Nef and Kirby stood side by side at the entrance to the cave, each gazing up one side of the pass. The narrow confines would make escape difficult, but would also make it harder for the Dreaded to overwhelm them. They were each hulking shapes of gleaming metal, but the difference between them could hardly be more evident. Kirby was squat and broad, industrial and unsubtle in the extreme. Nef glimmered like a pool of quicksilver, their outline comparatively soft and lengthy. They stood unarmed, while Kirby brandished her twirling rotary cannons.

Kirby herself dwelt on the contrast as she watched the *Atet* lift off and move to hover above the pass. Her own insecurities became more evident to her around Nef, though she could not yet tell if that was due to another latent effect of the towering deity or if Kirby simply felt inadequate standing before an actual golden immortal with glowing eyes.

Bryluen had been right—talking to Runner on the way here had eased a sinking feeling in her gut. Other questions were left to be answered, but at least she felt like she could show her face in public again. She lazily swapped her rotary cannons for her flak cannons as she watched aerial contacts on the readouts she was mirroring from the *Atet*. The *Atet* itself swung overhead. It was too large to land in the pass with them and safely escape afterward—but it could certainly drop off cargo. The case containing Kirby’s equipment opened with a noisy clang, and its contents floated downward on a chute. The *Atet* automatically turned and headed back to the landing zone.

A large metallic mass landed before Kirby, a power unit in its depths glowing to life. She smiled as a mass populated on the scanner near the base of the mountain: Dreaded were climbing up at that very moment on the side away from their landing zone.

“Nef, we’ve got ground contacts down your side of the mountain. ETA, twelve minutes. Air contacts my way in three.”

“Very well.”

Nef silently turned about and looked toward the sky. Kirby stepped up to the special cargo the *Atet* had dropped off. She flexed her metal fingers and grinned.

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“So, N-Nico, are you o-okay? What happ—“

Bel’Wa spoke over Runner, “—Not now. Nico will let us know if something further occurs. Focus.”

The team stayed in tight formation, gliding from room to room with weapons raised. At each door, Bel’Wa would hunker behind her shield, hook a gauntlet on the manual latch, and quietly slide the door open. Each room was a similarly dismal sight; research equipment was shattered, tables were thrown, and the occasional pitiful corpse lay crumpled against a wall. Bryluen took a brief scan of the identity cards on each deceased scientist as they were discovered.

As she knelt by the twelfth body in the wreckage of a common room, Nicadzim whispered over the comms. “Why were the lights down?”

This latest scientist looked like they had still been screaming when their chest cavity was crushed. Bryluen closed their eyes with two fingers. It struck her that doing so had long been a practiced enough motion that she never had to think about it.

She sighed, “Automated power-saving procedure due to a lack of living staff on site. I overrode it so as not to hint at our arrival. If we’re lucky this probe doesn’t know it’s got company yet.”

The grid layout of the facility made a thorough search simple. Finding the thing would be a matter of time; doing something about it would be trickier. They arrived in the largest of the specimen rooms. Preserved organic samples floated in tubes along the back wall. An empty containment cell in the corner was torn open, its half-shuttered door warped out of shape.

In the center of the room lay an examination table. Data feeds with strange adapters were strewn about, and an entire suite of surgical tools were still in a post-op acid bath.

Runner stalked around the edge of the room. “The hell were they doing?”

Bel’Wa was inspecting a data cable. “They were pulling information. The probes have a data drive organ of sorts, and it’s a more difficult task to learn anything if the probe is dead. This requires expertise, but they clearly had some idea of what to do. Unfortunately not enough to bypass a security measure, if I had to guess.”

Bryluen was busily using a console. “Thank god for pre-fabs and

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standardized lab practices. I think you're right, Bel'Wa. The probe crashed down and was injured, so they tried to pull data. Uploading everything to the *Atet*, ETA three minutes. The lab will wipe everything when done. Let's move on that probe before the Dreaded get closer."

Bryluen got notification from Kirby that she had started trading shots with several of the flying Kukulkans. She opened a channel to Nicadzim as the squad gathered back up and continued on their search pattern.

"Nico, what's the largest object you can take with you when you blink?"

"I ... won't have tried to take much."

"We're going to be up against the wall recovering this thing. If at all possible, I want you to blink it to the *Atet* and secure the landing ramp. The moment the probe is down, give it your best shot."

"All the way to ... yes ma'am."

Bryluen lead the team through two more rooms before, at last, they heard something fall in the neighboring culture storage chamber. They arrayed themselves around the door with their weapons raised. Bel'Wa raised her shield, and elbowed the button to open the door. The metal hatch slid aside, revealing the wrecked storage chamber as a frosty wave of vapor billowed out of the room. Shards of petri-dishes and vials were strewn about, and shelving systems were warped and collapsed like a tank had driven through.

Looming in the center of it all was the *Hassallcötallän* probe. The main body of the probe was an elongated shape roughly two and a half meters in length, featuring several long trenches that wound across the surface in a complex pattern—not unlike power feeds or communication lines—each filled with something akin to cilia or antennae. At the smallest end of the body was a cluster of tendrils, each half the thickness of a Human's arm, and split near the end into two grasping ridges. At the center of the tentacles lay a rounded pit, inside which whirling grind-plates produced a low rumble. The entire thing was made of a material whose appearance defied its potential organic origins—something like white fire opal, with shards of illusory colors swimming across its pearlescent surface.

The probe was as dazzling as it was bizarre, a brilliant cephalopodic being somewhere between an ultramodern statue and an

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atomic-era satellite. It floated along without any obvious form of propulsion, independent of its facing. The instant the door opened, it froze. A fraction of a second passed before the thing spun about and charged at a frightening speed.

There was no sound from the probe as it slammed into Bel'Wa's shield. At the instant of impact, she turned slightly. This deflected the probe into the side of the door frame, stopping its charge short. It lashed out at her large shield in a flurry of tendrils before she fired her shield and arm cannons in tandem, knocking the probe back. It charged again, grabbing onto the shield as Bel'Wa fired the cannon repeatedly. Chips and flakes of the thing's surface were dislodged by the blasts of energy, but little else. It thrashed back and forth, trying to wrench the shield off of Bel'Wa's arm. She stood firm, leaning and thrashing in the opposite direction to the probe in order to stay standing.

For several moments she held it in place this way, allowing Nico to swing his baton over her shoulder and shatter one of the tendrils with a heavy blow. Numerous other tendrils remained, which Nicadzim took to trying to break. As he shattered the second tendril, a pair of others grabbed onto his baton. He let it go, and it ceased to exist. It re-materialized in his hand, and he swung again.

The probe pushed hard, causing Bel'Wa to slide backward a dozen centimeters. She leaned in and pushed back, credibly slowing the probe's progress. Bryluen slid to the probe's side and aimed her cannon. "Vort, Runner! On my signal! Three ... two ... one ..."

As one, Bryluen, Runner, and Vort opened fire. The exotic energy pulses of Bryluen's weapon carved into the surface of the probe, and both a hair-thin bolt of lightning and a hyper-accelerated bullet followed just behind. The probe twitched at the impacts, and its grip loosened. Bel'Wa took the initiative by hurling the whole weight of her body behind her shield, slamming the probe sideways into the door frame. "Nico, now!"

Nico raised his hands, his frostwheel appearing in his grip. With a roar, the wheel struck home amid the wound opened up by Bryluen and Vort. After an instant, the whirling blade found purchase and burrowed into the probe. Bel'Wa dropped her shield and laid her own hands on the grip, lending her strength to Nico's. The wheel sunk into the depths of its body, its sound dulling for a moment. The probe made a

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quiet, chirping noise before falling still and its pearly surface began to dim. The frostwheel vanished, and both Nico and Bel'Wa took deep breaths of relief.

Bryluen motioned to Nico. He cracked his neck, laid a hand on the probe, and both he and the corpse vanished. A moment later, he curtly signaled that he was at the *Atet* and Bryluen motioned for the team to exit the facility.

Long acid scars now marred the sides of the pass, like long claw marks torn in the mountainside. As the facility hatch slid open a Kukulkan crashed down before the cave entrance, each of its spherical body sections bursting into a thick plume of dust on impact. The singing of Nef's blade and the shriek of their visor light-discs undercut the howling concussions of what sounded like a multitude of firearms. A swarm of Dreaded had ascended the slope of the mountain through the end of the pass away from Dread Naught's extraction zone—various forms of Rabisus and many Gugalannas had most successfully made the climb, though it was likely that other Dreaded variants were on their way up.

Nef waded among them, swinging their glowing blade in great arcs. The swiftness of their movements belied their size. The wave of Dreaded broke around them just above their knees as they darted to and fro. With each swing, a coruscating wave of white energy turned a group of Dreaded to dust and hurtled the survivors back up the pass. As the rest of Dread Naught emerged from the cave, a several seconds-long barrage of rockets hurtled past and detonated in a tight sequence past Nef. The Titan's glimmering armor shone orange and red as the flames pierced through the blizzard for an instant. Far afield, a Kukulkan writhed and spun above, unleashing long lashes of crystallized acid from the orifice on its frontal body segment. The filaments that ran along its body buffeted in the wind as it soared aloft through some unknown method.

A few seconds later several rockets blew it in half, affording Kirby the opportunity to turn and lend her firepower to Nef's aid. The Marduk would normally lack weaponry for an engagement at such range, but Kirby's project had at last borne fruit—the Marduk was currently docked inside an armored shell built into the center of an exterior frame bristling in weapon mounts. The exoframe, which Kirby had dubbed Imhullu, effectively extended the Marduk's limbs and

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provided additional firepower and strength, at the cost of movement speed and bulkiness. For this reason Kirby had designed the frame to fold neatly around the central shell, allowing its deployment in the field where she could simply walk the Marduk inside.

As it was, she was now roughly Nef's height and substantially broader. Additional rocket pods lined the top of the frame, three plasma turrets lined each shoulder, and large-caliber revolver cannons were mounted to each arm. Rather than hands, Imhullu bore armored housings which each contained a broad blade that could either be held in an extended position, or rapidly oscillated out of the housing in a short stabbing motion.

The turrets separately acquired targets, generating a piercing howl as they began to spit blinding bolts of light. After a brief scan for volatile mineral deposits, a clattering racket signalled the loading of the missile racks and a mighty whir struck a fever pitch as the cannons began their bloody work. Kirby continuously painted targets with smooth motions on a nearby haptic interface, observing density readings and motion predictions to the roar of her favored music. Using the Imhullu was an altogether more second-hand experience than running around in the Marduk directly, more a matter of managing a compound targeting system than the nearly one-to-one controls she had become used to.

She had practiced the complex task of conducting the Imhullu's symphony of weaponry in both simulators and walking around in the forest near Raven's Landing to an immense degree before today. Regardless, there was no substitute for the real experience, and she found herself making minor notes even as she washed away groups and streams of Dreaded around Nef with motions like brush strokes. The narrow pass ensured Kirby and Nef could keep the enemy back for some time, but they would need to do so while moving toward the *Atet* fast enough for pickup.

Bryluen signaled for the others to withdraw past Kirby. She jogged close to the canyon wall, keeping a sideways stance to watch for incoming projectiles. She paused, motioning for Bel'Wa, Runner, and Vort to continue past.

"Vort, take flight and make sure our path is clear. Runner, Bel'Wa, head for the *Atet*, I'll be just behind you. Nico, keep the

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approach clear and ping me if you see anything. Nef, begin withdrawing toward Kirby in thirty seconds.”

A series of affirmations flashed on Bryluen’s HUD. Vort’s wings made a loud percussive sound as they propelled him into the arctic winds. It was a credit to the strength of his wings that he could steer himself accurately under these conditions. Nef glanced up as an acid stream winged their shoulder. The metal of their armor retreated for a moment as the acid touched it, then bubbled back into place and reformed. A cluster of Ogumos had surmounted the sides of the pass and began firing down toward the two largest targets. Kirby refocused her turrets upward to suppress them and began pacing side to side.

Nef shifted to a more defensive stance and began to step backwards precisely thirty seconds from Bryluen’s command, picking off stragglers to their sides with energy discs from their visor. Bryluen’s cannon howled and fired a storm of sparkling projectiles that winnowed away at the rock above her, claiming one Ogumo in the initial burst. A second or so later, the other side of the pass shone with pale blue jags of lightning as Vort rocketed overhead.

Kirby steadily walked backwards, signaling the *Atet* to prime its engines and prepare for a swift exit—especially considering she would need spare seconds to dock the *Imhullu* to the cargo container beneath the *Atet*. Nef’s presence assured that the enemy could only progress so far toward Dread Naught as long as Kirby kept watch of their flanks. It was clear that Nef was immensely strong, and pre-eminently skilled. Their glowing khopesh appeared to consist of the same, or at least a similar, material as Nef’s armor. It was like quicksilver infused with sunrays, every facet of light reflecting off of it in wild beams of color.

Kirby regretted the dawning optimism of her situational assessment when she heard a singular and highly memorable sound: A cacophonous roar more like the bellow of a cannon than of a creature. To the naked eye the great beast materialized from the howling frost no more than forty meters distant, a great shadow leeching the light around it as its shape became increasingly clarified: an Aeshma. Bryluen pinged the beast, Nef changed stance in order to engage—and then a second roar sounded out.

13. Grudge-Matches and Gentleness

Two Aeshmas crashed through their own comrades, bearing down on Dread Naught. Nef stepped backward to get closer to Kirby.

“Left; right?” the deity uttered matter-of-factly.

Kirby responded with a fiery “Yes, Mx!” as she extended her gauntlet blades. Each was larger than a spade, and sharper than a yoinfa’s wit.

Nef held her khopesh upright in a two-handed grip, pausing as if for breath as the left-hand Aeshma charged in. Nef spun their blade in a twisting arc, detaching several of the Aeshma’s tendrils while side-stepping its charge. They continued the movement into a well-measured parry that detached a couple of more tendrils from the Aeshma’s other “arm”. Nef turned this parrying motion into a spinning jump that landed them on the Aeshma’s back.

Meanwhile, Kirby patiently strode forward, unleashing a hail of turret fire directly into the face of the Aeshma charging her. Its head was rocked to the side, throwing off its angle just enough for Kirby to plant her feet and deliver a haymaker so harsh she could almost swear it shook the ground. Her blade passed through the side of the Aeshma’s jaw, coming out through what would be a chin on anything less monstrous in aspect. One of the Aeshma’s feet left the ground as the impact knocked it back, and Kirby seized on this momentum. She delivered a return blow

with her other fist, throwing the Aeshma's face back the other way. This caused a chunk of its head to come away, the piece of black plating

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bouncing off the canyon wall. Kirby braced a shoulder and slammed forward, planting the point of Imhullu's pauldron at the creature's sternum-equivalent.

Imhullu's actuators and hydraulics were primarily sourced from the internal systems of Colossus-class war machines—its strength was utterly incomparable to the Marduk's. By way of demonstration, Kirby's shoulder-charge lifted the Aeshma off the ground and turned it onto its back. As it flailed and tried to recover, Kirby planted a foot on its stomach, pinned its shoulders with her massive blades, and fired the Marduk's extended cannon directly into the center of its face. Kirby roared like a bear as the Aeshma's head unceremoniously burst into a black cloud.

About eight meters away, Nef stood on the shoulders of the Aeshma they were fighting, fending off tendrils with their blade. One hand was hooked on the top of the Aeshma's mouth, pulling its head back. Nef gracefully slashed the last tendrils from the left side of the beast and then kicked out both legs, tightening their grip on the Aeshma's mouth while swinging around the beast's head. The Aeshma twitched once as its neck snapped from the force of Nef's weight. Riding the momentum of the swinging motion, Nef landed with both feet flat on top of an En-Rabisu, which was immediately crushed into paste.

Kirby emptied her missile rack ahead of her to keep the horde from closing in, and noted that she had registered several Ogumo hits on her exterior plating. They needed to move, regardless of their wild success against the Aeshmas. The pair of them drew close and began fighting backwards.

The rest of the team had retreated far up the pass, their comparatively small firearms whizzing rounds and small detonations upward as a large number of Ogumos pursued them. Vort had kept them from simply piling up on the sides of the pass and raining down acid, but he had already had one plate rupture from a lucky shot—as with most any Human-made armor, an interstitial lair of expanding foam had near-instantly filled the gap to keep out the lethal atmosphere.

Bel'Wa watched a yellow bolt hurtle over the pass. "Omukade, Vort, fly low!"

Vort pinged acknowledgment and swept downward to keep the

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Omukade from hitting him. Considering their effect on light vehicles, he was not enthused at the notion of being struck.

Runner was moving up the pass in a zig-zagging motion, his boot lifts carrying him back and forth in great bouncing strides. With every second bounce, he would lead a target, breathe, squeeze, and deliver a bull's eye shot. He had slain four Ogumos and several Gugalannas on the sides of the pass with precision thus far. Bel'Wa kept her shield high and faced away from the canyon wall to in order to best shield herself. Occasionally she would extend her arm and spend an explosive round to suppress the Dreaded overhead.

Bryluen kept close to Bel'Wa, jogging at an angle in order to watch for strays or stragglers that got past Kirby and Nef. The two heavy-hitters on the team were making good progress, nearly jogging backward to catch up with their smaller team mates. Kirby's weaponry was enough to keep back much of the horde, and Nef's visor weapon proved to be adept at clipping the legs from the occasional Ur-Rabisu. As Bryluen watched, Nef contemptuously back handed a Gugalanna so hard that it went flying. Between them and Kirby's Imhullu, Dread Naught's capacity for destruction had increased drastically—a boon they had sorely needed over the past months, as Dreaded encounters had become ever larger.

The pursuit continued for several minutes in the same capacity before Runner, Bryluen, and Bel'Wa had emerged from the pass. As they had outmatched the pursuing Ogumos, Bryluen had sent Vort ahead to scout the gap between them and where Nicadzim awaited on the *Atet's* ramp. Luckily, Nicadzim had reported no contacts, meaning the cliff face was clear. After Vort confirmed a clear approach from the sky, Bryluen sent him to sweep back and aid Nef and Kirby.

The gap between the team and the Dreaded soon grew further and further—as Bryluen came in sight of the *Atet*, she had the team take up defensive postures among the nearby stones in order to buy the small amount of time needed for Kirby to offload the Imhullu. Nef stayed at the front of the formation, with coordinated fire laid down by the rest of the team as the Dreaded trickled into sight. Bryluen felt that the Dreaded had lost some of their fervor, as if they had lost the scent of their prey and were less enthused about continuing the pursuit.

Kirby walked up to the *Atet* and commanded the Imhullu to

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deactivate. Kirby stepped the Marduk out of the Imhullu and the frame quickly folded in on itself; she grabbed the docking claw from the cargo crate beneath the *Atet* and attached it to the mounting point on the exo-frame. The case would close itself over the Imhullu as they took off—a feat that had gone through a number of tests and adjustments before becoming reliable enough for use in the field.

Unburdened of her exo-frame, Kirby docked the Marduk and took her place in the pilot's seat of the *Atet*. The team had practiced this procedure enough times that Bryluen did not have to give any commands. Vort entered the *Atet*, followed by Runner, then Nicadzim, then Bryluen, then Bel'Wa, with Nef coming up last. The instant Nef stepped inside the craft the ramp began to close and the *Atet* began to move. The Imhullu was drawn up into the cargo case and sealed within as they ascended. Kirby powered the *Atet* off 324;Skaði, leaving behind the oddly languid Dreaded.

Fortunately, the Sjorthursar responsible for the deployment was not encountered. The Gate was guarded, and there was nothing else Dread Naught could do but head back home. The CSOE had already ordered Bryluen to bring the probe to Raven's Landing, where a team would be waiting to secure and analyze it.

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Some hours later, Dread Naught was home and stripping out of their armor. Bryluen stood in the meeting room in a black tank top and gray shorts, hair askew from confinement within her helmet. She cracked her neck as she ran through the usual details of her debriefing.

Projected above the central table, councilwoman Ibragimova rapped their fingers on her desk aboard the *Cybele*. “Do you believe he has become a risk?”

“Not intentionally, but I think it's a safe assumption this will occur again.”

“Keep your eyes open. I will make a recommendation to the other councilors. Being able to attract attention is by no means always a detriment. Learn what you can in the way you judge best, and report any further changes.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

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“As always, Operative Branok, you have done well. Give your wife my regards.”

The meeting room darkened as the projector deactivated. The recovery team had already flown off with the probe corpse, beginning an initial assessment in the hold of their shuttle before they had even left the atmosphere of Aves Prime.

The mission had ended suddenly, building to a climax only to peter out at the very end. Bryluen almost felt slighted, her blood still hot in her veins. She would need to speak with Nicadzim, but knew the situation had to be handled carefully. His first exposure to Nef had affected his mind in some way, to be certain—possibly only in an emotional fashion, but the certainty stood. On its own that was useless information, of course, and even with additional evidence that something was amiss there was the possibility that his first encounter had rendered no long term effects on the functioning of his mind, opinions, or self-image. But since Gru’Thiall he had eaten less, and his everyday communicating was slightly more stilted; he was worried, quietly anxious in a way that had affected nearly every aspect of his life. Since Nef had emerged and joined them, he had been speaking silently with her more than he spoke with anyone else.

Each of these items could be some cause for concern, but altogether they painted numerous unsavory possibilities. She was going to approach this carefully, quietly, and as comfortably as possible: Vort might function well with a superior willing to get emotionally intense with him, but Nicadzim was more ... skittish, in a way. He was naturally quiet, but sometimes betrayed a strong dislike of conflict or confrontation. He was a sweet man, shy in some ways, and if he was going through something and didn’t know how to talk about it Bryluen would need a light touch. He had predictably went to his room for the night, and Bryluen would not pursue him.

A couple minutes afterward, she had swapped her sweat-drenched clothing for her bathing suit and was standing in her shower. She sighed loudly, eyes closed as the water crashed down around her. She braced her hands on the wall, registering a quiet footstep amid the torrent of water. She half-turned, extending a hand to Bel’Wa who gently clasped Bryluen’s hand and stepped into the spacious shower behind her. She wore what she called her “humble robes”, the same set she had worn

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at Vort's mourning ritual. She kissed Bryluen's cheek then turned to the small shrine in the corner, placing the tips of her fingers against one of her hearts as she muttered a short protective invocation to her ancestor spirits.

Bryluen waited quietly for her to finish. "Feeling unprotected?"

Bel'Wa gave a faint smile. "Aren't you? That should have been a quiet deployment. It almost was."

"Indeed. I will need to—" Bryluen said, running a hand over her wet face mid-sentence. "—speak with Nico, unravel some of his mysteries. I don't like unmeasured variables."

"I wonder what is eating away at him?"

"You think this is a matter of his emotional state?"

Bel'Wa was vigorously rubbing some of the ritual cream held in the shrine along her collarbone and neck. "I think that, for a man who teleports and exits our reality on occasion, his state of being is likely important to the extent and effects of his powers. I know, not scientific, but—"

"—But sound enough reasoning. I will speak with him tomorrow, give things time to settle."

"Bryluen ..." Bel'Wa muttered. She placed one hand on Bryluen's stomach. "... Please be gentle. I'm very worried."

Bryluen reached over, placing her thumb on Bel'Wa's chin. It was unusual for Bel'Wa to state a direct request or opinion in regard to the functioning of Dread Naught. Bryluen felt a slight sinking feeling; Bel'Wa had excellent intuition, after all. "I will, my beloved. I'm going to get some rest."

After Bryluen had finished showering and laid down, Bel'Wa strode out into the hall, intent on a quiet cup of tea. This was not entirely unusual, as Bel'Wa required substantially less sleep than Bryluen did. What was unusual was that Bel'Wa spotted a lambent glow from the lobby, and soon after caught a whiff of a telltale herbaceous scent. After several paces she saw Nef sitting in the lobby fountain, the flowing fabric of their bedlah floating around them.

Nef was slowly pouring water over themselves with one massive cupped hand. The deity's eyes were like twin moons, and the golden glow of their skin glistened enchantingly through the water. In the darkness, Nef's garnet beauty spots dazzled Bel'Wa's eyes with subtle

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infrared flashes.

The scene bore all the hallmarks of a folktale. Bel'Wa recalled a Cue-nA-tū story about a monarch who discovered a Yoir—a sort of sea spirit—bathing in a cave. The monarch chose to watch, and in time the spirit discovered the monarch's intrusion. Unimpressed with their lofty title, the Yoir shrieked haous spirit from haous body.

Regardless, Bel'Wa decided to take her chances. She stepped out into the lobby and spoke in a low voice. “Nef, are you bathing in the fountain?”

The deity registered no surprise, and mirrored Bel'Wa's lowered voice with as much of a hushed whisper as they could manage. The subsequent silken sibilance of their speech sent a shiver down the Storm Mother's spine. “No, I have no need to do so. I am present because ... I will say I enjoy it, for simplicity.”

“Interesting choice of words,” Bel'Wa conceded, “You haven't shown much enjoyment since you've been with us.”

The deity paused for a moment. “That is because I do not experience joy as you would perceive it. Stimuli do not cause me to laugh nor smile. But I am at peace with my existence. I find combat ... satisfying, and accomplishments in battle give me ... positive sensations. I do not feel what you may describe as happiness or sadness. I am not possessed of what you would experience as changing moods.”

“But you do feel some type of pleasure from certain things, like this?”

“There is ... a harmony in having water flow around me, the touch of a brisk wind, or the ... scent of rain. I can ... smell a body of water's story, or taste the land touched by the wind as it passes through my hair. I have a ... connection to what a Human sees as the color ‘violet’—the color of your eyes. More than many colors, it resonates within me. Because of that, my clothing whispers small hints and sounds that seep into my skin. These things all occupy my curiosity, as well as grant greater ... awareness with each sensation. Sitting in this fountain, I understand the rock it is hewn from. I am one with the air about me, the rhythms of these mountains, the pull of this very planet. I would explain better were I capable of doing so.”

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Nef commanded the room, but simultaneously did not feel real or alive. Bel'Wa found she could not empathize with them on a fundamental level. She had not even felt a flush of discomfort at Nef's uninvited, implied compliment of her eye color.

"You know what it's like for Humans to be around you by now, I'm sure?"

"Of course. I understand my nature creates uncomfortable complications—thus I sat in my room as often as is polite. I would have been worshiped on sight in past times, but while Humans have changed, they cannot help but be effected by me. I am, after all, one of their kind ... altered, let us say. What is it that you experience upon seeing me?"

Bel'Wa chuckled, "I suppose I should have expected that question. I feel no conflicting, existential feelings. But you make me feel ... exposed, like you can see right through me. Yet, I also can't feel you in a room. It's like you're just an idea hovering at the back of my mind, an inanimate idol."

Nef's eyes finally aimed in Bel'Wa's direction. Even when in repose, their gaze was singularly intense—at least partly due to the fact that each of their eyes was a hand's-length across. Bel'Wa felt a tingle run down her spine.

"It is true that a great degree of my appearance was forged with artistic intent. My creator had not lost their taste of aesthetics, even as their civilization fell—nor their understanding that such things are subjective. Perhaps they thought nothing of it, perhaps their understanding of beauty aligned with their most advanced forms of science."

"Maybe that's true, and maybe they simply found such things worth preserving in their darkest hour. Nef, may I touch your arm?"

"You may, but preserve your fingers by avoiding my hair."

Bel'Wa approached Nef, and sat on the lip of the fountain next to them. She slowly extended a hand, laying her fingers gingerly on the deity's massive golden forearm. The texture of their hairless skin was soft, but their flesh was as rigid as a starship hull. The deity was comfortingly warm to the touch, though the air just above their skin bordered on sweltering.

Bel'Wa brushed her hand over a beauty spot located along Nef's

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mighty left bicep. There was no differentiation in texture between the beauty spot and surrounding skin, even though it reacted differently to light.

Nef pivoted their head toward the Storm Mother, and beheld them out of the corner of their eye. “I have inquiries, yet the mechanisms of the library do not accommodate my size—nor can they be accessed from my room console. This has made the acquisition of knowledge troublesome.”

The library was isolated, consisting of data diodes and various other secure methods of storage unable to be accessed remotely. Additionally, the displays involved did not lend themselves to hands the size of serving platters.

Bel’Wa’s mind ran through a long and practiced list of concerns in the span of a second. The uncertainties around Nef’s connection and involvement with Nicadzim remained foremost in her mind. This uncertainty could be used to justify finagling some manner of restricting the information Nef could access, and given the context it would be simple to do so. Regardless, she recalled Bryluen’s wisdom on the matter: that Bel’Wa should keep a lid on things and act as she normally would. The fact was that there was no information accessible through the library that would endanger anyone were Nef to do something unexpected.

“Any of us would be willing to get something for you, Nef. Or you can have the drones bring things to you. Did you tell Bryl you wanted to use the library?”

Nef arched an exquisite eyebrow, causing the light of their eyes to dance pleasingly along the blue strands scattered throughout. “No, I did not wish to risk interfering. She ... smells of ... causality.”

“You mean ... she’s busy?”

“In this moment, and in many. She is the center of many strands. She quavers the web.”

Bel’Wa’s nictitating membranes twitched at the corners of her eyes. “I’m sorry, Nef, but I’m not sure I understand.”

Nef became silent for a long moment, their sideways stare lingering on Bel’Wa. “I believe you understand what you are able. Suffice it to say I declined to impose.”

“Nef, you remember what we told you when you got here?”

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“Of course, I remember all things.”

“What’s that like, by the way?”

“It is like never not remembering things.”

Bel’Wa placed both hands in the middle of her chest, over her first heart. “Mrmm, is that sarcasm I hear?”

“I will leave that for you to determine.”

Bel’Wa squealed and bounced on her heels. “So exciting to hear sarcasm out of you! Anyway, when I first came here adjustments were raised so that an area of higher humidity follows me around to keep me from drying out. Accounting for needs is the right thing to do. I’ll show you how to have the drones bring you drives and books. What is it you would like to know?”

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Bryluen eased back into consciousness a couple hours later, aware of someone being in the room with her and Bel’Wa.

“Couldn’t wait, huh?”

Nicadzim looked confused, glancing around as he realized he had never been inside Bryluen’s bedroom. “I was sorry, I will not intend to —“

“Go to my office, Nico, I’ll be right with you.”

He blinked away, Bryluen’s eyes tracing a brief afterimage of his outline in the dark. Bel’Wa stirred, but did not wake. She was, as it turned out, a remarkably heavy sleeper. A couple of minutes later Bryluen was—still clad in her nightgown—sitting with Nicadzim in her office.

“I did, uh, think that we would be talking about what happened.”

Bryluen nodded. “In due time, yes. I take it you are ready?”

He shifted uneasily in the chair provided him. “Yes. I will not be able to keep from talking about it.”

“Very well. Are you okay?”

Bryluen’s tone softened mid-sentence which, paired with a slight adjustment of her posture, seemed to lighten the air in the room.

“I ... did not know,” He sighed.

“What do you think about what you experienced up in the pass?”

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“It ... is feeling like I could *reach* them. Like, uh, being in a dark cave, and accidentally I had turned on the flashlight for a moment.”

“Do you feel like you did something, or that the Dreaded did something?”

“... neither. I ...”

Bryluen waited a long moment as Nicadzim gathered his thoughts. “I ... am having *trouble*.”

“What kind of trouble, Nico?”

“My ... me. My abilities. They had been stronger. Wilder. I would have been traveling further, or more. I saw ... things I will not be able to describe.”

Bryluen spoke softly and gently, “Does Nef help you understand what’s happening?”

Nicadzim froze, blinking slowly. “They ... have noticed I was changing. And ... my power will be ... like the Dreaded.”

Bryluen simply nodded again, moving as casually as if they were discussing brunch. “In what way?”

“They say ... the Dreaded, like me, are ... not like you in existence. They ... felt existing differently. Like two runners who will have crossed paths.”

“The Dreaded don’t exist in the same way we do?”

“Yes ... they did not experience existing like you will.”

“Does Nef experience existing in this way?”

“No. Neferneferuaten, they will be ... alongside you, the Dreaded were ... perpendicular to you. I ... only understand so much. They try to help me. They hoped it will ease my ability to ... control me.”

“Is this all you discuss with Nef?”

“That and history, about people. Nothing important.”

“Why have you not told me this, Nico? You haven’t been telling me things and, trust me, I have been aware.”

The stoic man suddenly looked nervous; to Bryluen’s eyes, it was merely the nervousness of being scolded, rather than a concern at some matter of further import coming to light.

“I ... am afraid. Of me.”

“Have you been afraid of you before?”

Nicadzim shook his head. “I will have just been me before. I ...

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will not change. It is like ... I did not know. I will not understand how I had been changing or why. I am sorry.”

“There is too much at stake to hide things, Nico. We could have been killed because of today—not that whatever happened was your fault—but knowing about changes could have allowed some prep and allowances to be taken in planning. These things matter to me. Do you understand?”

He nodded quietly once more. Bryluen’s tone maintained a calculated gentleness.

“Good. Is your ability to speak with Nef silently new?”

“I ... believed that was there all along. I will not have had a way to know.”

“If Nef is not like you, how can they speak in that fashion?”

“They have been claiming that they will get this ability from their creators, that it was some force or phenomenon they are discovering.”

“But not linked to the Dreaded?”

“Nef will guess it was something similar, but only by chance. Not intentional.”

“At least that tells us something. Nico?”

“Yes?”

“You know that it is very important for me to know all available information, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You know that everything is at stake, correct?”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

“And you understand what that means for all further changes or new information?”

“I did. Yes.”

“Good night, Nico.”

“Good night, Bryl.”

14. Cover and Clarification

Runner rose early several nights later, rapidly donning clothes he had never before worn. His outfit consisted of a dark gray half-jacket and narrow slacks, both brimming in silver embroidery that swam with a dull light. He slipped on a fresh pair of pointed shoes with low heels and fake laces made of fine chain, then rapidly wound platinum spirals into his braids. He inspected his shave one last time in the mirror—Kirby had borrowed his salon drone for the morning—before leaving his room.

The only sign of life were the running lights along the bottom of the lobby walls. Runner passed the fountain, turned into the main corridor, and strode up to the exit. He took a deep breath, then gently pressed the stud that opened the hatch. Bryluen stood on the other side, staring out from beneath a bold red hat with thin brim broader than her shoulders. She wore a red chain between her left earlobe and nostril, while the entirety of her hair and eyelashes were dyed a metallic red. She wore dramatic winged eyeliner, glittering ruby lipstick, and dark eye-shadow.

Runner raised his eyebrows, briefly appraising Bryluen's clothing. She was dressed in a hip-length bustier of overlapping leather strips above a garment divided along the middle between a short leather skirt and a leather pant leg. The ankle on the skirt side jangled with heavy jewelry, and a pair of broad belts crossed each other at her waist.

Over this she wore a tailed red leather coat with shoulder pads and a collar so high it nearly touched her hat. The leather was, of course,

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artificial, and had been printed for her a mere fortnight earlier.

“Yes, *ma’am*”, Runner muttered on reflex.

Bryluen raised an eyebrow and motioned for Runner to follow her up the hall. Her elegant heeled boots raised her to his height. “Subtle as always, Runner. But yes, I do clean up nice when I need to.”

He cleared his throat and looked back over his shoulder. “Why are all the lights so low, by the way?”

“Setting the mood.” Bryluen flashed a ruby grin.

As they exited the building Runner could see the rest of the team huddled by one of the shuttles. They each consisted of a dark outline brushing the cusp of the landing lights that ringed the platform. To Runner’s eyes it felt like only their bright clothing selection prevented the misty dark from swallowing their forms entirely.

Kirby had an extravagant, dark green design painted across her face. She wore a translucent bodysuit overlaid in iridescent plates, with a pair of knee-high boots adorned in a ream of large buckles. Her hair was shaved short on one side, while the other was gathered into a cluster of vine-like braids that hung past her right clavicle.

Runner’s eyes widened as he drew close. “You look amazi—That was out l-loud, sorry.”

Kirby blushed instantly, and made a strained sound of embarrassment.

“Rowww,” Bel’Wa cooed. She wore a garment formed of a single piece of fabric that wound down from one shoulder, left a gap at her midriff, then ended above the opposite knee. The orange fabric pulsed in golden tones with nearby sound-waves or other vibrations. Chains of delicately carved precious stones wound up her arms, and one half of her face was painted in a plethora of luminescent colors. Her head was adorned with a tiara-like headpiece, and her long hair was wound tightly within its circumference atop her head. She bounced slightly on ornately embossed shoes with mechanical springs for heels.

Nicadzim stood behind her with arms crossed. He wore a buttoned shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Though soft to the touch, the shirt had a foil-like appearance. Over it he wore a glowing vest, its ever-shifting hues refracting off his shirt in colorful flashes and beams. Around his thick neck was a woven scarf bearing a simple geometric pattern. Darting threads of rippling light marked the seams of his tapered

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slacks, and he wore chunky boots with a metallic sheen.

Vort was, as usual, unclothed. Nef towered behind him, resplendent in a draping silk garment. The soft glow they perpetually generated gave them an ethereal effect in the dark of the early morning.

Runner raised an eyebrow. “No g-glowing lights for you, Nef?”

“No more than the usual.” The deity’s thunderous voice caused a wave of color to wash over Bel’Wa’s dress.

Kirby and Bryluen moved to the shuttle cockpit as the others fastened themselves into the bay. Kirby moved through the takeoff procedures, wrinkling her nose at the comparative inelegance of the shuttle’s interface compared to the *Atet*. She reflected a moment on how different it felt to pilot a vehicle without her gauntlets on. She locked in the shuttle’s course: they could not use the Gate harness the *Atet* employed to execute jumps between gates, so they were to dock with a carrier vessel that would transport them to the border of Human space. Once there, they would dock with a Mass-Conveyor ship in order to enter the Liminal Stars without suspicion. As Raven’s Landing rapidly vanished behind them, Kirby glanced over at Bryluen.

“I mean, I’ve seen dressed-up publicity photos of you before but I gotta’ say this outfit is a little different than I’m used to on you.”

Bryluen laughed. She was holding her enormous hat on her lap, and stroked the brim with one hand. “To be fair, this is a special case.”

“Sure, but you guided my clothing selection. You were on your own and still showed up all crimson n’ leather!”

“I’d lie to you about the outfit being a necessary aspect of the mission, but what can I say: the missus likes the look.”

Kirby smiled. “You know what I don’t get? How the hell you’re ever able to go undercover. You are possibly the single most recog-fuckin’-nizable Human alive.”

“True, and it is rare now, but when I have to go under I’m usually given temporary surgeries or implants. Other than that, suspension of disbelief is the greatest tool of deceit.”

“Surgeries? Like what?”

“Oh, name e’m. Jawline and cheekbone padding, manipulation of soft tissues. All sorts of things.”

“Damn. Ever get something you liked and kept it?”

“Nah. I’d probably have to change it around later anyway, might

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as well leave the baseline alone.”

“I dunno if I could help worryin’ about losin’ myself in all that, temporary or not.”

“As far as my self-image, having to sometimes change faces *is* a part of me. I attended the academy at eighteen, and since then this is who I have been. Little fresh-faced Bryluen, marching up and down the aisles of the Al-Kindi library on Zhar-Ptitsa and studying away.”

“I can’t imagine what it would take to be able to get used to that.”

“It’s less what it *takes*, and more what you are willing to *give*. Success at becoming an Operative ultimately rests not on learning skills and material, but in turning over your every moment to serve others. There’s a reason most can’t do it. In fact, I doubt I could do anything else.”

“I ... hope this isn’t too personal. But it has to be hard to be married to an Operative, huh?”

Bryluen paused in thought. “It is, though Bel’Wa will never let you know that. It’s not just the danger or the absences—she’s a warrior, she’s at peace with that—it’s that every moment I have to myself, every moment with her, is contingent on no one else needing me. All our time is stolen, in a sense.”

Kirby spent a long moment in silence, absentmindedly gazing between her monitors with subtle flicks of her eyes. “Puts a little spin on squeezin’ into the bustier, don’t it?”

Bryluen smiled gently as the shuttle left Aves Prime’s exosphere. Thirty minutes outside the atmosphere, the shuttle eased into the docking berth of a small shipping vessel the CSOE had co-opted for the task. After an hour of travel, the ship’s vast Compression Drive wound up, and they began the cycle of jumps that would take them out of Human space.

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The \hat{H} assallcö \hat{t} allān probe had been thoroughly examined, and all remaining data had been extracted from it and analyzed. What was discovered was shocking, and had immediately spawned several subsidiary CSOE investigations. The probe had somehow obtained or

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relayed a pattern of gate translations by the Dreaded. The information was partial, but indicated a pattern of entry and exit that had allowed technicians to narrow down the direction the Dreaded were coming from. If an Origin Gate could be divined, that Gate could potentially be blockaded.

That, of course, made the incompleteness of the data all the more painful. Autopsy confirmed a physical removal of part of the probe's data organ, which could amount to the rest of the Gate-dilation readings. Judging by the intact portion of the data, this occurred just after the probe registered contact with an unknown vessel and recorded an automated greeting transmission.

This transmission, paired with readings the probe made of the ship it encountered, showed that the ship was on a known CSOE registry as a trafficking vessel. By all indicators, this vessel had encountered the probe, realized it was valuable, and extracted data from it to sell. Soon after they must have released it—the *Hassallcötallā* were known for coming to recover their property. They had notably done so in the Liminal Stars some years ago in an incident where a *Hassallcötallā* cluster vessel handily obliterated a space station in order to recover a disabled drone ship.

After three weeks of clandestine investigation and infiltration, the trafficking vessel had been traced back to a particular minor player in the seedy "politics" of world 671; Shamash, one of the Liminal Stars' most populous worlds.

The Liminal Stars, as suggested by their name, were a populated region between the negotiated borders of Human, Ly Aulth, and T'hröstag space. Due to various political maneuverings none could lay claim to this region, and it had long been a haven for those who had run afoul of their local powers. In theory—and according to the messaging of the companies who pulled the strings—this made it an area of massive potential and personal liberty. In practice, of course, it was by all statistics a dangerous area ruled by petty dictators and vast corporations, afflicted by mass public health concerns, and subject to constant bloody turf wars and the vast majority of sapient trafficking in known space. These problems were so pronounced that all Human systems along the Liminal Stars hosted a special government body that managed high-volume refugee intakes from the area.

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A fortnight ago, Bryluen had received a briefing from Councilor Kristi Tarif, informing her that High Command had decided to dispatch Dread Naught to the Liminal Stars in order to recover the rest of the Probe's data. High Command had left the method of recovery to Bryluen's discretion, which in and of itself spoke of the importance of the task. The CSOE had suspicions the organization could be linked to an individual of at least minor importance in T'hròstag space. This meant that on top of the probe data, it was possible that Bryluen would need to make a decision in the field regarding other intel she may gain the chance to acquire.

After the briefing, she ran Dread Naught through several days of infiltration drills and ordered appropriate clothing. Bryluen had then ordered Dread Naught to assemble at the *Atet* in the early hours of this morning in order to depart. Her plan required little if any guile on the part of her companions, who aside from Runner were unsubtle operators.

They would all arrive at 671;Shamash in the local evening, where they would enter a nightclub used as the main front of the "business" the trafficking vessel operated for. A bug placed within the club's office by a mole had confirmed the presence of the Probe data fifteen hours prior. After nine further jumps, they arrived at the Human border of the Liminal Stars. They detached from the smaller transport vessel and smoothly transferred to the Mass-Conveyor. The Mass Conveyor, a modified Hermes class, was so vast as to be able to hold a dozen private vessels at once. Such ships ran on scheduled routes, taking cargo, travelers, and tourists back and forth between systems and territories. In Human space, these craft were a matter of public infrastructure, with multiple routes interlocking with the Qixing equivalent and providing an express route from Earth to Torva'Ang. The ship was bulbous and shining, gunmetal and blue plates gleaming in the local starlight.

The Mass-Conveyor cruised easily by a pointed immigration station, rapidly trading pings and transferring certifications without stopping. The station was a standard model of its kind, four-lobed and layered somewhat like a stellar orchid. Though armed and accompanied by monitor vessels, the station's primary purpose was services for travelers and immigrants from housing, to food, to entertainment. As the first thing one would see upon entering Human space, the impression

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was intended to be a good one. Upon crossing the Compression Phenomenon threshold into the Liminal Stars, the contrast was evident.

The entry gate itself was flashy, covered in gold-inlaid paneling etched in company logos. The desired impression was apparent but, as with most things in the Liminal Stars, the details bore out the truth. Numerous micro-meteorite impacts across the gate surface testified to a lax maintenance routine, and the squat firebase watching the gate was not only a morass of guns half the size of the sleek immigration station mirroring it in Human space, but was covered in old scorch marks and had badly chipped paint. The fact that it had some form of paint at all was itself a giveaway, as colored panels on station exteriors were typically made of more expensive but far more enduring printed polymers.

The contrast between the glittering gate and the base was near parody. One hand offered awe, while the other was a balled up fist of filth and threat in plain sight. Kirby and Nicadzim had never been to the Liminal Stars, so Bryluen had been certain to set expectations beforehand. There were indeed spectacular things to see here: monuments, vast open-air markets, and other praise-worthy elements of culture and infrastructure. But they were all built atop a foundation of suffering, and perpetually crumbling from a cancerous mixture of apathy and greed. For every great achievement in the Liminal Stars, there were a hundred rancid cruelties.

Basic assumptions of life elsewhere were unobtainable for the masses here. There was poverty, starvation, and violence, over which the immensely wealthy plastered slogans, spectacles, and lies. Most anyone informed enough considered the Liminal Stars backwards, despite its many shining towers and touring vacation starships.

Kirby drummed her fingers as traffic control checked the Conveyor's paperwork. After a several minute wait, the ship and all the smaller docked craft were cleared for entry.

Kirby shrugged as her controls glowed back to life. the Mass-Conveyor was shedding its passengers before it turned back through the gate into the safety of Human Space. "So if there's no government, who the hell runs the base?"

"A corporation," Bryluen drawled, "There are fees for every entry; the conveyors pay out of a government contract."

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Kirby furrowed her brow. “Fees? For what?”

“Traveling.”

“For *traveling*? How have they not had a revolt?!”

“Because there’s no government to revolt against, Kirby. Just a company that owns the gates ... and an armed police force they call Security ... and most of the media.”

“So what, one person owns fuckin’ everything?”

“Twenty or so people, always having turf wars over every little thing while thousands starve, yes.”

“Shit, they don’t put that in the tourism pamphlet.”

“No, they do not.”

671;Shamash was locally known as Van Dieman’s world. Despite a lack of official recognition, the world was quite firmly held by several of the mega corporations of the Liminal Stars. The infrastructure was privately owned, the land was privately owned, and most of all the weaponry shipped or trafficked in from Ly Aulth space was privately owned.

671;Shamash was a pallid gray sphere that was only narrowly habitable in most respects—the company which managed the terraformation systems maintained a minimum viable atmosphere in order to reduce costs, but rented out pricey atmosphere scrubbers for private residences. The main continent of the world was dotted in cities centered around massive work sites. These work sites were clusters of towering buildings where workers spent much of their day laboring, and between them lay the occasional tourist trap filled with various monuments and diversions. Surrounding all of this were reedy patches of residential land where many of the workers lived. Unlike the more uniform glow and glimmer of cities in Human space, each city on 671;Shamash appeared as a sharp point of light that rapidly faded to darkness outside the work sites.

Kirby guided the shuttle in through orbital traffic control, balking at a several minute processing delay on the way down. The shuttle soon began its descent through the thin atmosphere, passing several small monitor ships emblazoned with company logos. Dread Naught had undergone a regimen of vaccines in preparation for the trip—while not strictly necessary, the CSOE was very clear on taking precautions when it came to travel in an area known for lax health standards.

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After several minutes of descent, the clouds parted before them. The core of the city ahead was a grim blotch of towers, the rest of the city hunched about like supplicants. The shuttle was directed to their assigned landing zone, near their target location. As they approached, the shuttle locked into an automated landing procedure. Their allotted portion of the landing pad was no less than four meters away from a gun emplacement cynically obscured by decorative plasterwork.

Bryluen cracked her fingers before opening the door from the cockpit to the passenger compartment. “Alright, let’s go over the plan one last time. Nef?”

Nef spoke without looking over at Bryluen. “Vort and I are far too recognizable, and so will remain until such time as you summon us, assuming the situation warrants our involvement. If summoned, we are to arrive directly through the east wall.”

Bryluen nodded and placed her hat on her head. “Nico, how about the rest of you?”

“We will have had fun, and not getting poisoned. You signaled, we will gather up.”

“Correct.” Bryluen unfastened her harness and walked through the bay to the shuttle’s ramp. She altered her stance slightly, the curve of her lower back changing and her shoulders taking on a slight skew as her weight shifted to one hip. Her face took on an uncharacteristic grin, and some subtle adjustment in how she held her eyelids gave her gaze a lively dazzle.

She smoothly donned her enormous hat. “I get us in with a bit of deceit, then make it obvious we mean business when the time comes. Follow me!”

Dread Naught descended from the landing pad down a set of wrought iron stairs in Bryluen’s wake like an entourage—Bel’Wa and Nicadzim were just behind Bryluen, and were followed by Kirby and Runner. Bryluen’s body language communicated that she was some scion of power, someone certain to be accompanied by guards and hangers-on alike. The illusion would assure their entrance into the club—the guards were not paid enough to be discerning so long as someone appeared to be capable of spending lots of money.

Outside, all was velvet darkness. Thin sheets of sappy mist brushed back and forth across the streets, slowly wearing away at the

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buildings. The work site towers loomed above, their distant reaches visible only as a soft glow through the fog banks accumulated overhead. The surrounding street was lit by struggling lamps and rows of hazy, glowing signs. A morass of people and drones shuffled in and out of the light, huddled and hurried as they rushed to the next point of familiarity and relative safety. It seemed that as long as one listened closely enough, the sound of a siren could always be made out among the clamor.

Kirby had never seen anything like it: the hypnotic glow of tall signs and traffic indicators battled for dominance with the pock-marked streets and the menacing shape of a black and white vehicle jutting from a nearby alley. She wanted to identify it as a community officer's vehicle, but she had never seen one so ill-equipped for community work. It was a low shape, needle-like and severe. The bars in the windows of the vehicle's rear passenger space made no suggestions of kindness. Kirby paused and made a slight sound as she spotted a man standing near it, cradling a rifle.

Runner gently placed a hand on her shoulder. His chest tattoo glowed subtly beneath his half jacket. "H-he's supposed to be there. That's called an En-nforcement Officer."

"He has a fucking gun."

Runner sighed. "They all do. That's h-how it is, here. These officers a-are just thugs protecting business interests. Very *r-r-retro*."

The club was about two blocks away; plenty of time to absorb the sights and sounds, the loudest and brightest of which were deceptively pleasant. For Kirby the illusion had already been shattered. She felt that one wrong turn off the lit path would find her knee-deep in fear and suffering. She spotted a hunched shape in an alley: a beggar. She paused a moment, realizing she had never actually seen someone forced to beg. The sight tugged at her heart, a distinct pang of helplessness at the thought that people in such lowly conditions could be in every one of these alleys and the powers-that-be would still change nothing.

She just couldn't understand it.

15. Nightlife and Non Grata

Their destination materialized out of the haze, at first merely an unfocused blur of magenta and red light. Before them was a cluster of flashing traffic signals directing the occasional private vehicle, beyond which was a shotgun spread of irregular signs, advertisements, and banners that fluttered in the breeze.

Pedestrians shuffled across the street and into neighboring alleyways, high collars and low hats obscuring them from the clinging mist. Rivulets of light rain curled down the tall streetlamps, and the darkness deepened for a moment as a hover transport passed overhead with a deep rumble. The mist parted beneath it, then gathered again in its wake as the transport passed over the next row of buildings.

Bryluen led the group up the street with an easy swagger, a vague emanation of light trailing behind a red phantom.

The club was located in what appeared to have once been a warehouse—its facade was uninspiring red brick but for decorative molding along the edge of the flat roof. Runner smirked, recalling his first encounter with Bryluen in a similar structure. A short line jutted from the door, consisting of a variety of people dressed in a manner similar to that of Dread Naught. A dizzying array of colors, lights, and trendy fashions battled for superiority in the mist.

Two hulking security personnel stood guard, checking identities with handheld scanners to determine who would be allowed in. As

Dread Naught approached the front of the line, they were drenched in the powerful neon glow of the sign over the club entrance. "Spotlight"

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the sign read—not the most original name, but it worked.

The two guards wore thick ballistic vests over their clothing, wary eyes surveying the line as they rapidly waved their hand scanners to search for weapons and verify identities. The red light of the club sign behind them drenched their faces in deep shadow. Bryluen lazily produced a card from a holster under one arm and held it up to be scanned. Identity paperwork in the Liminal Stars came in the form of cards issued by financial corporations. Essentially, an individual was permitted into the club on the basis of the score the banks assigned their expenditures and debts. Most simple actions in the Liminal Stars came down to companies vetting the information of other companies, rendering an individual as little more than a data set. While dehumanizing, this did make falsification easier for the CSOE. The card Bryluen produced belonged to a non-existent persona remotely managed through a complex web of deceit.

The guard scanned her with a vertical motion, their handheld device made to spot suspicious pockets of density or metal. Nothing interesting appeared on the readout so he scanned her card next. Glancing at the eyepiece hanging over their ear, the guard raised their eyebrows at the financial statistics that popped up. Bryluen made a bored motion suggesting the others were accompanying her. The guard knew better than to obstruct or inconvenience someone capable of spending the kind of money Bryluen's persona had on record. Most purchases and events in the Liminal Stars intersected with such easily-abused systems; it is no wonder that power here naturally concentrated upward.

Dread Naught filed after Bryluen, each receiving a brief body scan. Nicadzim glanced down at the guard scanning him and smiled slightly. The guard was less amused by the size differential and hurriedly waved him past. The entry door lead into a short black corridor sealed with a sound-absorbent curtain. Inside, club personnel handed out sleek headsets to each of the members of Dread Naught. Runner gave Nicadzim a brief run-down on how to synchronize his headset with the rest of the group before they broke the curtain and entered the club proper.

Within the club, complex music blared out. A column of water inset along the left-hand wall shrouded a narrow elevator that

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transported club patrons between the three floors. Laser-projectors and spotlights shone across the interior and filtered up and down through the crystalline material of the dance floors.

The center of the first floor held a round bar crewed by living bartenders. The rim of the bar was coated in a reflective material, causing it to glow with the surrounding colored light. The bar top itself was heated, causing waves of infrared light to wash over it in time with the music. The bartenders were each dressed in chaotic rave-wear that matched the colors of the sign outside.

Along the far wall was a giant audio-visualizer, flashing and strobing to the music in numerous patterns and colors. To either side of the three-meter tall visualizer were doors to the private rooms, each flanked by bouncers similar in size and dourness to those out front of the club. The right-hand wall featured a dispensary from which one could order a small selection of food. This was flanked by the entrances to the bathroom.

The second floor was smaller than the first by a third, and consisted entirely of an ovoid dance floor lined in thin translucent rails. Water-filled columns held suspended dancers between the second and third floors, giving yet another surface for the numerous lights to cascade through.

The third floor was a lounge area around three-fourths the size of the second floor. Clusters of couches, chairs, and tables rendered in a reflective material similar to the bar top trim were arranged to give a commanding view of the lower floors. Several security personnel quietly stood watch, peering below them for anything that required their attention. A smaller automated bar lay in the center, where one could order drinks to be sent up from the ground floor.

Bryluen motioned for the group to disperse as they pleased before signaling their arrival to Nef and Vort with a squeeze of a hidden device in her collar.

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Nef's helmet partially phased into being for a moment as the

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signal came through. "They are within the club now."

"WELL, NOT MUCH TO DO BUT WAIT AT THIS POINT, I SUPPOSE."

"Indeed."

"I GUESS YOU WILL HAVE LESS TROUBLE WAITING QUIETLY THAN I."

"... There is no need to do so, should you wish to speak. I had not anticipated you would have a desire for discussion."

"WHY WOULD THAT BE?"

"... You are likely in pain, and may desire silence."

"WELL ... I AM, YES. BUT I THINK TALKING ABOUT IT IS BETTER. NOT THAT YOU HAVE TO TALK ABOUT THAT WITH ME!"

"Would discussing your pain be of benefit to you?"

"I THINK SO, YES."

"Discussing your pain will certainly not be a detriment to me."

"THAT MAKES THIS SOUND REASONABLY SIMPLE, THOUGH I HARDLY KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN."

"Perhaps it will provide clarity to note that we both share a unique trait among all our companions."

"OH? WHAT WOULD THAT BE?"

"... we are alone."

"I ... HAD WONDERED WHAT YOU MAY HAVE FELT REGARDING THAT."

"Will a discussion aid you?"

"I CERTAINLY THINK IT COULD."

"Very well. I do not feel things as you do. But the knowledge that there were intended to be more of ... me, does not sit entirely well within my mind."

"I SUPPOSE WE'RE SITTING AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE SAME SCENARIO: I HAD FAMILY AND LOST IT, WHILE YOU ... NEVER GOT THAT CHANCE."

Nef nodded. "This is ... a substantial question, but what is family like?"

Vort produced a high, sighing noise. "THAT'S TOUGH. AT IT'S CORE, HAVING FAMILY MEANS THAT YOU ARE ALWAYS CONNECTED TO SOMEONE."

"Having this connection; how does it ... help you?"

"IT'S LIKE A CONSTANT REMINDER THAT SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE, HAS GONE THROUGH SOMETHING YOU'RE GOING THROUGH. THAT YOUR SUFFERING

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CAN AT LEAST BE RELATED TO, AND BECAUSE OF THAT YOU NEVER TRULY SUFFER ALONE.”

“To have that taken must be ... painful, I presume.”

Vort made another, quieter sound. “IT IS. THOUGH I HAVE A NEW FAMILY, NOW. REMEMBERING THAT HELPS EASE THE HURT. I AM VERY LUCKY TO HAVE BEEN WITH DREAD NAUGHT FOR SOME TIME BEFORE LEARNING OF WHAT HAPPENED. IT’S STILL HARD TO GRAPPLE WITH MOST DAYS.”

“Is ... forming a connection with a new family difficult?”

“IN SOME WAYS IT HAPPENS ON ITS OWN, BUT IN OTHERS IT IS VERY, VERY HARD. YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO TRUST, TO LET YOUR EMOTIONS BE SEEN AND HANDLED BY PEOPLE YOU AREN’T AS FAMILIAR WITH. IT CAN TAKE A LONG TIME TO FEEL SECURE IN THOSE PEOPLE AND IN YOUR OWN FEELINGS ENOUGH TO CONSIDER THEM FAMILY. BUT JUST AS OFTEN YOU FIND YOURSELF CONNECTED TO SOMEONE SIMPLY BY GOING THROUGH SOMETHING WITH THEM. THAT’S WHAT’S HAPPENED WITH DREAD NAUGHT FOR THE MOST PART; SURVIVING TRIALS AND STRUGGLING WITH SOMEONE MAKES THEM FEEL CLOSER. YOU SEE THEIR VULNERABILITIES AND FEEL BETTER SHOWING YOUR OWN.”

“So your new family has helped you cope with the loss of your previous family?”

“YES, IN MANY QUIET WAYS, AND IN SOME BIG WAYS. EVENINGS ON THE BALCONY WITH NICO, MOVIE TIME WITH BRYLUEN AND BEL’WA, OR DINNER WITH KIRBY AND RUNNER. JUST ... *BEING* HELPS SO MUCH. IT’S LIKE I’VE HAD TO RELEARN HOW TO EXIST, AND IT’S BEEN VERY HARD AT TIMES. BUT WHEN YOU HAVE PEOPLE TO JUST EXIST WITH, IT FEELS SO MUCH MORE POSSIBLE.”

Nef though silently for a moment. “Do you find it easier to speak with me than your companions seem to?”

“APPARENTLY SO. I HOPE THE WAY THEY FEEL DOESN’T BOTHER YOU TOO MUCH.”

“It does not. They have no choice in the matter, and take direct action to include me in socialization. Faulting them would be akin to blaming them for an inability to fly.”

“... I SOMETIMES CATCH MYSELF FAULTING THEM FOR THAT, TO BE HONEST.”

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Runner, Kirby, and Nico had settled side-by-side onto the central bar with drinks in hand. They were turned away from the counter, squatting on stools and people-watching. They chatted idly over their headsets as they looked about.

“Q-quite a scene, isn’t it?”

Kirby agreed, aside from the trafficking behind-the-scenes—which could under no circumstances be mentioned aloud. Bryluen had given simple but strict orders to Dread Naught. No alcohol, absolutely zero discussion of anything regarding Dread Naught, their mission, or any of the club’s extra-curricular activities. Most clubs in the Liminal Stars had surveillance kits to root out exactly the situation that was occurring that night, in addition to the monitoring of the headsets given out to each party.

So, at length, Kirby simply nodded at Runner. “Hey, you ever been to a club like this, Nico?”

Nicadzim was openly gawking about. “I had not being to any clubs at all.”

Runner leaned past Kirby and grinned at him. “You look-k like it rem-minds you of something.”

“It will.” Nicadzim nodded. “A rainbow in the stars, sussurating in scents.”

Kirby sipped her drink loudly. “Sounds cool.”

“It is,” Nicadzim stated with a smile.

Runner motioned up toward the second floor, through which they could see Bryluen and Bel’Wa dancing with wild abandon.

“It is like we never really know Bryl,” Nico announced.

Kirby smiled. “Or like some long-estranged sister of hers just showed up.”

“... and th-then got a little saucy with-th Bryl’s wife,” Runner added.

Kirby nodded and stirred her drink. “Oh, that’s good drama, I like it. Now Bel’wa being the dancing type, I can see. We’ve talked about it before. Bryl? Fuck no—yet here we are. When the hell does she practice dancing?”

“I thought that every time we won’t be looking, she is practicing

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or learned something,” Nicadzim drawled.

Runner motioned with his glass. “That’s true. Once kn-nocked on her office door and she was in there knee-deep in some T’hròstag b-board game.”

Kirby and Nicadzim laughed. Runner stood from the bar and offered a hand to Kirby. “Can’t let them have all the fun, though, can we?”

Kirby blushed as Nicadzim grinned and waved the two of them away.

Out on the dance floor, Bryl and Bel’Wa were laughing together. Bel’Wa hung her arms around Bryluen’s neck, her dress shimmering and pulsing wildly with the music. “This is a lot more enjoyable than I thought it would be.”

“Why, did you think I’d stopped being fun at some point?”

Bel’Wa laughed, knowing she couldn’t answer the question out loud—given the end-goal of tonight, Bel’Wa had expected less in the way of spousal quality time.

“Literally the least I could do. Let me pass off our note, then I’ll be right back.”

Bryluen spun away with a wink, slipping through crowded dancers in a gradual and indirect route toward the nearest guard at the edge of the dance floor. With a timely stumble, she gently bumped into the guard, apologizing as she slipped a folded note into his collar. Excusing herself, she slipped away once more back toward Bel’Wa. The guard didn’t notice the note stored on his person until Bryluen was gone. The note was a short, coded message asking for a meet—it matched the particular lingo used by the club for its trafficking activities, and assuredly would put the club’s entire security detail on notice for anything Dread Naught would do the rest of the night. Bryluen planned that she would be identified at some point sooner than later, but it was effectively too late to get rid of her now that she was inside—the guards could hardly move against her or members of her party without risking a confrontation in a busy club. The earliest they could act would be at closing time, when the meeting was requested regardless.

That left about two hours of time Dread Naught could use for leisure. Nicadzim looked about himself, drinking in the rich mixture of colors and sounds that filled the space. The textural experience of this

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club, the way he could feel the music reverberate through his body, the waves of heat passing over the bar top, and the multitudinous colors washing over every surface made this space almost familiar to him. He was surprised by that realization initially, having spent so much of his time alone, but on reflection he realized the multi-sensory experience of being here had more in common with his nightly travels than lounging about at Raven's Landing.

He spent some time trying to find Runner and Kirby in the crowd. They looked happy; happier than he had seen them before, and certainly happier than when he had first met them. Kirby, despite living out loud in most respects, had long nursed a confidence problem. Nicadzim had always wondered why that was—he certainly had never seen anything about her that necessitated embarrassment aside from the workshop incident—but concluded it was a private matter he had no business prodding into. Runner, for his part, had become magnitudes warmer over time and now approached what one may consider a degree of vulnerability, speaking far more easily and naturally about himself than when Dread Naught had just begun. Together, Runner and Kirby had naturally grown so close that even Nicadzim had noticed.

On that note he realized that, even after months of living with others, he missed a good number of quiet social cues that others seemed to pick up on easily. He had discussed this at length with Bel'Wa one evening, who explained that Runner had some of the same problems, as did she and Vort—albeit in their case it was simply a basic hurdle of cross-species communication. There was some irony that such a high-profile initiative consisted of so many people who struggled with social skills, but Nicadzim supposed that was Bryluen's problem.

He smiled to himself, and then turned partially in his seat, realizing he had forgotten his drink behind him. As he tried to close his meaty fist around the glass, his hand passed through it. He snatched his hand back, hoping no one had seen, and brushed his now wet hand off on his pants leg. He sighed, but then something caught the edge of his senses, like some distant sound he could feel beneath his skin. He knew this sensation, subtle as it was, and what it meant. He drained his drink in one go—his hand clutching the glass this time—and left the bar. He hurriedly worked his way to the bathroom, slipped into a stall, and closed the door behind him.

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He took a breath, and then he was no longer in the bathroom of a club in the Liminal Stars. He had somehow traveled while awake.

He looked around. He was on a bluff—if you could call it that, for it seemed to be part of a freely floating mass. Beneath the bluff was an ocean so dark he could barely see the whirling motion of its tide. The bluff was made of some lambent rust-colored material that crawled like millions of ants whenever you weren't looking. The skies above were a mixture of fantastic star fields and furious infernos in colors that had no name, layered over each other like sheets of fabric torn with a knife.

He checked that his headset was still with him, then moved along the length of the bluff in a sort of half-swimming motion—for the air here had a gelatinous consistency. For a moment, he had no idea what to do.

Normally he simply adventured or experienced the reality or realm he had unwittingly traveled to until such a time as he was returned to his home reality. This had previously always aligned with a predictable sleep cycle, though the amount of time he experienced during this varied greatly. Given the change in circumstance, however, he did not know how long he would be gone or how long he would have to linger here. That helplessness began to rapidly gnaw at him, knowing that his friends had need of him in as little as two hours back in their reality. Not to mention how he would get home if they were forced to leave without him.

After a short period of despair spent swimming back and forth, Nicadzim stopped and closed his eyes. He and Nef had discussed his abilities at length, wherein Nef had challenged a number of his preconceptions about himself. So much about his abilities seemed random but Nef contended there must be some way for him to control the strange occurrences, similar to how he controlled his weapon-constructs. Each construct was a concrete example of something about his nature that he had mastered, and since then he had spent a great deal of time thinking critically about how he interacted with them.

He discovered there was a minute sensation to summoning the constructs, some indescribable experience he had then latched onto and tried to define. He had then begun to notice that sensation at other times, when things would manifest in his presence or began to behave oddly. Not a fortnight earlier, he had felt the sensation at the moment he

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traveled.

He noticed it frequently now, though he did not know if that was entirely a result of his new-found discipline or if the sensation was growing with his powers.

He reached out his hand, closed his eyes, and breathed slowly. He sought the sensation, spreading his fingers and concentrating. He began to rapidly summon and un-summon a weapon construct, focusing not on the weapon but on its state of semi-existence. The weapon flickered, then ceased to be, then he felt the mental equivalent of barely catching his nails on something. He pulled, more with his mind than his hand, and felt something shift—or at least, that is how he would try and explain it to someone else. He pulled sideways as if drawing open a curtain, focusing his thoughts on the club and his friends and channeling those thoughts along his arm. He had no idea if this would work, but it was accomplishing something he had never done while traveling.

He opened his eyes, gazing into an abstract gap in reality. He felt a heat-like sensation in his eyes, as if they were glowing—and they likely were, as that had begun happening to him at times. Through the gap he perceived sights for which he lacked words, and sensations beyond Human ken, a raw distillation of potentiality manifested before him. He aimed the palm of his hand toward the gap, and stepped forward into it. As his skin touched the hole, it swam and shimmered and glittered before it overtook him like an ant-lion surging from the sand.

There was a single instant of nothing. Then everything returned—moisture, heat, sound, texture, weight, light, the feel of his tongue against his teeth, and a thousand other micro-sensations. He was back in the stall, and as far as he could tell only a note or two of the club music had occurred in his absence. He clapped his hands together excitedly, startling someone in the next stall. He rapidly excused himself.

He currently had no way to report the incident to Brylue, but he was gladdened to have some good, rather than worrying, news to bring her. He felt like he had been a harbinger of much doubt and worry recently, and had been plagued with concern that he was becoming a liability. He smiled for a moment, knowing that while it would similarly be some time before he could tell Nef, but they would be equally glad for him.

16. Experience and Exits

Dread Naught enjoyed the rest of their night, slowly drawing closer together as patrons left while the clock edged toward closing time. The last dregs were escorted out by the less-than-gentle coaxing of the security crew, aside from Dread Naught.

Bryluen's note had stated the terms of the meeting would take place in the open with her compatriots—not an unusual request under these circumstances. It was always wiser to have one's protectors close by in case something went wrong.

A ring of the five remaining guards on duty stood arranged around Bryluen, Bel'Wa, Kirby, Runner, and Nicadzim out on the dance floor. Each member of Dread Naught faced outward, calmly locking eyes with the guard in front of them. Cold overhead lights cast dramatic shadows, making the building feel much more like the warehouse it was built from. The owner of the club came out of the back offices. He was young, somewhere in his thirties, with gray patches at the temples of his short, dark hair. He wiped his hands together and stopped at a safe distance from Bryluen.

He was about to speak when his voice died in his throat. One of the security staff had identified Bryluen earlier in the night, and the owner found themselves momentarily at a loss as to how to open the conversation.

Bryluen smiled slightly. "I'm not going to waste any time. I am a

CSOE Operative here for data in your possession. Give me what I need, and I leave, no questions asked.”

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“Wait, let me get this straight: You come into my club, and you demand information out of me, just like that?”

The surrounding guards tensed and braced themselves, awaiting the go-ahead. Something about Bryluen suddenly changed. Her shoulders relaxed, and an air of danger settled around her. Something less than malice, but more than mischief swept across her face, a bloody certainty that glinted in her eyes. The inky shadow of her hat left little but her mouth and chin visible in the hard overhead light, a glittering smirk like some deathly apparition.

She chuckled softly, her voice easing from her throat in velvety amusement. “You don’t understand, do you?”

She held the room in suspense for a moment, lips slightly parted. She gazed lazily at the nails of one hand. “I walked in through your front door, allowed you to see me, and you still made the mistake of letting me get this close. You do not have the options you think you have.”

The owner made a slight upward twitch with their eyes. A grin crept onto Bryluen’s face. “I’m sorry, but your sniper isn’t there tonight.”

The sniper, who was intended to be crouched in the rafters with a rifle, was halfway out of the Liminal Stars with her family on a CSOE shuttle—they had been clandestinely offered immediate immigration to Human Space in exchange for their absence almost two weeks earlier. The owner’s face fell for a moment, their facade giving way as the situation began to sink in.

“Listen very carefully: I am the serpent in your burrow, little rodent. There is only one reason an Operative would make themselves known to you: because I am already in control. You can fight, you can struggle, but the only difference you can make from here is whether or not you choose to survive. You know who I am; don’t overestimate your chances.”

This sort of situation was always risky with the lower ranks of any criminal organization; those with more experience and power knew better than to end up in the room with an Operative. Similarly, those without the wherewithal to keep a distance from face to face meetings might panic and cause a confrontation. Bryluen had planned and accounted for all of this.

“I’m not just going to give you what you want, that’s not how

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this works.”

“This isn’t business as usual. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t far too important. I don’t know how loyal your contacts are, but no one appreciates getting on the CSOE’s radar. The data you have is useless to you, of that you can be certain.”

“Who says it’s for me?”

Bryluen raised an eyebrow. “Who do you think is going to buy it off you? It’s not marketable data. I’ll be frank: the only people who want the data are governments; it’s not useful for smuggling. Holding onto it puts a bullseye on your back. I promise that if T’hròstag special forces come for it, they’ll just put holes in you and leave.”

“You think special forces are going to come after this? That means it’s valuable. It’s worth something to me, so what can you offer?”

“Your life,” Bryluen sighed, “You will die if this information stays in your hands. It is a matter of extreme fortune that I arrived first. Hand it over before it kills you. What I am offering is to spare your operation in exchange for the data. Mercy is what you get.”

The man hesitated, then his hand twitched. This was not a matter of speed or reaction time: both factors were too unpredictable for a professional. Bryluen simply had the wherewithal, experience, and skill to pre-empt the club owner. As the man’s hand descended into a signal for the guards she snatched her hat from her head, bunching it in one hand and swinging the brim at the nearest guard as the signal descended. With a hard thud, the brim struck the guard in the side of the head and sent them sprawling—the brim contained hidden weights which, due to tampering by an infiltrator earlier in the week, had gone unnoticed by the hand-scanners. Runner reacted a moment later, launching a piston-like punch into the throat of the nearest guard before launching them back with a kick to the chest.

Kirby head butted the guard in front of her, causing a wet crunch as their nose broke. A palm to the shattered nose sent them rolling away. Bel’Wa struck her opponent in the sternum hard enough to double them over, and then followed up by grabbing their head and kneeling their face hard enough to make them cry out. Nicadzim appeared behind the final guard, punching them in the back of the neck with one meaty fist. The exchange had taken a single, practiced moment, and left every guard down. The owner had turned and sprinted back toward the rear offices—

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and the back door exit of the building. Bryluen motioned for the others to secure the guards and followed with a casual stride, tossing aside her headset and smoothly replacing her hat as she went.

The club owner sprinted back toward the private rooms and rammed into a black-painted door near invisible in the dim corridor. Upon passing through, they entered a nondescript hallway containing the rear offices and supply rooms of the club. They fled up the length of the hall to the locked door leading into the back alley and scrambled to unlock it with a swipe of their ID card. The door unlatched, but refused to move. A delivery crate had been pushed in front of the door hours ago by an inside source in order to wedge it shut. The owner doubled back and ran into their office just as Bryluen swept in after them.

Her gun was held squarely in her hand, overlaid with shielded plating that had prevented it from being detected in a thigh holster. The club owner had been scrambling for a weapon in a hidden compartment in their desk but stopped and raised their hands, eyes wide in terror.

Bryluen began to pace. “Let me tell you a story. About twenty years ago five children were kidnapped from a border colony and sold to slavers here in the Liminal Stars. Big story, huge incident, and covered by the media all the way to the end. Tracking those children and rescuing them took eight years. They were reunited with their families, and the slavers that had held them were dragged out of the fetid reaches of the Liminal Stars. There was just one loose end, one piece that had never been resolved; the apprehension of the individual who had kidnapped them to begin with. A small fry in the grand scheme, but also the last face those people saw before being robbed of their childhoods.”

Bryluen kept her pistol aimed unerringly at the man’s sweaty forehead. “Until now. I gave you an extremely generous offer. Now, surrender.”

The man panicked for the last time, extending an arm to grab the weapon concealed in the desk. His hand had only moved mere centimeters before Bryluen squeezed the trigger.

In such close confines, and without the sound dampening of a helmet, the discharge of the pistol was stunningly loud. Her pistol was loaded with blunt rounds larger than a thumb and weighing over three-hundred fifty grams. They were each merciless killers, shrieking bolts of death jacketed in a hardened alloy coating.

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The round shattered the sound barrier with a deafening crack and an instant later squarely struck the man's forehead, ignored it, and promptly embedded itself in the far wall. The only further sound was a curt slap of spilled blood, and the thud of a headless body.

"... I suppose that works," Bryluen said, holstering her pistol before the corpse had fallen still. She paid no mind to the drop of the dead man's blood running down her neck and quickly pressed the comms button in her collar as she walked over to the desk.

"Vort, ready the shuttle for launch."

She drew a small camera from one pocket and used it to take pictures of the office, concealed weapon, and body. She then used the dead man's hand to unlock the computer on the desk. Pulling a small data drive from a compartment in one sleeve, she rapidly downloaded a backup of a number of loose files that should contain information on known associates of the smuggling operation. As she waited, she dug through the dead owner's pockets, quickly finding a key. Taking the key to the safe mounted on the wall, she opened it and discovered her goal. The segment of the probe's data drive organ was a crystalline object one could easily overlook as any mundane mineral. Bryluen took it in hand, grabbed her data drive, and went back out into the hall.

The rest of the team was coming up the corridor, having tied up the guards and disposed of their headsets. They each glanced toward the office where the body lay, pausing a moment as they realized what had occurred. Bryluen snapped her fingers and motioned to Nicadzim. "Get the box, we need to move."

He blinked outside, shoved the crate aside with one shoulder, and opened the alley door. The group poured out and jogged behind Bryluen as they distanced themselves from the club. Within a few minutes they were back at the shuttle and in their harnesses. They waited quietly while Kirby got clearance for liftoff.

As Kirby took the shuttle upward, she quietly spoke up. "So ... what happened?"

Bryluen took a breath. "He panicked, went for a weapon."

"Well, nothing you could have done about that."

"Perhaps."

"Well I mean he went for a weapon, you had to defend yourself."

"It's never that simple."

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“How so?”

“He was cornered. Perhaps I could have hung back and negotiated. Maybe he would have given up with some reasoning.”

“I doubt it, and he was slaver scum to begin with. Deserved a bullet if you ask me.”

“I think so, too, but we’ll never know if there could have been another outcome.”

“... is it always like this when you have to shoot someone?”

“It has to be, Kirby. I can’t do this job well without having to think about things this way. Every bullet has to matter, or I can’t be trusted.”

“Sometimes I think your job sounds fuckin’ awful.”

Bryluen smiled. “It has its moments.”

No more than an hour later, the shuttle was attached to another mass-conveyor to be taken back into the safety of Human Space with none the wiser for their passing. The fight at the club and the corpse left behind would simply blend into the daily news of small-scale atrocities that characterized media coverage in the Liminal Stars.

A CSOE courier was waiting at Raven’s Landing for the data organ. Bryluen made for the meeting room as soon as she had passed off the organ in order to make her full report and the others headed to their rooms to undress. Within the meeting room, a projection of councilor Tarif greeted Bryluen. Bryluen plugged the data drive into the console and began a secure transfer.

She held her hat behind her back as she spoke. “Full success. The data organ has been passed onto the recovery team and I am transferring a large volume of incidental data. One casualty.”

Councilor Tarif was tall and pale with thick curls of dark brown hair that cascaded down to their neck. They looked through the photos of the dead man and the concealed weapon, then took a brief breath before speaking. “What was done to avoid this?”

“I laid out the facts of who I was and why I was there. I offered to leave their operation alone if they surrendered the data organ. They ran, and after pursuit I cornered them and let them know we knew their identity. They panicked rather than be brought in.”

“Was it necessary to identify them?”

“It felt prudent given the offer they had just refused. I asked

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them to surrender. There was no logical way they could have drawn and fired their weapon before I pulled the trigger. They made a decision, and I responded.”

The councilor paused, allowing a weighty silence to settle into the air of the meeting room. “... Very well. I will review all of the files you’ve sent and your written report. Thank you as always, Operative Branok.”

The room went dark as the call ended and the projection faded out. Bryluen let out a small breath; it was always easier to pull the trigger in the moment than to justify that trigger pull later.

Nicadzim was waiting for her outside the meeting room, and promptly asked to speak with her in her office when she emerged. Bryluen motioned for Nicadzim to follow her. Eventually she might be able to get out of her outfit.

Nicadzim had shed his club clothing for a plain shirt and a pair of blue shorts. He closed the door behind him and briefly relayed what had occurred in the club.

“Bit of a double-edged sword.” Bryluen sat cross-legged, holding her hat in her lap as she comprehended what had happened to Nicadzim. “But if it happens again we know you can travel back. This opens other possibilities, you know.”

“Like what?”

“You might be able to go places on purpose. Places we couldn’t otherwise get to. I’m certain there will be a use for that.”

“So you will not worry if I were to practice traveling like that?”

“Of course I’ll worry. But I can see this brings you some peace, and I think it’s an important part of understanding who you are. I want you to have that understanding and comfort, especially since your powers seem to be growing or changing. Keep me posted if you decide to attempt anything new.”

“I ... think I am going to try traveling tonight. To another world and back. I think I can phase to another reality, then come back elsewhere.”

Bryluen paused for a moment. “Wear your armor, and take an emergency beacon from the armory with you. That way if you end up stranded in some other system we can fetch you. Get Nef, I want to talk with them as well about this, since they seem to know something more

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than we do.”

Nicadzim flashed out of the room and then back after several seconds. Moments later Nef loomed in the office door, the ethereal glow of their skin permeating the small office space. “Yes, Bryluen?”

“I need to know everything you know about Nicadzim and his connection to the Dreaded.”

“I know very little. Only that the ... energy he emits at times is similar to that of the Dreaded.”

“In what way?”

“It is, I believe, a quantum phenomenon. The only significance is that I recognize it from the Dreaded.”

“So if Nicadzim would allow readings to be taken, we could learn more about how the Sjorthursars phase, perhaps?”

Nicadzim nodded. “I will agree to this.”

“Good. So if Nicadzim shares this phenomenon with the Dreaded, that could possibly explain how they saw us on Skaði. Namely that his powers are growing to the point the Dreaded could detect the phenomenon, perhaps causing them to investigate. If so, we could intentionally lure or misdirect them out in the field. You know nothing else, Nef?”

Nef shook their head. “Nothing but what you have been told.”

Bryluen paused. She had her doubts, but couldn’t decide if she was simply projecting onto the otherwise very straightforward deity. “Tonight, Nico, you attempt to voluntarily travel from the lobby to, say ... Tāwhiri, and back. Nef and I will watch and wait in case anything tries to come home with you. Meet in the lobby in about an hour. I have blood to wash off.”

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Several minutes later in her shower, Bryluen let the water crash over her face. Bel’Wa was sat on the edge of the tub in the middle of the room.

“Are you ... okay?” Bryluen hadn’t said much since the conclusion of their mission, to an uncharacteristic degree.

Bryluen leaned out of the water raining down within the shower. She was, as usual, wearing her black bathing suit. “I’m as well as can be.

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Nothing I haven't done before. Just have a lot on my mind."

"Would you like to share, my love?"

Bryluen took a breath. "I hadn't even considered sharing, I'm so used to dealing with these things alone ... I took a life. I make it look easy, but it isn't. Sometimes it feels like it gets harder rather than being easier after all these years."

Bel'Wa bobbed a foot up and down. "Was this death different than others?"

"No, if anything it had more justification behind it. He was a known quantity and certainly not someone that should be free. But he was also scared. I hate when they're scared."

"That would be hard. But they were scared because of their own decisions. They weren't scared because of you, not really. They were afraid because of where their decisions had brought them."

"You think so?"

"I do. If they hadn't done what they had chosen to do with their life, they never would have been in that room. You did what was necessary to protect yourself."

"That does help to hear. Kirby said something similar. I suppose I just need some time to mull it over."

"Is that what you usually do?"

"It is. I reason with myself, go back through the scenario, think about alternatives, and come around to being okay with what happened. It's not ... a bad thing that I have to do that. My sense of empathy lives."

"Your sense of empathy is why you're so good at this. You never lose sight of that, and it makes you do so much more than others might. I love you, and I'm proud of you."

Bryluen grinned at Bel'Wa's earnest sweetness. For a moment, she was lost for words. She had not undertaken such a difficult action since Dread Naught had been founded. It was certainly much easier to go through something like this when her wife was there to offer support. She felt a weight lift off of her. "... I love you, too. Thank you, tye'tyito."

Bryluen soon donned her armor and met Nicadzim and Nef in the lobby. Bel'Wa had decided to suit up and join them. Vort, Kirby, and Runner had already gone to sleep, but had been notified of what would be occurring in the lobby. "Alright, Nico, we need only establish that

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you can reliably travel away and back. I know time moves strangely when you travel, so simply do your best.”

Nicadzim nodded, flexing his armored fists in anticipation. “Yes, ma’am.”

He reached out a hand. He wasn’t sure if he actually had to do that, but it certainly felt right. He let his mind race, seeking the sensation and soon finding it. He spread his fingers, feeling once more like they had caught onto something. He pulled, drawing open a gap in reality, and then touched it. Again the nothingness pulled him in and through, and after an instant he found himself elsewhere.

Bryluen merely grunted as Nicadzim vanished. The gap in reality was not visible to her, so it appeared Nicadzim had simply blinked out of existence. “You ever seen anything like this, Nef?”

Nef looked down from their seated position nearby. “I have not. But I have not seen much. Mostly battle.”

“Your creator keep you busy?”

Nef nodded. “I was tested many times. They had hoped to create more of me, I believe. But this must never have occurred. I believe they gave into despair and never finished their work.”

“What were they like?”

“Distant, but I feel kind. I believe they were conflicted about creating me. Taking another creature and reshaping it does pose certain ethical questions. They did the best they could do, but could not save their people. I do admit to wishing that I knew more.”

“I bet you do. You must have many questions. I would.”

Nef nodded again. “I know I was created to do battle. That much is certain. Whether my creator ever had any other intentions for me I will never know, however.”

Bel’Wa shifted from one foot to the other, unintentionally menacing in her wargear. “I believe you will find more purpose than that.”

“I think that I already have. I desire to learn. I am more curious than I knew I was under my creator’s eye. They instilled that in me, I believe.”

“Perhaps that was not instilled in you at all, perhaps that is who you are: Curious,” Bel’Wa said. “You give your creator credit, but you are your own being.”

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“... This is true. I will consider that at length. I had not thought to credit myself thus, as the circumstances of my creation are a known quantity.”

Bryluen cleared her throat. “Take it from someone whose creation was less deterministic: One always outstrips the bounds of their birth. Always.”

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Nicadzim looked about himself. He was treading water, as much as one could, in a river of morosity hemmed in by cliffs of gleaming serendipity. Such extrasensory experiences were so routine to him that he hardly noticed. He reached out and focused his thoughts on the facility on Tāwhiri where Dread Naught had acquired their first Stone just a few months earlier as the “tide” dragged him onward. He pulled open the veil of reality and passed through.

After another instant of nothingness, a familiar feeling in the air settled. Stone stretched out around him in a wide plateau, around which thrashed a deep cyan sea. A familiar structure in green and beige stood up the slope of the plateau, hemmed in by a dark blue and gray sky. He had made it, on his first try, to Tāwhiri. The world’s unending electric storm crashed overhead. He laughed heartily, holding out his arms as rain poured down on him. He had violated established laws of physics many times, but never so dramatically, and with such little effort at that. He could hardly believe what had occurred. He held out his arm once more, focusing his thoughts on Raven’s Landing.

He sunk into the abyss, falling rapidly through silverine sheets of anxious memories and gossamer threads of hopeful impulses. Again, he pried open reality and passed through with little effort. He reappeared in the lobby, water running off of his armor and splashing on the floor. Bryluen clapped her armored hands. “You were gone maybe a minute or two! It worked?”

“It worked,” he said, spreading his arms in triumph.

Nef nodded their head. “Congratulations. I am pleased to hear this.”

Bel’Wa smiled, though it could not be seen behind her visor. “I’m so glad!”

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Bryluen began to pace. “Now, can you go somewhere you haven’t been before? That’s the real test.”

“Hrm. Shall I try?”

“Well I’d like to think I put on this armor for a reason, so why not?”

“Okay. Where should I go?”

“Let’s see.” Bryluen held up her tab, showing a landscape photograph. “France, back on Earth. This field. You should see a small church nearby.”

Nicadzim leaned in, focusing on the picture as he extended an arm. “Let’s see.”

The same sensation of catching his nails, the same motion of pulling apart reality, and the same moment of nothingness. The nothingness gave way to a yawning abyss below and above him, then became riddled with colors, and something other than colors. He felt like he was drifting down a river and fought to focus his thoughts. His senses came and went, being replaced by other sensations in turn as if his body was cycling through channels on a television. He felt like he clenched his fist, and was overwhelmed by an explosion of light in every hue. For an instant all went blank, and then he felt sensation return to him. He blinked his eyes and looked about. Sunflowers sprouted around him in splendor. He turned about, spotting a small church in the distance. He grinned. Rolling his shoulders, he reached out once more and returned to Raven’s Landing.

“Nico, you son of a bitch.” Bryluen grinned behind her visor.

He nodded. “I was feeling quite proud. I saw the church and the sun flowers.”

“It’s a pretty spot. That’s enough for tonight. I need to catch some sleep, but I’m proud of you.”

Nicadzim paused a moment. There was a certain dignified motherliness to Bryluen’s manner that made her compliment touching. “Thank you.”

He thought an impulse in Nef’s direction, a silent feeling of satisfaction and warmth. They responded in kind, or at least as close as they could feel to such sensations. This made Nicadzim smile as he removed his helmet.

Nef shifted from their seated position, thinking a sentence

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towards Nicadzim. “Such an ability will prove useful, I am certain.”

He responded in thought. “I will be certain that Bryluen was going to ask me to scout for us from this point.”

“It would be foolish not to. Between you and Vort, Dread Naught is able to assess situations very rapidly.”

Bel’Wa, unaware of the dialogue between the two walked up to Nicadzim and clapped a hand on his shoulder pad. “Cion’Tak, Nicadzim. See you tomorrow!”

“Indeed,” he responded politely.

Bryluen, Bel’Wa, and Nicadzim moved to the corridor and began to remove their armor. Nef proceeded to their room, but continued to speak to Nicadzim mentally. Nef was not entirely sure why Nicadzim could speak to them in this fashion. It was the manner in which Nef had spoken with their creator, and had no sufficient analogue in Human terms. The silence of this form of communication had made it a useful way to learn about their comrades and ask questions in situations with which Nef was not familiar. Nef had absorbed everything Nicadzim had told them, and voraciously consumed books and other forms of media. Curiosity indeed seemed to be their defining trait, which was greatly aided by their perfect memory. Nef often asked Nicadzim about his nightly travels as well, wishing to understand as much as they could of what he had seen and experienced in his time. As it turned out, that amount of time was not entirely known to Nicadzim. He only had a loose idea of his own age, and had little evidence to back up his suppositions either way. He had revealed there to be no documentation of his birth or family. Nicadzim was by all accounts a singular being, as impossible as that seemed. That said, if ever there were someone to be such an oddity in that respect, Nicadzim was a fitting subject.

Nicadzim, for his part, did not consider himself an expert on other people, shows, music, or other forms of cultural output. He deferred to others in that respect, having lived much of his life in solitude. Raven’s Landing’s library had proved fruitful for Nef as a result, but Nef still first asked Nicadzim for any questions or curiosities, finding simple kinship in their individual forms of uniqueness. Nef wondered often about Vort, but had felt questions about himself and his people could be insensitive given the still recent news of their disappearance. Most of Nef’s conversational attempts were inquiries—

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they had not quite mastered the art of small talk, instead mostly intent on the acquisition of knowledge or items of whimsical curiosity. Still, the other members of Dread Naught were all too happy to oblige. Runner sometimes wilted under the pressure of repeated questions, but aside from that many long and winding conversations had occurred to sate Nef's desire to learn.

Out of all of them, Bryluen was the one who asked Nef the most questions about themselves. Nef always insisted there wasn't much to tell, but Bryluen could always pull just a little more information out of them at each step. There was always more to tell, Bryluen insisted, and from this Nef had started to learn to offer up personal information when asking questions of others.

That night, however, Nef was more than satisfied mentally chatting with Nicadzim about his new abilities. "You can do truly amazing things, Nicadzim. I recognized your importance when we first met, but I believe such things bear repeating. You possess a great power the likes of which I thought had perished with my creator. You are able to perform tasks others may liken to magic."

"I feel ... a great responsibility. I didn't know how best to be using my powers. But I must be finding out and do so."

"Do you trust Bryluen?"

"... implicitly. I trusted her completely."

"Then, rather than seeking an answer on your own, perhaps you shall trust her judgment on how best to utilize your unique skills."

"True, she will have been thinking about the best way I can help Dread Naught. I will be keeping that in mind. But I still sought an answer. I feel ... drawn to greater things, but I knew not what."

"What greater cause is there but Dread Naught? We form the vanguard against the Dreaded which threaten all life."

"I knew this, I simply feel like there is something more I could do or be doing. To perhaps be finding answers about the Dreaded."

"Mayhaps. I would meditate on this question, but do not let it cloud your thoughts more than it has. We need you clear-headed and bright-eyed, Nicadzim."

"Well, thank you. I will have done my best."

17. Emotion and Escort Duty

Amid the excitement of that night, Kirby lay awake. She had a wonderful night with Runner, dancing and talking the night away. She was practically glowing, but something nagged at the edge of her consciousness. After contemplating this sensation for some time she sighed, resignedly rising from bed and getting dressed. She stepped out into the hall, gazing up and down the corridor conspiratorially. She padded on bare feet up the hall until she approached the door to Bryluen and Bel'Wa's room. She rapped on the door and waited.

Bryluen called out from within, "Come on in!"

Kirby tapped the button that opened the door and stepped inside. Within, the room was dim. Kirby realized she had never really seen Bryluen's room. She raised her eyebrows at the unexpected luxury of the lush bedding. Bryluen sat cross-legged in bed perusing something on her tab in her lap, with her free hand cradling a dark amber tumbler of whiskey. As Kirby entered she set the tab down and brushed a hand on the front of her nightgown.

"Unusual for you to be out and prowling this late. What's going on?"

Kirby took a deep breath. "You said I felt this way 'cause I'm happy. I don't know what the fuck to do with that information. Runner knows things are okay, but I feel like he wants more—or maybe I do? But I don't know how to ... do that. Not anymore."

Bryluen idly tapped a finger on the tumbler in her hand. Two instances of providing relationship advice in the span of a month. She

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briefly considered starting an anonymous advice column.

“Open the top of the wardrobe. There’s something I want you to see.”

Kirby turned to her left and tapped the top drawer, causing it to gently slide outward.

“Oh, I meant the lid,” Bryluen intoned calmly.

Kirby briefly comprehended the meticulously organized contents of the top drawer as she moved to close it. Her eyes widened as she spotted something. “Bryluen.”

The Operative smiled subtly. “Yes?”

“Tell Bel’Wa I respect her even more, now.”

Bryluen nodded sagely as Kirby closed the drawer and opened the lid of the wardrobe. Within was an assortment of medals, commendations, and mementos. A crushed shell casing, a burnt piece of plaster, a tiny vial of brackish blood, and a number of other seemingly random pieces of detritus lay in state among rows of awards.

“There’s a Qixing data shard at N7. Take it. Bel’Wa’s in meditation, so let’s go lock ourselves in the lounge and talk.

Kirby looked at the edge of the wardrobe and saw labels denoting each row and column of the various items. She realized the top of the wardrobe was a tiny, chronologically ordered museum of a very illustrious career filled with pains and triumphs in equal measure. She gingerly snatched up the small storage device at coordinates N7.

Re-situated in the lounge, Kirby and Bryluen sat at the bar over a couple of pastries and matching tumblers of whiskey. The data shard sat on the bar top between them.

Kirby glanced down at Bryluen’s legs. “Didn’t even consider some pants, huh?”

“Eh, it’s nothing you haven’t seen before.”

“I was confused, I thought you had an interview.”

Bryluen chuckled, and after a pause motioned toward the data shard. “In my time, I have seen a lot. Plague, slavery, genocide, and those who are indifferent to them all. Handling any of it has never been clean, never been easy, and rarely ended satisfactorily. But that shard is a recording of the thing that made me doubt myself the most in my entire career.”

Bryluen nodded, and Kirby tremulously clicked the small button

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on the side of the data shard. A small user interface faded into life above the shard, which began to play a recording. It was a familiar voice: a decade and a half younger, and that much less accustomed to speaking in Human tongues.

“Ihh ... hello, Bryluen. I, ih, I just ... I really can’t wait to see you again, and ...”

The voice sighed, “L’ith l’aus, heyantey unopira-ua ... I’ve had so much fun, and I ... I, ih ... should have practiced this more. Look: p’yor tar’pe t’yonle. I want to ... more than go eat and see movies. With you. I want to be with you. Alone. I mean, just me. Like, ih, romantically. No, not — well yes, but ... I want to go out with you? Is that right? Q’iltac, this is easier in Ho’Xan!

“I know you are on assignment this week, but I was jogging and the sun came up behind the astral band—like this huge green flame casting beams all over the hills—and I realized there was no one else I wanted there to see it but you. I really, truly hope to hear from you safe and sound. I love you, Bryl.”

Bryluen picked up the data shard and cradled it in her palm, smiling fondly. Kirby had reddened, surprised at the candid and vivid memory.

“I didn’t get her message for eight days. I was gallivanting around interrogating suspects and tracking cartel activity. Huge crackdown on organized crime—one of the last multi-system laundering schemes. Brought in sixteen ringleaders. Collapsed an entire organization with the intel from that. But when I heard this? Me, a forty-eight year old woman, was frozen. She said ‘love’, and every little bit of doubt about myself gathered into one big ax blow. I was a committed professional, I lived in a government building, and I hadn’t been in a serious relationship in nineteen years—I thought there was no possible way for us to work it out.

“Excuses. I was afraid. My heart knew I loved her. Trust me, you won’t find me having sent flirty karaoke recordings to anyone else, but I didn’t think I was lovable, per se. I didn’t think I could be someone she deserved, that could demonstrate that kind of love. But now she’s tattooed on my skin. Twice. He loves you, Kirby, and I think you know that you love him, too. The rules and expectations don’t matter. What matters is that you are both honest about it and happy.”

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Bryluen gently took hold of Kirby's free hand. "I know that's hard. But no one has or can ever make you unworthy of being loved, Kirby. Never."

Bryluen's emphasis on the last word was steely, as much a commandment as a statement. Kirby squeezed Bryluen's hand. "You know about ... what happened, don't you?"

Bryluen nodded slightly. "I do. But even if I didn't, I know what it's like to look back on everything and think you've been locked out of being in love. You aren't."

"But, I don't ... I haven't ... Bryl I don't know a goddamn thing about dating someone anymore. I mean shit, I'm kinda busy."

Bryluen grinned and chuckled, "Evidence says you've been doing just fine with him as is."

Kirby blushed. "Okay, that's not the same as—"

"—as spending every day with him? Watching movies with him, having meals with him, sharing books, building equipment together, polishing each other's armor ..."

Bryluen leaned toward Kirby. "... installing grapple points on your cockpit for him? Trust me, that's romance. When Bel'Wa sent me the grip plates for my pistol, I almost forced my CSOE minders to filter through an extremely graphic multimedia response."

Kirby started laughing. "Fuck yeah, if someone got me an accent piece for my cockpit I'd melt!"

"What would it be, a phoenix made of flaming middle fingers?"

Kirby's eyes went wide. "Now? Yes. Thank you for talking to me, Bryl. I'm going to talk to Runner in the morning."

"Well good luck, but you won't need it," Bryluen said with a wink.

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That morning, Kirby went to Runner's door and knocked. He usually slept in later than she did, so she assumed she would be waking him up. He indeed stirred in his bed, running a hand down his face and blinking his eyes. He was sprawled sideways in bed, which is how he most often awoke. He had little idea what shenanigans he was involved in on a nightly basis that caused such a thing. He gracelessly threw

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himself out from underneath his blanket and stumbled over to his wardrobe. He quickly threw on some dark gray shorts and finally slid open the door.

“Oh, h-hey! What’s up?”

Kirby stood in a pair of shorts and a green tank top. Runner realized it would take him some time to get used to the hairstyle Kirby had adopted for the brief mission to the Liminal Stars. The hair on the top and right side of her head was wound into heavy braids that hung down past her shoulder. The left side of her head was shaved short, giving her an asymmetrical aspect. She smiled as Runner inadvertently took a moment to process what was happening.

“Can we talk, Runner hon?” she said.

“Oh yeah, o-of course!,” Runner said. Internally he dreaded the implication of needing to talk, despite their being no evidence it was a bad thing.

Kirby paused a moment. “In your room, though?”

“Oh! U-u-uh, come in!” He moved to the side and waved Kirby onward.

She neatly stepped into his room and closed the door behind her with the light tap of a button. “I wanna’ talk about us.”

Runner swallowed and sat on his bed.

“Runner, god damn, take a breath. It’s not bad!”

“O-oh! Okay, I can handle that!”

Kirby laughed, “What, did you think I was gonna divorce you and keep the kids?”

“I don’t kn-now, you opened up with a ‘Can we talk’, it c-could have been anything!”

“Alright, alright, alright. Look, I don’t know what you want to be, or what to call us. I have no fuckin’ clue. And rather than let that hang on in silence, I wanted to actually say that out loud. I just know that I love to spend time with you, and I’m not going to be looking to do that with anyone else any time soon. I really like you, Runner, and it feels crazy as shit to be saying that to a folk hero whose name I don’t even know, but it’s true. I just hope you feel somethin’ similar.”

Runner smiled. “I do. I don’t know what to c-call this either, b-but I love just being ar-r-round you. I don’t want to scare you off, so I’m glad to be hearing this from you. Kirby, to be hon-nest, I l—”

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“—ove you—I said it first!”

“What?! It was c-coming out of my mouth, give m-me a break!”

Kirby stepped toward Runner, positioning herself between his spread knees and placing her hands on the side of his face. He lightly planted a kiss on her stomach as she spoke. “Everything feels a million fuckin’ times lighter and brighter, holy shit.”

“That was a r-relief, wasn’t it-t?”

They both laughed. Kirby took a deep breath, which caught in her throat as the light above Runner’s door began to flash amber.

“Oh, you are shitting me.”

“E-eh, could have been a few seconds earlier. Th-that would have been p-p-painful.”

A low alarm sounded throughout Raven’s Landing, summoning Dread Naught to the meeting room. Runner and Kirby moved quickly, pouring out into the hall and jogging across the lobby. Nicadzim and Vort were close behind, with Nef following them in a crouched stance. Bel’Wa and Bryluen were already in the room when the rest arrived, seated at the head of the table. A projection of councilwoman Arai appeared as Dread Naught entered the room.

“Dread Naught, a Stone was confirmed discovered on D’Ash-i 2b, a moon of planet D’Ash-i, in the L-Auk’Bri system. You will be entering Qixing space to aid in its retrieval. A small survey team using state of the art scanning equipment located the Stone but require a pickup. Due to the remote location, no Gate Sentinel forces are close enough for a short term extraction. Readings from the local Gate hint at a possible Dreaded presence in the system, so be on guard. You will take the *Atet*, take the stone from the team, and transport it to Gate C’ioth-lon Mak, where the Gate Sentinels will take possession of it. This will get the team out of danger as soon as possible. You are to leave immediately. Any questions?”

“No, ma’am,” Bryluen noted curtly.

“Excellent. Good luck.”

Asmat vanished, and Bryluen made a slight motion toward the door. The team rushed out of the meeting room and into the corridor, swiftly snapping on their armor. Nef passed them to wait out on the landing pad, their glittering armor appearing on their person as they went. Bryluen was first to be outfitted, as usual. She grabbed her liquid

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metal rifle, slinging it onto her back and jogging out to the *Atet*. Runner was ready next, bringing his ax, tri-pistols, and his rifle. Vort followed, then Bel'Wa in her full panoply, then Nicadzim, and then Kirby in the *Marduk*. There was a light rain outside, hissing gently against the landing pad and running down the curved lines of the *Atet*. Dread Naught assembled inside the craft in the same order as always, and Kirby soon had them rocketing off toward Gate Corax. As they left Aves Prime's atmosphere, the rain on their armor began to blob up and float about the inside of the ship. This excluded the water on Nicadzim's armor, which stubbornly continued falling toward the floor as if they were still within a gravity field. The ship began to disinfect its interior with a thin mist, in order to prevent transporting bacteria between planets.

Bryluen spoke through the speaker in the disembarkation bay, "The moon we're heading to is very close to the local star, so it is subject to very harsh conditions. Don't be surprised if we encounter problems with our communications. We get in, we get the Stone, we go. The research team can handle themselves as long as they aren't carrying around a target. We expect to be on-site within three and a half hours."

The *Atet* flew out to Gate Corax, then relayed through seven other Gates to the border of Qixing Space, where they were quickly scanned and permitted through. Passing through five Qixing gates they finally entered the L-Auk'Bri system in Silent Running mode. The risk of a Sjorthursar being in system made it unwise to reveal themselves.

D'Ash-i was the nearest planet in the system to its star, and Kirby would have Dread Naught walking on the surface of one of its' moons in less than forty-five minutes. D'Ash-i 2b was an airless tan rock baked by constant, immense heat and rocked by frequent meteor impacts from the nearby asteroid belt. The vast green and brown-streaked gaseous body of D'Ash-i loomed on its horizon at all times.

Kirby glided the *Atet* through the asteroid belt, a trivial task given the literally astronomical distance between many of the meteors. After approximately fifteen minutes she exited the belt and guided the *Atet* into orbit over D'Ash-i 2b. She reached out to contact the research team, but an ongoing solar flare meant there was no answer. So, under Bryluen's direction, Kirby brought the *Atet* down toward the team's last reported position. Once they were closer, Bryluen said, they should be

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able to reach the team regardless of conditions.

The *Atet* settled down in the low gravity of the moon and, in short order, Dread Naught disembarked with Bryluen at their head. Within a nearby depression lay the base camp for the research team, a squat cluster of dome-like prefab structures arrayed in concentric circles. In the center was a larger dome filled with plants responsible for generating oxygen for the rest of the base. The middle ring consisted of living quarters and sparse amenities, while the research labs and surveying equipment occupied the outermost domes.

Bryluen looked around, half-consciously squinting. The surface of the moon would be unbearably bright without their helmet filters, due to the constant glower of the local star. A vast plain of pock-marked stone stretched in every direction. Intense solar radiation bombarded every inch of this moon to a degree damaging to Human sight. Bare skin would suffer almost immediate third degree burns here, and breathing the air would be lethal as it incinerated the insides of your lungs. This was not a place for casual research. The team that was living here were doing so to test the viability of certain survival technologies, from new methods of oxygen manufacture to hydroponics research. They also had been surveying the moon for minerals, and it was during this search that they had discovered the Stone.

Bryluen tried local comms, reaching out to the last reported frequency of the research team. “Research team Cy’onle, this is Dread Naught. We are on site.”

She waited a couple seconds. “Nef, Vort, Nicadzim, go search the base camp. Kirby, run scans. Runner, Bel’Wa, we’re heading to that mound to get a better look at our surroundings. Keep sharp.”

Vort opened his wings before realizing there was not enough atmosphere for him to take flight. Resignedly, he scuttled down the slope. Nicadzim simply blinked down toward the base camp and began calling out for anyone that could hear. Nef’s long stride carried them down the incline where they could begin looking in the windows of the habitat domes. Kirby settled the Marduk into a crouch and began to run a scan of the surrounding area for transmissions. The Marduk’s equipment was much stronger than that contained in her compatriots’ armor suits, and therefore stood a stronger chance of locating the researchers should they be off-site.

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Above them, a great gout of stellar plasma further illuminated the already blindingly bright sky. Dread Naught's armor warned them of excess radiation with a constant flashing icon on their HUD. They hardly needed the reminder, with such palpable evidence overhead. Bryluen jogged alongside Runner and Bel'Wa to a nearby mound that would allow them to survey the area the old fashioned way. Runner moved carefully on his boot lifts, tentatively hopping from one foot to the other in long strides. The three of them quickly reached the mound and hopped up its side—an act far easier than it would normally be due to the low gravity. From there they slowly turned about, taking in their surroundings. Bryluen rapidly switched visor settings, trying to spot anything that stood out. There was little to the terrain here, simply small mounds and larger hills interspersed with craters. If the researchers were within several miles they would likely be visible as long as they were outside of a crater.

The research team consisted of twelve Qixing, and two Ly Aulth scientists in varying fields. If they were all gone, they were likely in the same place out in the field. Why they were there and not at the base camp when they were expecting a pickup, however, Bryluen couldn't imagine.

Nicadzim blinked inside the nearest dome and went room to room. All signs pointed towards an unplanned departure. Beds were unmade, lights were on, appliances were active. Vort scuttled about between the rings, observing no activity as Nef's glimmering form loomed around the outer ring. Nef soon came across a vehicle bay. It was open, and two sets of vehicle tracks led away a short distance. The high winds had erased the tracks.

“Bryluen, there are at least two vehicles absent from the base.”

“Got it. Sounds like the whole team is out. Any signs they left behind, Nico?”

“They are in a hurry. No messages left behind from what I can be telling.”

“Hey, Bryl, got somethin’.” Kirby spoke from the Marduk. “A ping, about three kilometers out. Hard to tell over the cosmic noise, but I think it's a surveying beacon.”

“Nico, you, Nef, Vort, and Bel'Wa stay with the ship. Runner and Kirby, we're heading to the beacon. Anything happens here, let me

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know immediately.”

Bryluen, Kirby, and Runner headed toward the coordinates indicated by the beacon. Bryluen jogged at a fair clip, while Kirby loped along in the Marduk. Runner, as usual, had to watch himself to not speed ahead of his comrades. As far as Kirby’s tools could tell at this distance, the beacon was located below ground level—likely in one of the many craters that dotted the surface of the moon.

Bryluen ran through scenarios in her head to explain the team’s absence. There were valid reasons: perhaps the team was unwilling or unable to transport the Stone back to their base due to the natural feelings of revulsion it put off and decided to wait with the Stone for pickup. For Bryluen, however, caution often overtook her thought process. Thus, she acted on the assumption that something bad was afoot. Regardless, she had no idea what that could possibly mean in this instance. Why was the team absent? Why hadn’t they left a message? Why had they left in such a hurry?

Kirby continued scanning as they approached the beacon. At around a kilometer out it became apparent that the beacon was located in a deep pit about thirty meters down, likely a dig site for the surveying team. “If I had to guess,” Kirby said, “I’d say this is where they found the Stone. Maybe they’re just waiting for us?”

Bryluen cracked her neck as she jogged along. “I love your confidence, but I doubt we know all the details of the situation. Keep on your guard. Runner, go ahead of us and keep out of sight. Report to me what you see when you get there.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded.

Immediately he took off like a rocket, bouncing meters in the air off his boot lifts. He accelerated dramatically, clearing the last kilometer in a little under fifty seconds. He stopped and slowed as he drew within sight of the edge of the pit. It was clearly dug out with mining equipment, being a rough rectangle around thirty meters across. Both the vehicles, small tracked crawlers made of white and yellow metal, were parked nearby. One of them contained the surveying beacon they had followed.

Runner got down on his hands and knees and crept to the edge of the pit. He set his armor to camouflage him. The dark surface of his plate shifted to match the menacingly bright surroundings.

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“On site now. Appears to be an excavation site.” He peered over the edge of the pit.

Beneath him lay a surprising sight: open to the air was a columned hall of dark stone, thirty meters long and twelve wide. The columns were twisting constructs roughly ten meters tall and three meters apart, arranged into two rows along the outskirts of the hall. At the far end where the vehicles were parked, the ground was a rough slope down to the hall. At the near side there was a large raised platform bearing a bizarre, almost distressing jagged design around its top edge. To all intents it resembled an altar. Atop that altar lay a Stone about forty by eighteen by eight centimeters.

What drew Runner’s immediate interest, however, was the members of the survey team. Ten of them were knelt before the altar with their hands on the backs of their heads. The two Ly Aulth members of the survey team prowled around them, menacingly hefting handheld mining lasers.

The Ly Aulth were extremely lithe bipeds. They had varying shades of vibrant red, yellow or orange skin with a texture like velvet, and voluminous feathers laid along the backs of their upper arms. When startled or otherwise excited the feathers stood up, giving the impression of wings. These feathers came in a massive variety of colors and patterns and were the easiest way to identify a particular Ly Aulth.

Each had a beak that dominated their face and could be straight, narrow, or curved, and was usually a cream or brown color. Atop the center of their heads was a crest of feathers that could raise or lower at will. Each arm ended in five short gray talons and a taloned thumb, and each avian leg—which actuated like the hind legs of a horse—ended in four great talons, two in front and two behind. Additional feathers dotted the outside of a Ly Aulth’s thighs in just as much splendor as their arms.

Ly Aulth saw the world through small eyes of various yellow, brass, or golden tones with horizontal pupils much like that of a gecko. They spoke in a vast variety of clicks, whoops, and squawks, but could also accurately imitate almost anything they heard. This made it quite easy for Ly Aulth to learn other languages, and it was in fact supremely rare to find one who didn’t speak at least one Human or Qixing tongue.

Ly Aulth expressed a dramatic example of sexual dimorphism. The masculine Ly Aulth were substantially larger with longer arm and

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leg feathers, while feminine Ly Aulth were shorter than Humans on average but with larger head crests. The two Ly Aulth Runner saw were a fine example of this, one being about two meters high, and the other only one point seven meters high.

All the survey team members were arrayed in bulky yellow protective suits with large windowed helmets. The Qixing members of the team were clearly afraid of the Ly Aulth, who seemed to be saying something Runner couldn't quite make out over the wind.

“Bryluen, it's a h-hostage situation. Hell if I know why but two of the survey team a-are holding the others hostage with mining lasers. There's a hall he-ere, some ancient struct-ure, and it's got a Stone on an altar. It's c-creepy.”

He adjusted the settings on his helmet to focus ahead of him in an attempt to capture the Ly Aulths' speech.

“-nd behold the coming glory! You shall be only the first! All will bow before the Destroyers!”

The Ly Aulth carried on, each speaking over the other in a similarly grandiose manner. They were clearly deranged, waving the lasers around carelessly as they walked,

A few minutes later Bryluen crawled up next to Runner, her armor similarly disguised. Kirby had stayed back a distance so as to not attract attention.

“What in god's name is going on down there?”

“G-good question. We have to h-h-help these people.”

“No one dies today. Take aim at the smaller one's laser, and I'll take aim at the bigger one. We disarm them on three.”

Bryluen unslung her rifle and set it on the edge of the pit. Runner took aim with his own rifle. He breathed slowly, taking aim at the emitter at the end of the mining laser. One shot and it wouldn't do a thing.

“One ...”

The Ly Aulth continued ranting and marching in a circle around their fellow researchers.

“Two ...”

The scientists below were whimpering, pleading for the Ly Aulth to see reason.

“Three!”

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Two trigger pulls, a slap and a crack, two targets, and two direct hits.

The lasers spun out of the Ly Aulths' grasps, each sparking as they were destroyed. The two Ly Aulth shrieked and looked up as Bryluen and Runner leapt downward, the low gravity allowing a safe landing. Bryluen drew her pistol and took aim.

"On your knees, now."

After an instant of hesitation, the Ly Aulth charged with a whooping cry. Bryluen dropped her pistol and with a moment of wind up, laid out the bigger Ly Aulth with a shuddering blow to his helmet. Runner did much the same with a kick to the smaller Ly Aulth's chest. Each of them rolled their respective Ly Aulth over and held their arms behind their backs. Bryluen motioned to the researchers.

"Get up, get up, we need to secure them. Do you have anything we can tie them up with?"

One of the researchers nodded and rushed to the parked vehicles, soon returning with a couple lengths of power cables. Bryluen and Runner tied up the Ly Aulth and hauled them into the bay of one of the crawlers.

Bryluen came back down the ramp and secured the Stone. "Which one of you is in charge?"

A researcher raised their hand. "I am. Name's Qyu-thu."

Qyu-thu was tall, with winsome features and slate skin. Aoue peered at Bryluen through the helmet of haous environment suit.

"Qyu-thu, what in the hell happened?"

"We've been digging at this site for a bit, uncovered the hallway and the Stone. Then Rr-kitt and Lak-me—" He motioned to the crawler where the Ly Aulth were tied up. "—They volunteered to retrieve the Stone, but then they set off their beacon like they needed help. So we all rushed over here. They have us gather before the altar, explaining that nothing's wrong, and then pull out the mining lasers! They've been ranting on and on about the Stone and Destroyers and the end of days. We've been here for hours!"

"I'm guessing that's a little out of character?"

"Entirely! They'd been acting a little weird, sort of distant since we found the Stone. I have theories, but ..."

"Well, what's your theory?"

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“So far as I know the Ly Aulth haven’t discovered any Stones. What if it effects them differently?”

“Makes sense to me. More sense than two reasonable people becoming doomsayers within a span of hours for no reason.”

“Well thank you, I don’t know what we would have done if they had pulled this before we had reported the Stone.” Qyu-thu shivered.

“If all is well I suppose I’ll be taking this now.” Bryluen tossed the stone up and then caught it. “Runner, Kirby, let’s get out of here. Mind if I hitch a ride with you folks?”

Several minutes later, Dread Naught was back at the *Atet*. The team of researchers stared in awe at Nef as the team entered the bay, then remembered to wave goodbye. Another team was en route to the moon to examine the Ly Aulth in case they didn’t begin to act normal when away from the Stone.

Kirby took the *Atet* up into the atmosphere. Bryluen clutched the Stone, hating how it felt in her hand. The object inspired outright revulsion in Humans: most researchers could only stand being around the great Stone at Fort Salamis for a few minutes at a time. For the Qixing the effect was queasiness and nausea. For T’hròstag it was nervousness and unease. For Ly Aulth, apparently, that effect was some form of mania.

Kirby took the *Atet* up and away from D’Ash-i 2b in short order, and proceeded back to the system’s Compression Gate. From there, they took two jumps to Gate C’ioth-Lon Mak. A Gate Sentinel frigate, the *Blade of Har’Than*, awaited the *Atet*. Kirby docked inside the *Blade of Har’Than’s* bay, at which point a team of Gate Sentinels came and retrieved the Stone. The exchange completed, Kirby took the *Atet* back through the gate and returned to Aves Prime.

18. Sentiment and Subterfuge

That evening, Kirby and Runner locked the lounge door behind them and took a late meal together, sharing appetizers heaped steaming on a tray set on the bar. The two of them had gathered to complete the conversation they had started earlier. Runner was wearing gray athletic wear, while Kirby was in a green t-shirt and white shorts.

Kirby tapped a finger on a glass of mead sitting before her. “So, uh, fuckin’ hell, right?”

Runner smiled. “F-fuckin’ Hell.”

“How do you feel about ... things?”

“Haven’t had m-much time to think about it w-what with the excitement, b-b-but I feel good! A little que-easy, but good.”

“Where do we go from here? Are we supposed to go on dates or something? Seems like shit we should do I guess.”

“Aren’t we k-kind of doing that ri-ight now? I just-t know that when I’m with you I have mor-re fun than I’ve ever had, and I’m hap-p-pier than I’ve ever been. You make me happy, s-so whatever we do is f-fine as long as I’m with you.”

Kirby blushed, her cheeks turning a deep red. She turned away for a moment, embarrassed and uncomfortable. “Why you gotta say shit like that, you’re gonna make me cry!”

“Oh, I’m s-s-sorry!”

She waved a hand. “No, no, it’s okay. I’m just ... not used to

talkin' like this. It's been a hell of a long time. It's ... scary, but nice. Like a damn roller-coaster. Exciting, but it makes me sweat."

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“I’ve n-never...had someone like this. Never dated, not-t seriously. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, who I-I-I’m supposed to be with you.” Runner shifted in his chair uncomfortably.

Kirby took a deep breath. “Just keep being you, and I’m happy.”

Runner grinned. “I think I can man-nage that. Let’s take this o-out to the balcony, the aur-rora has been beautiful these past nights.”

Runner stood up, lifting the appetizers in one hand, and taking Kirby’s hand with the other. He led her out of the lounge and to the balcony, where a rippling corona of color was cascading over the horizon. Kirby realized she hadn’t held someone’s hand in years.

Runner set the tray down on the table out on the balcony and turned back toward Kirby. She was staring at the aurora, and for a moment he simply watched the reflection in her wide green eyes. Her braided hair hung by her shoulder, obscuring the glowing tattoo on her neck.

“You really are beautiful, you know that?”

Kirby started and looked into Runner’s eyes. In the dimness he was mostly just a silhouette, outlined in the rippling colors of the aurora. It was a magical night out, unlike anything either of them had experienced in a long time. Runner raised his free hand and placed it against her cheek. Kirby closed her eyes, drinking in the warmth of his hand. She placed her own hand atop his and smiled as tears formed in her eyes.

“I’m sorry this is hard for me, I—well, I—”

“You don’t h-have to tell me if you aren’t ready, Kirb-by.”

“Is my hang-up that fuckin’ obvious?”

Runner simply smiled.

Kirby laughed. “I should be so gung-ho about this, but it honestly scares the shit out of me. It’s not fair. You’re so hot it makes me giggle, I should be over the moon. Instead I’m embarrassed and worried.”

Runner removed his hand from Kirby’s face. “W-whatever you’re comfortable wit-th is what we’ll do.”

“Just keep holding my hand for a while?”

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The data organ from the *Hassallcötallän* probe had made its way to a CSOE installation in the Solar System. The secretive facility was on the surface of Enceladus, a small gray blister of thick metal and no ornamentation. The data on the organ had been extracted and was being studied. The *Hassallcötallän* had been monitoring Compression Gate activity out on the rim, and had observed and thoroughly cataloged Sjorthursar activity. Little was known about the *Hassallcötallän*'s technological abilities, other than that they were very advanced. The fact that they could observe Sjorthursar gate travel without specialized tools spoke to a highly sophisticated ability to detect energy readings.

The reason this was important was that the activity pattern, which had been transmitted between a network of probes, indicated that the Sjorthursars were coming from a specific direction. After sifting through the data, it was evident that all Sjorthursars passed through the same Gate in system IX-921, an almost unmapped system on the very edge of the Milky Way.

This information rapidly made its way to CSOE High command and Commandant Prime Penashue of the Astral Marines. High Command immediately assigned an Operative to investigate. Dread Naught had been busy on D'Ash-i 2b, so the task fell to Armin Neidhauer, another senior Operative.

Neidhauer was transported through the target Gate by a sleek, scan-shielded transport craft and proceeded further in a similarly shielded shuttle. He was slim-built, with close-cropped dirty blonde hair and a neat mustache. He was tall, with high cheekbones and blue eyes. He had been an Operative for twenty-six years, having been sent out on missions from the Liminal Stars to the rim. He was confident, skilled, and more than a match for a reconnaissance mission.

The shuttle had much smaller scanning systems than the transport he had left behind, but was much less easily observed. Attracting the attention of a single Sjorthursar would be a deadly mistake. He was alone in the shuttle, passively scanning the system as he went. IX-921 consisted of four planets, six moons, and a late main sequence star. There was nothing of note here in every sense, yet this was where the Sjorthursars traveled.

For four hours Neidhauer worked inward from planet to planet, initiating scans of each as he progressed.

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He was used to working alone, as any Operative was. He was armored in blue and white plate, with a trusty pistol at his side and a hefty assault rifle slung on his back. He didn't expect combat on this mission, but an Operative was always ready. He sent a covert ping back to this transport, indicating that he was still alive. He had repeated this every half hour. Three missed pings, and the transport would escape the system.

As he mulled over the quiet and solitude of his current mission, something populated on his latest scan. A strong energy signature on the surface of the second planet from the local star. That particular planet was a frozen rock with a reasonably dense, mostly nitrogen atmosphere. The landscape beneath was jagged, with numerous volcanoes and fissures from constant tectonic activity. The energy signature was located on the slope of one such volcano. No details could be ascertained as to what the source of the signature might be, necessitating a closer look. Neidhauer brought the shuttle down toward the second world, buffeting about and rocking as the storm-laden atmosphere jarred his small vessel.

Breaking through the upper atmosphere, Neidhauer was met by a grand vista. Great sheets of ice and permafrost glowed with lava trails and were permeated by dark rents in the earth. The signal was halfway up the nearest volcano, a gaping maw of fire and brimstone. He came in low, just skirting the ground to avoid being spotted. He stopped the shuttle behind a hill about a kilometer from the energy signature, then sealed his helmet and stepped outside.

He triggered his armor's camouflage and crept up the hill. As he reached the top, he told his helmet to zoom in on the distant volcano. He scanned his eyes down the slope, carefully searching for the source of the energy reading before spotting a dark shape jutting from the white slope. There was no sign of what it was, other than being a tall narrow spine of some material.

Neidhauer crawled forward, then rolled to a standing position and began to jog toward the slope. He was reasonably concealed by his armor, but he had little way to know if he had been spotted before it was too late. It was a vulnerable position to be in, and he didn't relish it at all.

Luckily he proceeded in silence for the dozen minutes it took

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him to walk across the permafrost to the volcano's slope. Now that he was closer the structure loomed large, spearing into the sky a good thirty meters. At the spire's base was a large rounded platform. He couldn't see what was on the platform from his current position, so he began to shuffle up the slope to get a closer look.

Neidhauer knew the structure was artificial, but it didn't appear to be something built by any species he could think of. As he drew closer, the structure seemed to grow darker, as if it was slowly eating the light around it. At fifty meters he started to feel uncomfortable. At thirty meters he felt a feeling of disgust build in his gut. At fifteen meters he hated the very idea of approaching the structure so strongly he hesitated. At five meters he could see complex designs all over the surface of the structure.

This was a Stone. Or at least something made of the same material, which would be even more significant. At no point had any structures, or in fact anything planet-bound at all, been associated with the Dreaded. Neidhauer ignored the screaming in the back of his head and climbed up onto the round platform. It was about eight meters across, and bore a large object he recognized as some sort of console. It had several large shapes protruding from it at a height uncomfortable for him to reach. He supposed they were buttons of some sort.

He was in awe, bearing witness to an actual structure used by the Dreaded. It's mere existence spoke of a complex civilization, which was completely at odds with what had been seen of Dreaded behavior. He began to save pictures with his helmet, catching each of the buttons, the platform, and the spire-like structure above—perhaps an antennae? He documented everything he could see in short order.

As he worked, an En-Rabisu squawked and came into sight from around the structure. He took cover below the lip of the platform before he was spotted, and watched carefully. The En-Rabisu walked up to the console, and pressed the buttons in a sequence. This particular En-Rabisu was missing a hand—or rather, it's arm was simply a long, straight bar. It thrust this bar into a notch next to the dialing wheel, and thrust it forward like a lever. There was a loud clack, and then an orb of energy briefly flashed to life above the console.

Neidhauer received a ping from the transport ship, relayed to him by the shuttle. It was a short missive from the transport's captain.

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“Energy flare detected in far orbit; unidentified source; reads as Compression Phenomenon.”

Neidhauer paused. There was another Gate in the system. No other Human-made Gate was registered to system IX-921. This was a control console for a Dreaded-built Compression Gate. The sophistication necessary to make such a device was staggering, to say the least. Some secure gates were constructed with a terrestrial control system that could be remotely dialed, which suggested this Gate was important enough to add an extra layer of security.

As he pondered this, there was a squawking, ululating screech as a Rabisu formed not twenty yards away.

He began to sprint back toward the shuttle, breaking cover to make a mad dash. He heard the squawking behind him heighten as others joined the chorus. A fireball struck the permafrost three yards to his right. He didn't look back but set his helmet to upload all the images and notes to the shuttle, which relayed them to the transport. If he couldn't escape, his information would.

He started to zigzag back and forth as more fireballs struck around him and heard a choking, snorting sound as a Gugalanna started to pad after him. He drew his pistol and looked back. The quadrupedal monstrosity was rushing at him, far faster than he was running. He fired a shot one-handed, striking the Gugalanna right in its faceted eye. It went down on its face before scrambling back to its feet and looking around, blinded. It tried to follow by sound but made little progress.

An En-Rabisu formed no more than five meters ahead, causing Neidhauer to curse and juke to one side. He shot the En-Rabisu squarely in the head, staggering it as it tried to lunge for him. The fireball storm was getting denser and closer. He ran around a large rock which offered some shelter, and broke for the next spot of cover some fifteen yards past. The ground here was sloped, meaning the Rabisus behind him were unable to fire directly until they had caught up. He sailed down the slope and leapt a crag in the ground. He was no more than a quarter kilometer from the shuttle.

Three more Gugalannas appeared twenty yards to his left. He fired at them with his pistol, striking one in the eye and blowing the horn off a second. He breathed, braced, and fired again, blinding a second Gugalanna. The third closed in and charged. Neidhauer leapt backwards,

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narrowly dodging the charging beast. He rolled to his feet, braced, and fired as the Gugalanna turned around. A perfect shot killed it outright. He resumed sprinting.

He could see the hill the shuttle was parked behind. He just had to get in and get off this planet. He remotely activated the shuttle, so it would be ready to move the instant he was inside.

A projectile struck ahead of him from above. A Kukulkan soared overhead, the air screeching as it passed. That wasn't good. A Kukulkan would shoot down the shuttle with ease. He realized he had to hide and wait out the Dreaded—there was no leaving like this. He pinged the transport to wait for him; he might be a while.

He looked around for ways to conceal himself. The terrain around the shuttle was craggy and dense, providing numerous places he could hole up. He jumped down a small incline, then dashed up under a rock overhang. A small hollow space existed under the rock, and he crawled inside it. He barely fit, but was concealed. He held his pistol close, but if he was found, it was over.

He listened as the Dreaded rushed past squawking and crying out, almost like a hunting call. He heard the deeper screams of an Ur-Rabisu and witnessed an Ahuizotl take shape before him. The Dreaded nearby began looking around and searching. He remained concealed for almost two hours as the Dreaded ranged out further and further in search of him.

He waited an hour more after all sounds had ceased before moving again, crawling out from under his rock and sprinting towards the shuttle. It was miraculously undisturbed. He leapt into the cockpit, turned on the instruments, and took the shuttle straight upward through the atmosphere. He messaged the transport that he was on his way.

He flew toward the Compression Gate at full speed, reuniting with the transport ship forty-five minutes later. The transport wheeled about and promptly ventured back through the Gate. A clean enough mission, at least. This data would be vital to the Grand Council. A Dreaded Compression Gate made a lot of sense; it explained how they had known how to interface with the Compression Gates of other species, and also could explain how they had traveled to this galaxy.

Perhaps, just maybe, this could be a way to stop the invasion.

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“A mech jockey, honestly. Livin’ the dream! Well, Bryl, what’d you wanna be growin’ up? Just come out wantin’ to be an Operative?”

Kirby, Bryluen, Bel’Wa, Runner, and Vort were in the lounge. They were arrayed in casual wear, except for Bel’Wa who wore a long, vivid orange sari-like robe.

Bryluen smirked. “A gynoid.”

“A ... what?” Runner inquired.

“A gynoid. I was ten, flipping through some of my baba’s antique art books when I saw it. It was a sort of ... robot pinup set, I suppose. All curves and chrome. Since then, I wanted to be a gynoid.”

“Ah, so that’s when that happened for ya, got it.”

Bryluen chuckled at Kirby’s comment. Bel’Wa placed her tea cup on the table and spoke, “... and why a gynoid, my love? Not exactly a career, if I am understanding the initial prompt.”

Bryl leaned against the bar, idly reading something on her tab. “You know: immortal.” She shrugged. “Maybe some rocket fingers. A cool synthesized voice like Vort, here.”

Vort ruffled his wings slightly. “THE VOICE IS QUITE COOL. TOOK ME TIME TO LEARN TO APPRECIATE IT.”

Bel’Wa made a small motion with center of her forehead. “... you were wholly swayed by the sight of feminine chrome, weren’t you?”

Bryluen paused. “To my credit, the rocket fingers were the very next thought.”

Bryluen received a message on her tab. “Ah, our outfits are coming in system now. Guess it’s time for another briefing on the Grand Council. We’re only a week out, after all. Everyone, meeting room. I’ll gather up Nico and Nef.”

Mere moments later the team was assembled.

Bryluen rolled her shoulders and spoke. “Alright, in just a week’s time we will be attending the Grand Council. New intel extrapolated from the probe indicates we now have an origin point for the Dreaded invasion of this galaxy.

“There is a Dreaded-built Compression Gate near the outer rim. Intel indicates the origin point should be just beyond that, meaning there should be a much larger Gate on the other side to allow inter-galactic

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travel. The Grand Council will be deciding what to do with that information. Our part in the council is to play nice and not cause any incidents. We've been assigned formal swimwear, which will be arriving in the next couple hours with a tailoring drone for any last minute adjustments."

"So what is the Temple of the Great Mother like?" Kirby asked. "Wet, obviously."

Bryluen turned on the projector. A map of the Temple of the Great Mother appeared. "I'm so glad you asked, Kirby. Perfect segue. Let's review one more time. This is the Temple of the Great Mother. A central step pyramid contains the grand hall and numerous ancillary chambers. The grand hall is where the heart of the council will be located. It's a throne room, and where most of the delegations are expected to spend their time mingling. A smaller chamber behind it is where the leaders of the delegations will meet and negotiate.

"Outside of that pyramid is a ring of smaller pyramids. Each is linked by a waterway that flows through them all—ferries will be provided for transport back and forth. This pyramid here," She said as she pointed, "—is where there will be entertainment and a sparring arena. Mostly to satisfy the T'hròstag delegation. At that pyramid we'll have access to food vendors from all across known space. Lastly, here at this third pyramid is housing for all the delegations. This is a three day event, and exists not only to serve as a backdrop to negotiations, but to strengthen ties between all the species in known space. Press is allowed at any of the outer pyramids and the grand hall. It is very important that you remember everything we've been training on. This is the big time."

Dread Naught, in their time off, had been practicing diplomatic interactions and lessons on etiquette. At this point they lived and breathed good manners and good sense. "We'll have ear pieces so we can keep in contact, in case we're needed for anything."

"Anything like what?", asked Nicadzim.

"If High Command sees fit they can send us to speak to certain people or acquire certain information. We're on the job, and don't forget it. We may still have a role to play. Other than that, I want you all in your outfits as soon as they arrive so they can be adjusted."

After the meeting, Vort went out to the balcony. Bel'Wa joined him, and after a minute of silence, spoke.

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“How are you doing, Vort?”

“I AM DOING FINE.”

“How are you *really* doing?”

He paused, then took a deep breath. “THE FACT THAT I DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT MAKES ME FEEL LIKE I SHOULD. I FEEL SO LONELY AT NIGHT. LIKE EVERYONE ELSE IS A BILLION MILES AWAY. I’VE REALLY BEEN FEELING MY DISTANCE FROM HOME. I’LL NEVER BE BACK. EVERYTHING AND ANYONE I KNEW DOESN’T EXIST ANYMORE. I DON’T KNOW HOW TO COPE WITH THAT. I CAN RARELY EVEN GRASP IT, TO BE HONEST. SOMETIMES I WAKE UP THINKING IT’S ALL A NIGHTMARE, BUT THEY’RE STILL GONE.”

“I’m so sorry. You’re very brave to continue on.”

“I DON’T KNOW IF IT’S BRAVERY OR SIMPLE SURVIVAL INSTINCT. I HAVE LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO GO FORWARD.”

“Just ... remember you have us. All of us. We’re like family.”

“YOU ARE FAMILY AS FAR AS I’M CONCERNED. AND THAT KEEPS ME SANE. IT’S ALL THAT GROUNDS ME. IF I HAD LEARNED ABOUT THIS BEFORE WE WERE FAMILIAR WITH ONE ANOTHER, I’M AFRAID OF WHERE THAT MIGHT HAVE LED. SO ... I’M SURVIVING. I’M HURT, AND I WILL CONTINUE HURTING FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE. SOME NIGHTS IT FEELS FRESH, AND OTHERS IT SEEMS SO DISTANT I CAN’T FEEL ANYTHING.”

“That’s grief for you. It returns when you least expect it, and it never really disappears. It’s a scar on your heart. It’s a part of you, a part of who you are and who you will be. It’s a great weight to carry, but if there’s any way I can help you, let me know.”

“THIS IS HELPING. IT FEELS MORE REAL, LESS EPHEMERAL WHEN WE TALK ABOUT IT. LIKE I CAN ALMOST GRASP AT MY LOSS INSTEAD OF BEING OVERWHELMED BY IT. IT’S HEAVY, BEL’WA. CRUSHING AND MASSIVE. IT DOES FEEL LIKE A WOUND ON MY HEART, AND IT’S STILL BLEEDING.”

Vort wheezed quietly. Bel’Wa knelt down and placed a hand on his back between his vanes. “We love you, and we’re here. If that’s all I can do, consider it done.”

“THANK YOU, BEL’WA. I WISH I HAD MORE WORDS FOR WHAT IT’S LIKE. TO BE THE LAST, THE ONLY. IT FEELS LIKE I SHOULDN’T BE HERE, LIKE I DON’T DESERVE TO BE HERE, STILL EXISTING.”

“Survivor’s guilt. You have survivor’s guilt on a cosmic level. That must be very hard. I can’t imagine it.”

“NO, YOU CAN’T. NO ONE CAN. WHY ME? WHY DID THIS HAVE TO

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HAPPEN? WAS IT FATED? DO I HAVE A SPECIAL DESTINY? IF NOT, IS THIS REALLY JUST CRUEL FATE?"

"I wish I had an answer for you. All I know is that all of our lives are richer for having you in them. You make everything you touch better and brighter. You've been a blessing and a valued comrade. We all love you very much."

Vort wheezed again. "THANK YOU. MAYBE THAT'S ENOUGH. MAYBE ONE DAY I'LL FEEL LIKE THAT'S ENOUGH."

"If you'd like, you can sleep in mine and Bryluen's room for a while."

"I THINK I'D LIKE THAT."

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An hour and a half later, an automated cargo drone arrived at Raven's Landing, dropping off the assigned outfits for each member of Dread Naught. They rapidly changed clothes and arrayed themselves in the lobby, where the tailoring drone awaited instructions.

Runner had emerged first. His bathing suit was a one piece dark gray suit with a diagonal window that exposed his abdomen and glowing chest tattoo. He wore woven pads adorned in designs on his left arm and lower right leg. Each design was a simplified rendition of Runner leaping between buildings or dashing along. His hair was bound in platinum spirals with charms hanging from the ends. Runner's mask was a smirking wooden rendition of the Igbo deity Ekwensu.

Kirby emerged thereafter, wearing a green bikini trimmed in fake fur. Long translucent sleeves and a skirt trailed from the bikini, putting all of her tattoos on display. Her mask was the face of a snarling elk with golden antlers stretching back behind her head.

Vort came out at the same time wearing a cream vest and matching boots. The vest was embroidered in all manner of iridescent designs. He did not require a mask as he lacked the anatomical features to dismay T'hròstag, and even if he did it wasn't clear how he would wear one.

Nicadzim emerged in a two piece swimsuit. The top was light blue, with windows on his enormous biceps. The bottoms were a wash of patterns in varying blue shades that extended down to his shins. He

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also wore a pair of thick bracelets made of polished sapphire. His mask was a swirling spiral of blue like a whirlpool, only vaguely shaped like a face.

Nef arrived in the lobby in a gleaming violet bandeau bikini overlaid with nets of colorful beads. Several rigid silver panels hung from the bust line and bikini bottoms like armor. Their arms were adorned in beaded nets from the elbow to the wrist, and they wore a proud pharaonic crown. Their mask was an Egyptian-styled silver eagle's face.

Bryluen's swimsuit was white, consisting of a rigid, straight top like armor plate and a modest bottom that was similarly rigid. Gleaming armor plates adorned her shins and lower arms, and a stylized wing like a Babylonian carving extended back from her left shoulder. Her mask was a classically beautiful face, androgynous and rendered in loving detail.

Last to emerge was Bel'Wa, who Bryluen had spent most of her time helping. For a Qixing—especially a member of the royal line—formality was less a matter of convention or solemnity than a time to express oneself loudly.

Typically Qixing wore similar clothes on a daily basis, perhaps varying in color but otherwise staying at a standard form of dress. To a Human eye Qixing clothing was vibrant and detailed, but there was a reason so many of their garments could be quickly adjusted for different contexts—a typical wardrobe was far smaller than the Human equivalent.

At an event, however, one was very much expected to make a personal statement. Bel'Wa's clothing bore the basic outline of swimwear, but differed enormously from their typical robes. Her hair was bound into two meter-long, horn-like protrusions extending back and up from her head, wound around each other like vines. Her top consisted of a band of stiff blue and white fabric that looked like an ocean wave. This was simply adhered to her—Qixing skin took more readily to adhesives, which had long been a popular fashion mainstay.

Paired with this, a sheaf of white drapery swung over one hip, passed between her legs, and after being secured at the base of her spine by further adhesive, trailed behind her like a fish tail. Attached at a single point in the front and back was a thin blue net sparkling with

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jewels that wrapped about the opposite hip. Again this was glued to Bel'Wa, seeing as the garment would otherwise be kept in place by optimism.

Her right arm and left leg were sealed inside finely hewn decorative armor made of green coral—including an articulated gauntlet. Mounted to a frame glued to her lower back, three broad sails extended a meter behind her. Each resembled the ribbed folding sails of traditional Kirth Al sailing vessels—including functioning rigging.

Bel'Wa wore no shoes, but bore reams of fine bracelets on her unarmored limbs, and one or two rings of various description on all but her left-hand ring finger. For the actual event every inch of skin that wasn't obscured by her clothing, mask, or jewelry was going to be painted in blue verse with the scarification design on her leg as the only exception. Her mask was the wild, shrieking face of a Yoir sea spirit.

“Goddamn, Bel'Wa,” Kirby said as she crossed her arms.

Bel'Wa smiled. “I told you, didn't I?”

Bryluen paced back and forth, looking over her squad mates. “Alright, we look great! I actually think we're ready.”

19. Inquiry and Interdiction

Most of the week passed without incident. Nico and Nef were in the library, having a silent conversation as they often did.

“Where have your travels taken you lately, Nicadzim?”

“I will have flown over a rocky canyon filled with the potential futures of a particular river. So many different ways to be eroding.”

“Fascinating. I have thought often of this: time makes all the difference as it were.”

“The difference?”

“Between you and others. You exist simultaneously across time, and you witness time in ways no other can.”

“Is that what made me different?”

“The main difference, I would venture. Anomalies can be explained or resolved. But time is the great equalizer. All are slave to its constant advance. All but you.”

“I wondered constantly about what will make me who I am. I could not imagine what will have made me this way. Have I always been existing? I only had memories of certain points. I have been born within the lifetime of the others, but I did not age. I will have no childhood or growing up. Only how I was now.”

“That I cannot answer. I can only speculate. We may never discover your genesis, Nicadzim. But perhaps you will learn in your travels. One can only hope.”

“I worried about that. I feel such a deep connection to the carvings on Gru’Thiall, like they will be speaking to me directly. I still

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didn't know what that means.”

Raven's Landing suddenly glowed red. The alarm shrieked and Dread Naught answered its call.

Kirby was first into the hall and began suiting up, followed by Bel'Wa and Bryluen from their room, then Runner and Vort from the lounge, and last arrived Nico and Nef from the library.

Bryluen equipped her explosive disc gun, while Runner equipped his tri-pistols, ax, and adjustable plasma rifle.

A couple minutes earlier, Bryluen had received an urgent communique.

*** COMBAT PRIORITY THETA ***

Time: 849 UTC; Terrestrial Strike Op

Response per CSOE Protocol 48.7.2
Action Approved by Councilwoman Notaras

Condensed abstract follows. Full details attached.

At UTC 831, a small Dreaded fleet entered the Sapien system with a likely heading for planet Goodall. A Stone is located at Murphy Base on planet Goodall, and must be defended. Dread Naught is to reinforce the Marine garrison and repel the Dreaded invaders.

Integrity and Strength,
Aglaea Notaras

Kirby took the *Atet* up at speed, docked with the Compression Gate frame, and made the four jumps to the Sapien system. Upon entering the final Compression Phenomenon, comms lit up with ship-to-ship chatter.

The destroyer H.S.S.D. *Ayanmo* and the frigates H.S.S.F. *Marie Laveau* and H.S.S.F. *Mignola* were in a firefight over planet Goodall with no less than four Sjorthursars. They were holding their own for now, trying to minimize the chances the Sjorthursars had to generate more ground troops.

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Kirby gritted her teeth and took the *Atet* into an approach vector. She threw the switch to put the *Atet* into silent running and drew close to the world. Cannon and laser fire, clusters of missiles, darts, and plasma bolts sang back and forth across the void. Adding to the chaos, Kirby loosed a shot from the *Atet*'s cannons, blowing a chunk out of a nearby Sjorthursar's weapon mount and creating just enough of a window for the *Atet* to pass by intact.

The ship plunged into the upper atmosphere at a steep angle, flames gathering at the craft's long nose as they descended away from the space battle. Upon entering the lower atmosphere, several shots flew past the bow; a cluster of Kukulkan were trying to shoot them down.

"Sorry!" Kirby yelled as she rolled the craft, facing the underside toward the first Kukulkan. The turret tracked her target and she fired, obliterating the beast in one shot. She pulled up and then cut the engines for a moment, falling into a hammerhead turn and causing everyone in the bay but Nef to cry out.

This maneuver left the *Atet* pointing straight down at the next Kukulkan when Kirby again slammed the firing stud—tearing the beast in half with a single round.

A sudden shot rang out, striking the starboard side hull and causing Kirby to curse as she slung the *Atet* toward the last Kukulkan with a violent jolt from the lateral thrusters. The reticle locked and she fired the cannons once more, causing the Kukulkan to burst into a black, inky cloud. Kirby ran a hand across her forehead and whooped as she resumed course for Base Murphy.

Planet Goodall was a sparsely populated world near the border to Qixing space. It was a striated gray and brown sphere with a single large ocean covering almost forty percent of the planet's surface. Below them the soot-like dirt was arranged into endless rows of dunes, but the green-blue sky above slowly came to life as the local star rose.

The base was a square complex set within a high, thick wall of metallic olive green metal. The buildings within the perimeter were squat and heavily built, made to resist aerial bombardment. There was a barracks, a hospital, a recreation structure, a mess hall, an armory, and a landing pad arrayed in a grid, with the Stone itself held in a vault within the armory.

A Tauriz, a massive snail-like monstrosity bearing two large

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cannons, sat a distance outside the complex, lending its fire support to the main Dreaded force. It was currently lobbing projectiles over the wall, devastating the Marine forces within. Kirby brought the *Atet* low and fired the cannon, the shots striking home and shattering the monster's carapace, causing it to burst asunder.

Enough Dreaded to be a problem had gotten inside the facility due to an overwhelmed part of the wall, but most of their force were still outside. Rabisus, En-Rabisus, and Ur-Rabisus swarmed the Marines atop the walls.

The garrison here was about three hundred strong, and they must have been outnumbered eight to one. Roughly two hundred of the Marines present were along the walls of the complex, while a hundred more were spread among the structures in defensive positions. At the corner of each building was a machine gun mount protected by armored shutters, each gun firing full tilt down into the surrounding hordes. Atop the armory and barracks were flak cannons to deal with any aerial threats. Shutters had been brought down over all the windows, featuring gun ports for the defenders. The base was locked down but the mess hall, recreation structure, and armory were fully surrounded. The ranking Marine, Sergeant Major Slokhov, was embattled atop the wall, but pinged an acknowledgment to Bryluen as the *Atet* approached.

The *Atet's* ramp lowered as it swung low over the landing pad, and Dread Naught burst from the bay guns blazing.

"Vort, air support! Nef, stop the flow over the wall! Nico, get up on the walls and help where you can! Runner, Bel'Wa, Kirby, let's clean up the inside of the perimeter!" Bryluen called out.

Kirby slid her auto cannons up to her wrists with a loud clanking. "Hell yes, ma'am."

Vort took off with a loud pop of air while Nef, shining in their divine panoply, sprinted toward the breakthrough gap on the wall. Nico vanished and then appeared astride the far side of the wall, ice wheel in hand.

Kirby lurched forward, tracking a cluster of Rabisus and firing two precise shots that passed through them like butter.

Marines were stationed at each of the reinforced windows of the mess hall nearby, firing assault rifles and shotguns at the closest Dreaded. One of the machine gun mounts on the roof had been

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destroyed by a Kukulkan and three of the window shutters were breached, requiring the soldiers within to use ripsaws and punch blades. The fighting was dense, the narrow spaces between the buildings packed with Dreaded.

Bryluen fired her disc gun down the nearest alleyway and was rewarded with a vortex of flame that consumed a trio of Gugalannas. She turned toward a squawking sound to her right and fired again. The Rabisus to her side screeched as they were incinerated.

Bryluen motioned for Runner to stick to her flank and advanced toward the mess hall. "We clear this one building at a time. Kirby, Bel'Wa, head around back!"

Kirby and Bel'Wa turned and advanced around the other side of the mess hall, Kirby firing her auto cannons as she went. Rabisus and Gugalannas died before her in groups of two or three. Bel'Wa lent fire support with her explosive arm cannon rounds and regular shots from her shield cannon. The both of them drew their melee weapons and dove in, brute force and momentum carrying them along a river of Rabisus that ran up the side of the mess hall. Bel'Wa took partial cover behind Kirby, mopping up any individuals that escaped her notice or slaying stragglers with her sword as Kirby raged before her with both wrist blades out.

Runner and Bryluen strode side by side, unleashing shots ahead of them. Runner's tri-pistols peppered Rabisus with withering fire, while the occasional projectile from Bryluen's disc gun obliterated groups and larger Dreaded with ease.

Kirby and Bel'Wa met Runner and Bryluen at the corner and then, at urging from Bryluen, advanced in the same way on the neighboring recreation structure. Marines burst from the Mess Hall behind them, advancing under commands from their squad leaders to lend supporting fire to Dread Naught.

Atop the wall, Nicadzim fought for his life. A two handed swing bisected a trio of Rabisus, then a quick reversal knocked an En-Rabisu from the wall behind him. He blinked from existence for a moment, then reappeared with his blade buried deep in the next En-Rabisu. He activated his blade, causing the weapon to tear its way out of the En-Rabisu's chest, and a backhanded swing tore a Rabisu in half from groin to sternum. Nicadzim instantly switched to his newest weapon, the

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amber constructs wrapped around his fists. Firing them to both sides they left a green trail of skin-dissolving particulates, causing the Rabisu clambering up the wall to fall apart on contact. This created a bit of breathing room for him, but marine teams to his left and right similarly struggled to hold the line. Each was a close combat-equipped group with shotguns, ripsaws, and punch blades. As of yet, their armor-assisted strength and thorough training was seeing them through the fight.

An Ur-Rabisu clambered up the wall eight meters to Nicadzim's right. He switched to his rocket launcher construct and unleashed a volley of projectiles. They struck the Ur-Rabisu's upper chest, causing it to stagger and lose grip with two of its arms. After a moment of hesitation it resumed its climb, but was knocked flat on its face by a volley of lightning from Vort overhead.

Nicadzim blinked toward the downed monstrosity with his ice wheel in hand and brought it down in a wide arc through the Ur-Rabisu's "face". He struggled to hold the device as it ground and growled, then burst out the other side of the Ur-Rabisu's head. The creature flopped off the wall as it's life left it.

Vort wheeled overhead, spinning about as he dived in for another strike along the wall. This time, his target was a pair of Gugalannas clambering up one of the complex's corners. A gush of blue flame consumed them, causing them to fall back down the wall in pieces. He veered to one side as a yellow bolt from an Omukade hurtled past. Vort turned, dived low, then came about toward the Omukade. He spotted it a distance outside the wall and juked back and forth toward it, evading two further shots. He gushed a font of acid as he passed over, hearing the satisfying hiss of melting flesh. The centipede-like Omukade collapsed from within as Vort pulled back up out of reach.

From his perspective the battle was still desperate, but more or less stable now that Nef was up on the wall. They were shoring up the defenses where the Marines on the wall had failed, and doing a good job of it. With the perimeter restored, the Marines inside the wall could focus on cleaning up the Dreaded in their midst. Vort came down and landed on top of the armory. Scuttling to the edge of the roof, he pointed his trunk down and unleashed a gout of flame, searing Dreaded trying to get into a sundered shutter.

Above them, the H.S.S.D. *Ayanmo* had scored two kills, while

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the *Marie Laveau* and *Mignola* had scored one each. With the Sjorthursars down, the Dreaded would be receiving no reinforcements but this still left a daunting task for the ground forces. The Captain of the *Ayanmo*, Anna Singh, contacted Sergeant Major Slokhov and appraised him of the situation. The Sergeant Major promptly gave strike coordinates to the fleet above.

Great cannon shots streaked down from the fleet, tearing holes in the Dreaded's vast army. The ships couldn't fire too close to the base, but the outer reaches of the Dreaded were doomed from this point onward.

Nef made a graceful sweep with their sword, then reversed and thrust in the other direction. They were almost dance-like in their motions, bringing their sword around and around, mowing through Dreaded like they were tissue paper. Nef fired a disc of energy from their visor, slicing two arms from a nearby Ur-Rabisu before they closed and finished it with their blade. Six meters to one side a squad of Marines held their ground, and another squad held seven meters to the other side. The intervening gap was being managed by Nef alone. Where once a torrent of Dreaded had poured into the base, now there was little more than the occasional individual desperately flopping down the wall when Nef's attention was elsewhere.

Nef stomped a Gugalanna to death, then whipped their blade along the outside of the wall, slaying a dozen Rabisus before they could finish climbing up. Nef raised their hand and caught an Omukade bolt with a loud metallic clang, grunting at the impact and pinging Vort. A few seconds later, Vort swung overhead, blasting the Omukade apart in a shower of lightning.

Nef continued holding the wall, noting that the back of the Dreaded horde was slowly drawing closer. This fight would go on for a while yet, but the end was in sight. The good news is that they spotted no Aeshmas or more Tauriz among the Dreaded. A couple Kukulkans flew back and forth overhead, but the roof-mounted flak cannons were fending them off.

Having cleared the recreation building, Runner, Bryluen, Kirby, and Bel'Wa were at the head of two groups of Marines advancing around the sides of the recreation structure. This building had been hit hard by Tauriz fire, leaving a tear in the roof large enough for Rabisus to

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climb through. There had been heavy losses inside due to the hole in the roof, a lack of cover inside, and two torn open armor shutters. Bryluen switched to her pistol and whip and led Runner and Bel'Wa through the destroyed door as Kirby cleaned up outside.

Immediately a group of Rabisus spotted them and rushed forward. Runner sent them back with a hail of fire, twirling his pistols and reloading deftly. Around them was an open chamber filled with exercise equipment. The marines here had fought hard, as every piece of equipment, every weight and dumbbell, was coated in black ichor. Clearly this had been a last stand for most of the marines inside, and a bloody one it was. Corpses were strewn about, similarly caked in black powder.

Bryluen threw her back up against a wall, then aimed around it and sighted a Rabisu up a nearby hall. She plugged it in the head with a single neat shot, then motioned for Bel'Wa to move forward.

With her shield in hand, Bel'Wa charged past the torn corpses of several marines. She encountered an En-Rabisu around the corner, barging into it and firing her shield cannon. She blew a chunk out of the monster's chest before her sword deprived it of an arm. A neat motion sliced her blade along the beast's throat, and it collapsed in a pile. Bel'Wa yelled and burst through the half open door into a small theater where a wounded marine was leaned against the wall, firing a pistol one-handed at an advancing Rabisu. Bel'Wa's shout distracted the beast long enough for the marine to shoot it in the head.

Bel'Wa immediately ran over to the marine, detaching the marine's med kit and using it to treat her wounds. The marine would need further medical attention but, after several bandages and anti-septic spray, they would survive. The marine thanked Bel'Wa as Bryluen and Runner passed the door. They finished a sweep of each room before finding three more survivors who had been backed up to a supply closet.

That just left the armory, the most deeply embattled structure and the goal for the Dreaded on planet Goodall. The marines from the previous structures followed as Dread Naught emerged back onto the street.

Kirby led the way toward the armory, wading into swarms of Rabisus with her wrist blades. Ahead, an Ur-Rabisu called out a challenge and charged Kirby. She quickly sheathed her blades and took

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her hammer from its back mount, rushing forward with a shout. Her hammer impacted the Ur-Rabisu's chest, the explosion rocking it backwards and removing a chunk of its torso.

The monstrosity staggered and fell to one knee, a point Kirby capitalized on with a reverse swing that met the Ur-Rabisu's head. The blast removed two of its petals and sent it flying into a prone position. Kirby finished the beast with a two-handed downward swing. She roared in triumph before spinning about with her hammer to clear space around her. She quickly put her hammer away and resumed violence with her wrist blades, firing a salvo from her missile rack to force the hordes back.

Shattered windows were torn open by dozens of claws, and three of the roof-mounted machine guns were out of commission. Swarms of Rabisus washed over each other in an attempt to enter the structure, punctuated by En-Rabisus and the occasional Gugalanna. Bryluen sent the marines from the previous structures, led by Runner, around the back of the armory, while she and Bel'Wa stayed behind Kirby lending fire support.

Kirby's wrist blades were covered in black soot, singing loudly as they passed through Dreaded after Dreaded. She howled as she fought, her voice magnified by the Marduk's speakers. She was listening to her favorite music loudly, singing along as she cleaved her foes asunder.

The nearest Dreaded to the door were hyper-focused on entering the armory such that resistance was light. The Dreaded were distracted and not thinking of their own survival. It was like they had gone entirely feral. They had no way to escape even if they did acquire the Stone. Bryluen pondered this as she loosed another round from her disc-gun and incinerated an En-Rabisu.

Perhaps this was desperation? Or more likely the Sjorthursars directed their ground forces, and without them the Dreaded only had their last goal in mind. It was a puzzle to be sure, and just another question about their foe that would go unanswered for the moment.

Bel'Wa thrust her shield into a Rabisu that had slipped past Kirby, hitting it so hard it died on impact. Bel'Wa whooped and fired an explosive round past Kirby into the horde.

Nicadzim was continuing to fight, now blinking between two

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portions of wall where losses were heavy. He kept making particle trails with his newest construct to shore up the defenses, but mostly he stayed in melee combat. He was wielding his pistol-like block construct and his glowing baton. He fired a super-heated orb into a Rabisu's face, then clubbed another over the head, causing it to rock back and forth as the baton's odd multi-hit phenomenon took effect.

He blinked and confronted an En-Rabisu with a shoulder charge that knocked it from the wall, then wheeled about and struck a Gugalanna's foot with his baton as it tried to climb up. It lost its grip and he fired three shots into its face, causing it to drop lifelessly to the ground.

A cluster of Rabisus emerged onto the wall, squawking and screeching as they saw him. Possessed by a sudden impulse, he extended his arm and several bolts of purple energy shot from his fingers, causing the Rabisus to boil, their flesh bubbling and sloughing away.

His breath caught in his throat at the new power. His fingers tingled and his eyes glowed for a moment. He had felt himself getting stronger, but it took until today to notice a truly appreciable difference. He could face down En-Rabisus alone and even threaten Ur-Rabisus with his weapon constructs now. He was more able to rapidly and accurately blink, and now could apparently cast energy from his hands. He only hoped Vort wouldn't mind him encroaching on his gimmick.

Nicadzim had nursed a growing worry in his gut. At Gru'Thiall he had felt a sense of guilt when witnessing the story of the fallen ancients. It made no sense, but it was as powerful a feeling as he could remember. He couldn't possibly have anything to do with what had happened, but it still bothered him. Everyone else seemed to have the same experience, one of horror and upset, but he alone felt guilt. That, combined with his growing powers, gave him pause. Was there a connection between him and the Dreaded? Or perhaps a connection with the ancients? Was he a creation of theirs like Nef?

But Nef knew where they had come from. He knew nothing of his origins and as far as he knew he only existed centuries after the last ancient took its life. All he had were questions and no way to answer them. He had begun searching for meaning or connections in his nightly travels, but had no idea where to start. He had fished through his own memories for anything that could hint at an origin, and found nothing.

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The Dreaded were so bright to him now, swimming in iridescent color. Perhaps this was something like what Vort saw. But it was more than that, he could feel their minds, the click and pop of synapses and thoughts reverberating through the air. His answers lay with the Dreaded, that much he knew. Perhaps beyond the Origin gate ...

His mind returned to the present moment, where he was throttling a Rabisu before bashing its head in with his baton. Perhaps the reflection could wait.

20. Clean up and Councils

Nef cast down yet another Ur-Rabisu with a bisecting swing of their khopesh. They kicked a group of Rabisus so hard they turned to dust, then wheeled about and fired several energy discs from their visor to keep more Dreaded from surmounting the wall.

At least two thirds of the Dreaded force was slain at this point, judging by their memory of the initial battle lines. The pressure on the wall wasn't letting up until the Dreaded were all dead, however.

Nef reeled as they were struck hard in the shoulder by an Omukade bolt. They snarled and straightened up, tagging the offender for Vort. They caught the next bolt in one hand, swept their khopesh around them to clear some space, and continued slaughtering every Dreaded in reach. The dent in their armor repaired itself rapidly.

Vort swept downward and annihilated the Omukade two bolts later, both of which missed Nef. Vort turned about and flew low over the wall as he spotted an Ahuizotl pulling itself upwards with its claw. He sprayed acid in a tight jet, melting the armored beast's claw arm and causing it to fall to the ground helpless.

Vort received a ping from Bryluen to clear an alleyway. He veered toward the armory and obliterated an entire swarm of Rabisus in a rush of flame. At that moment, a yellow bolt flew past him as another Omukade fired in his direction.

He began evasive maneuvers and turned toward the direction of

the fire, flying back and forth to avoid incoming shots. Coming low over the Omukade, he burst it asunder with a loud crack of lightning.

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Kirby reached the front door of the armory at last, stomping and stabbing her way forward. Runner and the marines came from the opposite direction, covered in a backwash of black soot. Kirby led the way into the armory, crouching through the door and firing one of her auto cannons into the Dreaded within. The marines in the armory had fared much better than those in the recreation structure, as there were barriers inside the armory to assist in defense of the Stone. After a minute of hunting lost Dreaded within the side chambers, the building was clear.

Bryluen ordered Runner, Kirby, and Bel'Wa to the walls to help when she received an odd message from Sergeant Major Slokhov: the Dreaded were disintegrating.

Sure enough, the Dreaded had simultaneously begun to disintegrate. Rank after rank of Rabisus vanished into dust and blew away. It was later theorized they simply could not continue to exist for long outside the control range of a Sjorthursar; regardless, the battle was now a decisive victory.

Bryluen sought the Sergeant Major, finding them on the wall overlooking the gathering of bodies.

"Operative, I don't know what we would have done without you."

"You have good soldiers under your command. You would have made it."

"Maybe, but a lot of lives were saved by your team. Especially them..." He trailed off, motioning toward Nef on the wall.

"That's Nef. They're ... special."

"... yeah, I can tell."

"Losses?"

"One hundred twenty estimated casualties. Much better than expected given the size of the enemy force. I thank you again for saving my soldiers."

"You're very welcome. Is there a way we can help with cleanup?"

"I won't make you stick around for tagging bodies."

"We will if you'll have us."

The Sergeant Major paused. "Thank you. Just gather them in the spaces between buildings."

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Brylue spoke to the team. “Team we’re helping with clean up. Gather the bodies.”

The task of arranging and tagging the bodies took around two hours. Dread Naught quietly helped line up the bodies, note the tags on their armor, and put them in body bags. It was somber work.

Runner hefted a body into its bag and privately contacted Brylue. “Why are you having us do this? I mean I’m glad to help, but usually you have a goal in mind.”

Brylue was doing the same task two buildings over. “To remember. We need to remember why we’re here. To stop this from happening. Sometimes you just need a humbling experience. We do the big flashy part, but we don’t usually stick around for this. I want us to experience this together.”

The ride back to Raven’s Landing was quiet. All was silent as a tomb for most of the trip, until Bel’Wa spoke up. “We did good today. We saved lives, and that counts for something.”

“I ONLY WISH WE COULD HAVE SAVED MORE,” Vort said.

Nef’s voice filled the hold. “We fought well. There is no more we could have done. We performed our duty.”

The others nodded. “Damn right,” Runner intoned.

The *Atet* settled gently on the landing pad at Raven’s Landing. The sun was just rising.

“Breakfast in the lounge, everyone?” Brylue called out.

“Sounds good to me,” Nicadzim said. He always approved of a good meal, even though he hadn’t been able to eat as much recently.

Dread Naught stripped off their armor and gathered in the lounge. Nef loomed large over the bar, their knees pulled up to their chest. Everyone was battered and worn, and ate quietly.

Brylue broke the silence after a while. “Three days until the Grand Council. I need everyone rested and ready by then. Get a good night’s sleep tonight, whatever you have to do, then take it easy the next couple days. Consider that an order. Runner, I need to talk to you in my office.”

They ate in companionable silence, enjoying each other’s company over a hearty meal. Around thirty minutes later, Brylue and Runner met in her office.

“There’s no easy way to drop this on you: Akk’Duun is going to

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be at the Grand Council.”

“Oh, sh-sh-shit.”

Akk’Duun, murderer of Runner’s family, was going to be at the council. Runner couldn’t believe his luck.

“I know. T’hròstag intelligence has nem nailed down and they’ve identified co-conspirators. During the Council, they’re going to bring nem and several others in.”

Runner’s eyebrows were raised. “They’ve got nem? They h-have nem-m? That’s great news!”

“You are not to interfere at risk of tipping nem off. Do not engage.”

“... I have things to say to nem, Bryluen.”

“I know. But you’re going to wait until they grab nem. I’ll be in the loop and will let you know.”

“You will, really?”

“If I didn’t, you would seek nem out regardless. I can’t risk letting you do that, so yes. I will let you know when they’re moving on nem.”

“... thank you. I c-c-can’t believe this. You’ve m-made my night.”

“I’m serious, Runner. Wait until ne’s caught.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Runner returned to his room to find Kirby waiting for him. She was sitting on his bed, in a green sports bra and gray shorts. “Hey, sweetie. What’s got you glowing?”

“Well, Bryluen just told me A-A-kk-Duun is going to be at the Council. They’re going to catch nem.”

“That’s fuckin’ amazing! How do you feel about it?”

“Well I’m not sure. It’s closure, I g-g-guess. I kind of wanted to kill nem, but hey.”

“Can’t win e’m all. You want to talk about it?”

“I d-do, actually.” He sat down on the bed next to her, and threw an arm over her shoulder. “Is it weird that I’m a little conflicted?”

“Not at all. Some anxiousness would be pretty damn understandable. It’s like closing a chapter on your life, you know? Big shit.”

“You’re right-t-t. I just ... I hope I get to talk to nem.”

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“What are you going to say?”

“I’m not s-sure, to be honest.”

“Well let’s practice. I’ll be the no good son of a bitch and you be you.”

Kirby’s voice took on a high, silly affectation, “Hiii I’m a murderer and I smell bad and I’ve been caught!”

Runner burst out laughing. Kirby grinned. “You’ll think of the right thing to say, I know it.”

Runner squeezed Kirby close. “Th-Thank you. Really.”

“Any time”.

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The day of the Grand Council had finally arrived. Dread Naught’s armor had been stored in the *Atet*’s bay, and they were all dressed in their formal swimwear. Kirby was swinging her arms, watching the translucent fabric of her sleeves waft about in the breeze that permeated the lobby.

“Gonna be weird flyin’ the *Atet* without pants and with antlers, let me tell you what.”

“The good news,” Bryluen said, “Is that we all look amazing.”

“It’s true,” Nicadzim added. “We are being quite the sight.”

Bel’Wa looked up at Nef. “So what is your plan for how to spend your time? You’re going to attract quite the crowd.”

“I suppose I will be answering queries from awed onlookers.”

“Yes, that sounds like a good plan to bet on.”

“So Bel’Wa,” Kirby said, still swinging her arms. “You’ve got words all over you. But how in the hell is someone supposed to read what’s on the underside of your ass?”

“Well, Kirby, I just suppose they’d have to be determined.”

Bel’Wa somehow embodied a smirk from behind her shrieking yoir mask.

Bryluen took a deep breath. “Alright, let’s do this. Onto the *Atet* everyone, let’s go.”

The team settled into their usual harnesses, chatting and abuzz with excitement. Bel’Wa spoke up, “I haven’t been back to the home

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world in several years. I'm excited to see the temple again."

"I'm nervous about the water. Isn't it cold on Torva'Ang?" Kirby inquired from the cockpit speaker.

"The water and the inside spaces of the temple will be heated for Human comfort, don't worry. But yes, Torva'Ang gets very cold at times. Us Qixing are insulated for it."

Kirby grunted. "I swear you folks get all the biological goodies. Need less sleep, got denser muscle mass, need to eat less, can see in the goddamn dark ..."

Bel'Wa arched a wiry eyebrow and smiled. "Yes, it's great. We can't breathe arid air for long periods without developing respiratory diseases, we have to regularly use either salt water or special gels to keep our scales from falling off, our hair tends to get removed from our head by a stiff breeze, we average five inches shorter than you, we can't walk or run for as long as you, we have a comparatively astronomical rate of cheek cancer, and finally it takes three people, an extra stage, and almost fifty percent longer overall to make a kid.

"Also, seeing in the dark doesn't work as well if everything is a similar temperature, so that's only a half bonus. All that genetic variation did give me a really pretty eye color, though ... at least, according to you. I am unable to see it."

Bryluen chuckled from the cockpit. "Someone flag Kirby's corpse for pickup on the way out."

Kirby sniggered. "God damn, Bel'Wa! What's with the inferiority complex?"

"We come from a planet still dominated by eighty-meter long ocean beasts. Our beaches and floating islands have to have deterrents, and over sixty percent of Torva'Ang's ocean floor remains unmapped. We are very familiar with feelings of physical inadequacy."

Runner froze, and started shaking his head. "Hell no. Remind me to stay out of the o-ocean. It's safely inside the pyramids for me."

"Were you ... not a fan of the terrible things that live in the depths, Runner?" Nico said wryly.

"Not h-h-huge on the idea, no."

Kirby brought the *Atet* up and away from Raven's Landing. She felt naked. She was used to the extra sensory input from her armor—it was like flying with one arm. "Oh this is weird. Behave for me, honey,

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I'm flying you raw."

The sun was rising. The *Atet* flew up into the dawn, glimmering in golden light as it rose higher and higher. Soon the air thinned and then vanished entirely as they proceeded into the exosphere. Kirby settled into her seat as comfortably as she could without her armor, and brought the ship to the Compression frame. She docked the *Atet*, then pushed the frame up to the local Gate, then engaged the Gate and took the first jump.

From there they proceeded through three other jumps to the border of Qixing space and then, after a brief scan from a firebase on the border, took seven more jumps to the Ke-Ilva system. Torva'Ang was the third planet of the Ke-Ilva system, and even from space it was magnificent.

Numerous satellites orbited the world, as well as several Interior Guard space stations and a full battle fleet of red vessels of every description. A menacing Battleship loomed large among the numerous smaller craft. As with all Qixing creations, it was a beautiful ship, curvaceous and glinting in the light of the local star. But numerous weapon mounts and bays made its nature all too clear.

Kirby exchanged digital handshakes with the various layers of defense as she brought the *Atet* down through orbit. They stopped to check in with the Interior Guard at one of the space stations before being permitted to land. It was unusual for an armed craft not belonging to the Gate Sentinels or Interior Guard to be permitted access to a Qixing world. The *Atet* was a very special exception.

Torva'Ang itself was a glittering blue-green sphere of almost ninety percent water. The only land masses were scattered islands dotted in sea caves where the Qixing had spent most of their evolutionary history. Nowadays across the surface of the world were great floating islands constructed over the millennia, allowing them room to expand and grow. These floating islands had been connected over time, leading to nine entirely artificial continents dotting the surface of the world. These continents glimmered in white across the great ocean, and slowly traveled with the seasons.

The Temple of the Great Mother was located on the continent Q'ir-thulaz, within the small nation of Vuiz, in the province of Vuizara, in the city of He-he Tulok. Vuiz had long served as a neutral ground for

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other nations, and the Temple of the Great Mother was widely regarded as the center of society on Torva'Ang.

The local star, Hieu'Thurax, was just rising over the horizon as the *Atet* descended. As they came down, an interior guard interceptor pulled up alongside them and guided their descent vector. Kirby had to do all she could to get the nimble *Atet* to slow down enough for the interceptor to keep pace. It was a notable moment, revealing just how advanced the *Atet* was.

"You're the fastest in the west, baby. Hell yeah," Kirby muttered.

Q'ir-thulaz loomed before them, a vast expanse of white punctuated by every color imaginable and even some beyond Human sight. The dense structures that made up the entire continent were awash in different colors, separated by white causeways, bridges, and ramps. As they drew lower, vehicles of every description, from long buses to trains and small personal lifters, flocked about like busy insects.

Here and there, towers reared up from the surrounding buildings. Most of the construction was low and spread out, making the towers hard to miss. They were temples, places of reverence and worship for the planet's six billion inhabitants. Each tower was topped with a different statue of an important individual or a character from Qixing myth.

The great hydroponic farms responsible for much of the populace's food were occasionally visible in vibrant pinks, purples, and oranges, as were great holes into the ocean through which underwater vessels departed to catch sea life in nets.

They passed over the border into Vuiz. The small nation was a wealthy one, many of its structures shining in gold filigree. Soon the border into Vuizara passed beneath them, at which point the number of temples quintupled. This was a holy place for the Qixing, much more than being the seat of the Queen or the site of an important structure. It was larger than the sum of its parts.

The *Atet* entered its final trajectory, slowing greatly to reduce noise and prepare to land. The interceptor directed them at last to their destination: A vast landing pad at the spaceport nearest the temple.

The *Atet* settled into its assigned space between two large lifters and Dread Naught exited to find someone waiting to meet them. The particularly tall (for a Qixing) woman was emerald-skinned and wore a

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light gray robe. She addressed Bryluen as she descended the ramp. Kirby clutched uselessly at her sleeves as a cold wind hit them.

“Come, come, we have a vehicle waiting for you! Our couriers will take your belongings to your rooms.”

A large open-topped bus parked near the *Atet*, filled with other delegates and various guests of the Grand Council. Nef perched in the back, folding down the seats to give them a place to squat. The bus crouched down on its tires as it settled under their weight. Everyone was enchanted by Nef, silently turning to look at the giant among them, utterly agape.

“Are you ... real?” A Human woman asked from behind a panther mask.

“I am Neferneferuaten Setepenre Meketaset. You may call me Nef. I was created by a being of advanced wisdom, and I exist to do battle.”

The woman simply nodded, incapable of absorbing Nef’s words over the sheer distraction of being near them.

Warm air wafted from the walls of the bus, for which Kirby was particularly thankful. Runner threw an arm around her to warm her up, and she snuggled close to him.

Bel’Wa took up two seats due to her sails and hair, while Bryluen, Vort, and Nicadzim took whatever seats were open.

The bus trundled away from the landing pad and descended into the busy streets. Most all traffic in He-he Tulok was public transport, and rarely so busy as this. Hundreds of delegates, representatives, guests of honor, and various workers were flooding into the Temple of the Great Mother.

As they advanced through the streets toward the temple, the woman from earlier stood up and addressed the bus.

“Welcome to He-he Tulok! We have name tags for each of you, as well as ear pieces so you can stay in contact with your party.”

She began to walk down the aisle, handing out name tags and ear pieces while the bus continued to pass dense housing and towering temples. Thin rail lines crossed back and forth over them, ferrying dozens of people to and fro in small cars.

At long last the Temple of the Great mother loomed into view. The massive central pyramid reached into the sky, stepped and decorated

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in gleaming white and gold. Vast effigies of personas historical and mythical alike decorated every step, and grand waterfalls fell down the noble sides of the vast pyramid. A great ray of light shone out the top of the pyramid in a bright beam that touched the clouds.

The surrounding pyramids were about a quarter the size of the main pyramid, equally spaced around it and no less decorated in gold and white. Between each of them ran a covered waterway twenty meters wide, which formed a continuous circuit from pyramid to pyramid as well as from each outer pyramid to the central one. Ferries carried guests through the waterways.

Their bus pulled up to the food vendor pyramid. Dread Naught dismounted their transport and hurried inside to the warmth of the interior.

21. Majesty and Mystery

Within, it was just as impressive as the outside. Tiled walkways and platforms ran up and up the pyramid in layers, such that there were eight separate floors in this pyramid alone. Food vendors of every possible description were arrayed in all their glory and in every direction. On the third floor was a small stage where a hyper-jazz band was playing; their music wafted along air replete with enticing scents, and permeated the entire pyramid.

Waterfalls, water features, and multiple swim-up bars filled the space, with numerous additional bridges to allow T'hròstag guests to stay dry. Almost nowhere could one get far from a pool of heated water or a stream running along the floor. The main waterway made a large loop around the inside of the pyramid, where a cordoned-off section connected to the channel the ferry traveled. Guests were lazily floating in the artificial river on inner tubes. The sight would have been nerve-racking for a T'hròstag, but the guests endured regardless.

“Let’s grab some breakfast, I’m hungry,” Bryluen stated matter-of-factly. She handed out cards to her team members. “Don’t spend it all in one place.”

Kirby motioned around them as she slid the card into her top. “Where the hell do we start?”

Bryluen snatched a brochure from a nearby podium. “That depends. This and floor two are good for Qixing, Floors three and four

are for Humans, five and six T'hròstag, while seven and eight are Ly Aulth. So Bel'Wa, you pick something and then we'll head upstairs and

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feed ourselves.”

A small crowd had already gathered to stare at Nef. “I will remain here so as to not disturb your meal time.”

“Nah, come with us. You’re part of the family. We’ll all get stared at together.”

Nef nodded, drinking in the familial overture.

Bel’Wa thumbed through the brochure, identified a promising sounding vendor, and jogged off to acquire a meal. She met the others upstairs, where they had gathered around one of many dozens of tables and booths arranged around the pyramid. As she approached with her food, the others were deep in discussion.

“Man, I’ve c-come a long way from roughing it wi-th no money doing vigilante w-work. Being here, it feels like I’ve made it, you know?”

“You are going without basic income, Runner? That will sound difficult,” Nicadzim noted.

“Yeah, going without UBI was t-t-tough. I couldn’t collect because I’d have to ha-ave an ID, and good lucking scamming that system. Had to spend a lot of time working in the Lim-m-minal Stars so I wouldn’t get tagged by some well-meaning Needs Office clerk.”

Bryluen smirked. “Funny thing about a system made to help people: it wants to know you exist.”

“Ha,” Runner chuckled. “Would have been a h-hell of a lot easier being in Paris with it, for sure. Just worried the g-g-good guys might have tracked me down.”

Bryluen gritted her teeth. “Honestly? You should have risked it. Needs Office folks go through ethics testing nearly as strict as the CSOE; they almost certainly wouldn’t have talked if they figured out who you were.”

Runner nodded. “I thought about it a l-l-lot, but it would only take one person s-saying something and then I’d have to re-anonymize myself. I learned how to get back off-f the grid if anything happened, and it’d be a p-pain in the ass.”

“Fair enough. I have a whole death-faking suite in place if I ever need it for the same reason. It’s pretty complicated.”

“I didn’t even know about that for a long time,” Bel’Wa said. “You all got fast-tracked to the inner circle, and you aren’t even sleeping

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with her!”

Kirby put her hands out. “The hell? We weren’t inner circle material before?”

Bryluen simply smiled. “I’m hard to get close to, I know.”

Kirby laughed. “You’re a tough nut to crack for sure.”

Bel’Wa sat down sideways and took a bite of her food. “I ever tell you about Bryluen’s birthday? We had been dating for two months before she’d tell me what it was.”

“I didn’t want to make a deal out of it, it’s just a birthday!”

“Well, you’re special and I want to celebrate you being around.”

Runner straightened up in his seat. “So when is y-y-our birthday?”

Bryluen sighed. “In a week.”

Dread Naught, aside from Nef, all exclaimed aloud.

“WE ARE NOT LETTING THAT PASS US BY,” said Vort.

Bryluen made a dismissive gesture. “It’s my sixty fourth, I’ve had plenty. It’s fine.”

Kirby booed through a mouth full of food and threw a wadded up napkin in Bryluen’s direction. “We’re throwing a party, get used to it!”

“Yeah, it’s like Mother’s Day for us. Gotta m-make mom feel appreciated,” Runner added.

“You’re all embarrassing, but I’ll allow it.”

The group cheered. Bryluen looked around, taking in the multiple crowds of people gathered to stare at Nef. “Okay, from here you’re all free to go. Our ear pieces are synced up so we can stay in touch. I’ll let you all know if anything comes up. I’ll be with Bel’Wa in the Grand Hall saying hi to everyone.”

Runner put a hand on Kirby’s shoulder. “We’re going-g to be in the entertainment p-pyramid.”

“Oh are we now?” Kirby drawled.

Nicadzim took a breath and clapped his hands against his lap. “I’ll be here for now, probably floating along.”

Vort made a brief chirping sound. “I’LL BE HERE WITH NICO. I LIKE THE SMELL. REMINDS ME OF HOME.”

Nef nodded. “I will proceed to the Grand Hall as well. I am curious about its appearance and wish to witness the dignitaries.”

“Alright, sounds good,” Bryluen said as she stood up. “Everyone

24. Coordination and Close Combat

meet back here for lunch at twelve local.”

She extended a hand to Bel’Wa, helping her up, and then transitioned to holding her hand. “Let’s go, tye-tyito.”

Bryluen, Bel’Wa, and Nef walked between rows of vendors to the elevator, rode it down to the first floor, and headed for the ferry. They waded through a heated stream together, then gathered with a crowd to wait for passage.

The small boat approached the dock and extended a ramp. It was a squat, rounded shape with an open roof and five rows of seats. They boarded in short order among guests of varying races, with Nef once again squatting awkwardly. The ferry turned about and powered toward the main pyramid.

The central pyramid towered higher and higher as the ferry made the half-kilometer trip. Above them was a glass roof shimmering in numerous colors and geometric designs, giving it a textured appearance. It was beautiful work which heightened what otherwise could have been a drab piece of architecture.

As the ferry entered the main pyramid, the Grand Hall yawned around them. The channel ended at the entrance, so Bryluen, Bel’Wa, Nef, and the other guests offloaded onto a small dock. The space was grandiose in the extreme, filled with gold statuary, and what would be waterfalls and pools which had been turned off for the T’hròstag guests. Even without water the monolithic architecture of the hall was impressive. Great columns reared up above them, meeting the towering roof dozens of meters overhead.

The terrain of the Grand Hall consisted of various landings, canals, and platforms covered in plush seating with a central aisle down the middle leading to a massive red coral throne. Two great statues of armored warriors loomed over the throne as if to protect its occupant.

Outside the Grand Hall were over a hundred smaller chambers, ante rooms, art galleries, balconies, and meeting places, most of which were occupied at the present moment by various diplomatic parties deep in negotiation. Aside from the Grand Council itself, numerous trade agreements and other matters of state were being decided during the three day event. A Grand Council of this sort had only been called once before, hosted by the T’hròstag, and that was when the system of inter-territory trade had been established. This was a supremely rare

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opportunity for all involved.

Great glowing signs were suspended over the hall, indicating different zones where different delegations could gather. Also indicated was a formal dance floor and the area around the throne itself. Due to their stance on small talk (very much against), the T'hròstag delegation was either gathered in the entertainment pyramid near the sparring arena or in meeting rooms for planned negotiations.

Bryluen pointed toward the sign declaring the Human portion of the Hall. "Let's hit home first, get the greetings out of the way, then check in with the Queen."

The party of three proceeded across the hall, passing the Qixing and Ly Aulth areas up the center aisle. Bryluen noted the numerous Interior Guard soldiers patrolling the upper balconies that overlooked the Grand Hall. As they approached the Human zone, Asmat came to meet them.

She was dressed in a carefully embroidered, yellow one-piece swimsuit with matching hijab. Her mask was that of the poetess Sappho. "Bryl, so glad to see you! I love the look, it suits you so well!"

Bryluen smiled behind her mask. "Good to see you, Azzy."

"Hello, Bel'Wa, I must say I am impressed."

Bel'Wa laughed and reached back to rustle her sails. "I try."

"Nef, it's an honor to meet you," Asmat said as she looked up at the looming deity.

Nef nodded. "You are one of the council people, I surmise."

"Indeed I am. The others are all here, let's get all of you introduced."

Asmat led Bryluen, Bel'Wa, and Nef over to where the members of CSOE High Command and the Commandant Prime were gathered. Prime Minister Tuazon was off in a meeting of their own. Bryluen reached a hand out to the nearest member of High Command and shook.

"Hey, Lucy, how are you? How are the spouses?"

Lucinda Braynard shook Bryluen's hand. She was a shorter woman with a billow of blonde hair who had a long career in the Astral Marines before her elevation to High Command. She wore a mask of a growling bear.

"Good, good! We're all good! Glad to see you."

Bryluen next shook hands with Abel Rocco Ollivier, a taller man

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with long blonde hair tied behind his head and a mask like a medieval helmet visor. He worked as a theoretical physicist.

After councilman Ollivier, Commandant Prime Nanimissuat Penashue greeted Bryluen. Ne was the highest authority of the Astral Marines, and was as formidable as his title suggested. Ne was tall, with long dark hair and a face seemingly carved from stone, and wore a detailed wolf mask, giving him a fearsome aspect.

Then Bryluen greeted Eun-byul Ibragimova, a dark-haired woman with olive skin who wore a blank mask dominated by faceted eye holes. She had previously had a robust career in sex work.

Next was Aglaea Notaras, a small woman with mousy brown hair and a mask of the Buddha. She was several months pregnant, and had recently retired from her position as an Operative to join High Command.

Following her was Kristi Sabir Tarif, tall and pale with curls of dark brown hair spilling down to their shoulders. They wore a mask of a unicorn, replete with a spiral horn. Kristi had previously been a member of Terran Parliament.

Last was the head of High Command, Galmaan Maahir Cabdinuur. Galmaan was an imposing man with dark skin and short-cropped hair. His mask was that of his own face rendered in gray. He had a deep, pleasant, thickly accented voice, which he had once used often as a Planetary Arbiter. “Bryluen. Pleased to see you here.”

“The pleasure is all mine, sir.”

He leaned in close. “We have had some intel come in regarding some minor matters to attend to here. Expect to hear from me.”

“Understood. I’ll be ready.”

“I know you will,” he said with a smile. “I suppose you had better get in line to greet the Queen. There’s quite the long queue.”

“That was our next stop. See you all around.”

The members of High Command waved and politely nodded. “Let’s go, Bel’Wa, Nef. The formalities can’t wait, sadly.”

Bryluen led the trio past staring onlookers up the whole length of the massive hall, and joined the back of a line gathered before the Queen’s throne.

The leaders of various trade groups, business ventures, military detachments, and ambassadorial parties were greeting the Queen one by

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one. She sat upon her red throne, resplendent in a long cyan robe that trailed around into a train fifteen meters long. The robe was delicately embroidered in the finest detail, depicting scenes from Qixing history, and gold tassels hung from the edges. The Queen was bedecked in exquisite jewelry, glowing down her arms, fingers, ears, and around her neck.

She was a singularly intimidating woman. The Queen of the Qixing had skin the color of moss which faded past her upper arms and legs. Her hair was light red and bound into a golden frame in the shape of the dynastic sigil of the Ho'Xal dynasty. She wore a mask of the great Ho'Xal itself, detailed in gold and ruby.

Queen K'ia Lewl-Ock Thernax Ho'Xal was the most powerful individual in known space. While her official powers were highly limited and mostly consisted of ceremony, her practical power was immense. She had sway with every government in the known systems, and knew exactly how to leverage it. She was calculating, wise, and ambitious in equal measure.

After about fifteen minutes, Bryluen, Bel'Wa, and Nef reached the front of the line and stood before the Queen at an eight meter distance. Bryluen spoke in a clear voice. "Greetings. It is an honor to be in your presence. Ho'Xal q-ie tahk lu'so frow."

The Queen smiled slightly. "Ar'an ney als-for."

The exchange completed, Bryluen and Bel'Wa took a bow. Nef took note and imitated them. The chatter in the line behind them had reached a fever pitch as onlookers stared at Nef.

The Queen suddenly spoke up. "And what is it that so transfixes you all? Is it not childish to stare?"

The line fell silent. The Queen smirked slightly behind her mask. She looked back at Bryluen. "'Tis very good to see you. Enjoy your time in the Temple."

Bryluen nodded and led Bel'Wa and Nef back towards the Human zone. "Well Nef, you can stay here or go wherever. Bel'Wa and I are going to dance out on the floor over there."

Bel'Wa looked at the lavishly appointed dance floor, attended to by a neo-string quintet. "Are we really?"

Bryluen smiled at her. "Why miss the opportunity?"

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Kirby and Runner entered the entertainment pyramid with wide eyes. It was dark inside, with spotlights, flashing strobes, and glowing neon as far as the eye could see. Acoustic padding on every surface prevented echoing. There were multiple dance floors on different levels, as well as the brightly lit sparring arena and several stages, each inhabited by a different act. The acts were from across known space and were each considered musical ambassadors for their people.

Runner was holding Kirby's hand. He squeezed and yelled over the noise, "Let's go!"

"Go where?"

"That dance floor right there!"

Kirby grinned. They jogged over to the nearest dance floor, where a synth-pop group was performing a particularly upbeat song.

Kirby yelled, "What do you wanna do after this?"

"Who kn-nows! Let's watch a band and check out th-the arena!"

Kirby gyrated to the beat. "Sounds good to me!"

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Vort and Nico were floating in the river inside the food vendor pyramid on inner tubes. Vort had been getting his fair share of attention from onlookers. He didn't mind, and had spoken with several strangers about himself already.

Vort made the equivalent of a sighing sound. "THIS IS NICE. I HADN'T EXPECTED ALL THIS HUBBUB. IT REALLY IS LIKE HOME HERE."

"Tell me about what will be home to you."

"OUR MARKETS WERE LIKE THIS: UP AND DOWN AS MUCH AS SIDE TO SIDE. WE ALL FLEW, OF COURSE, SO WE BUILT IN THESE HIVE-LIKE STRUCTURES THAT WE COULD FLIT UP OR DOWN EASILY. EVERYTHING WAS DENSE, CROWDED TOGETHER SO YOU BARELY HAD WING SPACE, BUT SOMEHOW IT WORKED OUT. VENDORS AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE HAWKING WARES; I CAN STILL RECALL THE SMELL OF ALL THAT FOOD. IT'S SO MUCH LIKE THIS, IT REALLY MAKES ME HOMESICK. I CAN'T BELIEVE I'LL NEVER SEE IT AGAIN ..."

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They fell silent for a minute.

“I’m sorry, Vort.”

Vort spun himself with the tips of his wings. “IT’S OKAY. I HAVE THIS MEMORY NOW, BEING HERE WITH MY FRIENDS. IT’S A GOOD MEMORY.”

“It was. I am enjoying myself. I did not expect this to be so relaxing.”

Nicadzim suddenly felt an all-too-familiar sensation. He spilled out of his inner tube and turned to Vort. “I’m about to be traveling. Be right back!”

He dove under the water as the world unfolded before him, turning inside out and then shattering like a pane of glass. He fell down a twisting tunnel of lightning into a void. He felt something in the distant darkness looming closer and closer and he realized that, whatever it was, it was vast.

A feeling of raw terror hit him in the gut as a Sjorthursar emerged from the darkness around the object. In person, the Sjorthursar was massive, but it was trifling compared to the distant object. Nicadzim felt the object calling to him, and he almost listened.

Shaking his head, he reached out a hand and unfolded space. He needed to be anywhere but here right now.

He touched the gap in existence, and once more reality warped around him. He found himself on an icy peak, part of a range that formed a massive wall. The wall towered over what appeared to be a submerged city, just a dark, foreboding shadow of walkways and spires locked beneath the ice.

He sat down wearily. That brief encounter had left him winded and scared. What was the vast thing in the darkness? Was it Jörmungandr? He wished he could have seen it, but was also rather relieved he didn’t. More than ever he knew his answers lay with the Dreaded. They were entwined in some way, and he wanted to know how. It was nonsense; what could he have to do with the Dreaded? But the pieces fit too neatly.

He reached his hand out again and opened a portal he hoped would lead back to the pyramid.

Nicadzim burst from the surface of the water, startling Vort. “Sorry,” he gasped. There was still frost in his mustache but it seemed no one had noticed his brief disappearance.

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“Where did you go?”

“I do not be knowing for sure, but I need to tell Bryluen.”

Soon after, Bryluen and Nicadzim found themselves in one of the many meeting rooms off the Great Hall. Nicadzim had just regaled Bryluen with the story of what had happened.

She was deep in thought. “We need answers. You have a connection to the Dreaded, that much we know. But what could it mean? We have nothing to go off of at this point. Do you think you could go back to that place?”

Nicadzim shivered. “Perhaps.”

“I’m not going to make you, but it should be under consideration.”

“I will be thinking about it.”

“Good. Thank you for telling me. Now try not to go anywhere else, alright?”

He smiled. “I will do my best.”

22. Intelligence and Orders

A few hours later, Dread Naught met back at the food pyramid for lunch. They gathered at a round table on the third floor, located on a small balcony. The team was making small talk, relaying what they had seen and experienced so far at the council. Everyone agreed it was an impressive undertaking.

Bryluen's ear piece chirped, and Councilman Cabdinuur's voice came through.

"Operative Branok, a Ly Aulth dignitary by the name of Tk'aack I'aarl has, through back channels, requested a discrete meeting with a Human dignitary. I'm assigning you to this meeting. They wish to meet in room 15 K'olfa at 0900 local."

"I'll be there."

"Good. Report to us as soon as you can."

"Understood."

The line went dead. A discrete meeting with a Ly Aulth could be anything. They had limited relations with Humanity, and mostly tense ones at that. It was little surprise that a meeting might be secretive simply to avoid possible negative press back in the Ly Aulth home systems. That said, if Cabdinuur was assigning Bryluen to the task, it must be considered important. She could only guess what the meeting could hold.

Relations with the Ly Aulth Stellar Confederacy were fraught

and uneven, at times boiling into outright conflict such as during the small Triad War not three decades earlier. Trade was limited and mostly

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done through the T'hròstag Empire as a proxy, and disagreements and criticisms of the handling of the Liminal Stars was common. The Ly Aulth were ruled by an amalgamation of cartels, each headed by a powerful family. Their internecine conflicts were the stuff of legends, though they tended to unite against shared threats rather quickly by setting aside territorial and resource squabbles until the crisis had passed.

The Ly Aulth had made it to space with fewer government ethics concerns than Humanity, and were the main purveyor of illegally trafficked goods and people in known space. The cartels were cutthroat, employing advanced technology with no heed for the consequences. Autonomous combat drones were common in warfare and policing, and even some autonomous starships existed. These were highly impressive on an engineering level, but the ethics of their deployment were troubling, to say the least. They were as likely to wield such technology against their own populations as against an enemy. The Ly Aulth as a people were sensitive, reasonable, and inquiring, but as a government the cartels were ruthless and fractious. It was a sad state of affairs, to see a species who had not shed the shortcomings of its home world.

It was for these reasons that the Ly Aulth meeting with Bryluen was an event of some consternation. It could be nothing, or at least an offering Humankind would never accept, or it could be something truly vital and unexpected. Cabdinuur seemed to be betting on the latter and, to be fair, this was the event for such a happening. Bryluen would certainly be mulling it over for the rest of the evening.

“Well,” Bryluen said to the rest of the table. “I’ve got work in the morning. What’s in store for the rest of you?”

Nicadzim answered first. “Myself, Runner, Kirby, and Vort were going to a match in the arena. A T'hròstag champion and Qixing fighter. Apparently there will be a tournament the next day.”

“Sounds fun. What are you up to, Nef?”

The deity was sitting next to the table, still towering over everyone. “I will return to the Grand Hall to observe.”

“Today’s the day for that. The other two days the main body of each delegation will be in meeting chambers. Not time for fun then.”

Bel’Wa put a hand on Bryluen’s shoulder. “I’m doing whatever you’re doing.”

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Bryluen smiled. “So, hanging around with the Human delegation and schmoozing?”

Bel’Wa squeezed Bryluen’s shoulder. “I guess so!”

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After their meal Nicadzim, Vort, Kirby, and Runner proceeded to the entertainment pyramid together. They crossed the floor, passing under roaming colored lights and by packed stages, until they entered the brightly lit area around the arena. Rows of seats surrounded a pit three meters deep where the fighters would clash. Around the pit were transparent panels three meters high to prevent any pieces of equipment from flying into the audience.

Finding a spot for all of them on the third row, they sat together and waited for the event to start. The show match was between a T’hròstag champion chosen by nir delegation specifically for the Grand Council, and a Qixing soldier from the temple’s roster of Interior Guard.

The combatants were equipped with fake weapons bearing sensors that would detect contact with the opponent’s sensor vest. In this way hits would be tallied and the first fighter to five hits would be the winner of that round. The match was for the best of seven rounds.

The combatants emerged out onto the arena floor, drinking in the adulation of the gathered crowd. The T’hròstag fighter was a two and a half meter behemoth covered in pale yellow hairs. Nir opponent was comparatively diminutive, but broad shouldered and powerfully built. They were a woman with almost slate skin and dark orange hair.

They each appealed to the crowd in their own way, then squared up at the center of the arena. The T’hròstag was wielding three axes, while the Qixing bore a thin blade like a fencing foil.

The countdown to the match began.

5...

4...

3...

Runner spotted the T’hròstag delegation on the front row across the arena.

2...

A thought occurred to him.

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1...

Right there in the front row, sat Akk'Duun. He would know that T'hròstag anywhere. Platinum hairs, pale brown skin, and a small notch on one side of his maw. Runner nearly surged out of his seat. He had to wait until day three. He'd promised Bryluen. He'd promised.

But the bastard was right there. Runner could practically touch nem. Squeeze through the crowd, get close, and ... then what? He couldn't kill someone right in the middle of a crowd. He couldn't tip nem off that someone was coming for them, either.

The match had begun. The T'hròstag whirled its axes and charged its smaller opponent. The Qixing dodged backward, blade at the ready with a calm thrust for the T'hròstag's center of mass. Kirby looked over, realizing Runner had stopped moving.

She tapped him on the shoulder. "What's wr—oh, shit."

Her eyes had followed his to the T'hròstag delegation. "We can leave if you'd like. We don't have to stay here."

"Ne's right th-there, Kirby. Right fucking there."

"There's a whole crowd between us. It's further than it looks. We can't tip nem off, you know that."

Runner clenched his fists. "I know. Fuck! I can't stay here, I'm sorry. I promised. I promised!"

Kirby and Runner stood up. "I'm comin' with you hon."

Vort looked over. "IS SOMETHING WRONG?"

"Don't worry about us, you have fun, okay?"

Runner and Kirby left the arena and reconvened at one of the several bars in the entertainment pyramid. Kirby signaled the barwoman for two vodka shots. "Talk to me, hon."

"I used to shoot people like nem in the head, and now that ne's right there I just can't. I promised. I'm so god damn frustrated by this. How am I gonna get through the next couple days knowing ne's out there?"

"Ne's being taken care of. T'hròstag intelligence has this. Here's what we're gonna do. Here's what we're gonna do. You and me, right? We're gonna sit right here and drink, okay? And then when we're plastered, we're gonna stumble to our room and do unthinkable things to each other."

Runner grinned. "That actually sounds pretty good."

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“I thought so.” Kirby waved to the barwoman. “Three more a piece!”

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Nef had returned to the Grand Hall, and currently stood near High Command. Commandant Prime Penasuhe was away meeting with a T’hròstag admiral.

Asmat sidled up next to Nef. “So, how are you?”

She seemed utterly unintimidated. She was, in truth, quaking inside, but one did not become a member of CSOE High Command without being able to put on a brave face.

“I am well. That is the typical response, no?”

“That is indeed. But is it true?”

“I am indeed truly well. Do people not often respond with the truth?”

“Not at all. We play our cards close to our chest sometimes.”

“Hm. Are you well?”

“I am, thank you for asking.”

As always, Nef stared off into the distance. “This is a very strange event.”

“Why is that?”

“So many serious matters of state, yet so much entertainment, food, and enjoyment. A party is occurring on the periphery of such weighty events.”

“These things are tense. People need to be able to cool off, it allows cooler heads to prevail, as it were. This is a perfect setting for a bit of revelry, in fact. People from all over coming together in matters both serious and joyous.”

“I had not considered that. You are wise.”

“Ha, well I don’t know if I’d go that far, but thank you. What is your impression of how things are here?”

“Curious. Very much ambling about and greeting one another. All of the work is done in the side chambers, so I am unable to observe it. There are so many ways to greet one another. I have been comparing greetings between species. So many different cultures and

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standards. The organization of such an event must be a monumental undertaking.”

“It is. It was all planned within three months’ time. I can’t even imagine. Nef, why don’t you tell me about yourself? I’m very curious about you.”

“As is everyone else.” Nef knelt down and faced Asmat. “What would you like to know?”

“What do you do when you aren’t fighting? What are you into?”

“I think, mostly. Or talk with Nicadzim. At times I converse with others so as not to appear rude.”

“You are very direct, aren’t you?”

“I am indeed. I cannot comprehend of another way to be.”

“It’s a positive quality in my opinion. No guessing needed.”

“That is my goal; to not appear inscrutable.”

“Are you inscrutable? I’ve just read reports, I’ve never met you, but from what I’ve read you don’t experience reality like us, uh, mortals do.”

“That is correct. I engage with reality on a different level. One more removed from temporal concerns.”

“Because you’re immortal.”

“Because I am immortal. But also I see and feel impulses you cannot properly comprehend.”

“So I’ve read. So, in truth, what does your gut tell you about this event?”

“It is a river of feelings and thoughts, a flowing torrent of chaos and order clashing for dominance ... I like it. The air here is ... stimulating.”

“That’s as good a summation as any.”

“I understand you are ... best friends with Bryluen?”

Asmat smiled. “That’s me!”

“What is it like to be her friend?”

“Huh, not sure how to answer that. She’s a good friend. She’s loyal, kind, and considerate. Very busy, always dangerous, but a good friend. You know, you’re her friend, too.”

Nef paused. “I was not aware. Should I have been?”

“Everyone in Dread Naught are friends. Just because it’s gone

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unsaid doesn't mean it's not true. I can tell she's fond of you."

"I assumed I was a comrade in arms, but had not considered myself anyone's friend. I am not ... typically friendly."

"You aren't unfriendly, just a bit more to-the-point than most. And there's nothing wrong with that."

As always, a crowd had formed of people observing Nef. Asmat looked toward the crowd, then back at Nef. "Looks like you have admirers."

"I have learned this is inevitable. They will have questions."

"Want me to shoo them away for you?"

Nef paused again. "No, they have done nothing wrong. They cannot help themselves."

"Oh, yes they can. If you don't want to be bothered, let me know."

"I ... will do so. Thank you. Navigating this is very new to me."

"You shouldn't have to answer questions if you don't want to. Just as a general rule."

"I have no objections to questions."

"Good, then all is well. But if you tire of answering them, I'll help you out of a spot."

"I do not tire, but thank you."

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Nef, Bryluen, Bel'Wa, Vort, and Nicadzim later met for dinner, as Kirby and Runner had returned early to their shared room. After eating, the rest of Dread Naught decided to retire for the night and they boarded the ferry to the pyramid containing housing for all guests.

The interior of this pyramid was warmer than the others, a functioning hotel normally reserved for those who could afford an exorbitant fee. In this case, a registered name tag was sufficient for an assigned room. Dread Naught had four neighboring rooms: one for Bryluen and Bel'Wa, one for Kirby and Runner, one for Nicadzim and Vort, and one for Nef. Nef took the stairs while the others rode the elevator to the third floor. Making their way to their rooms, Bryluen

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wryly noted the sock on Runner and Kirby's door.

The rooms were lavishly appointed spaces of soft fabric and plush cushions. A large bed was the centerpiece of each room, and there was a hot tub, a desk, and a large bathroom with an enormous shower in each. Room service soon came to launder the team's swimsuits for the morning.

Dread Naught settled down for the night, preparing for day two of the Grand Council.

In the morning, they emerged well-rested. Runner and Kirby were slightly hung over but otherwise no worse for the wear. They all proceeded together to the food pyramid for breakfast, after which Bryluen reported to meeting room 15 K'olfa alone.

The meeting room was a small space dominated by a round table with a projector in the center. Delicately embossed wood paneling characterized the room as serious and formal.

The Ly Aulth dignitary was waiting for her. She was about a head shorter than Bryluen, with purple and white plumage, a curved pale yellow beak, and golden eyes. She was clearly nervous and spoke in a rapid language consisting of repeat consonant sounds and clicking. "Thank you for meeting me."

Bryluen knew more than enough Ly Aulth Arr-Varin to converse, but she was forced to respond in English due to an inability to speak it. "The pleasure is mine. What do you need?"

"Protection. I have a data drive detailing fleet movements, army redistribution, and damning evidence of the Hyulggrayo and Le-tikaak cartels' intentions for the Liminal Stars."

"How did you get this information?"

"I have a network of contacts working secretly to funnel information that could weaken the cartels' grip. This was much larger than we anticipated. The cartels intend to mount an invasion of the Liminal Stars, while the Human and Qixing fleets are occupied by the Dreaded."

"Show me."

The Ly Aulth pulled out a small data drive and inserted it into the meeting room table. The projector lit up with a star map, with curved lines illustrating fleet movements throughout Ly Aulth space. Indeed, a sizable battlegroup was mustering near the Liminal Stars.

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“What other evidence do you have for the invasion?”

“Private communications, battle plans, deployment orders. I have two hundred pages of documentation. This has been a months-long endeavor. If you bring this data to the negotiations, the cartels will be forced to stop. As it were, it would otherwise be some time before anyone would know of the invasion. There’s plans for a communications blackout that would prevent news from getting out. By the time anyone knew better, the cartels would already have control of the most populous worlds.”

“But by exposing them now, they won’t be able to make a move without sparking a conflict.”

“Correct.”

“I’ll take this and get it to High Command. I’ll have one of my people watch you, and we’ll get you extracted at the first possible moment.”

Bryluen took the drive and dropped it into her top. “Nicadzim, are you there? I need you to watch someone for me.”

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High Command was located in the largest meeting room, located behind the throne. It was a place filled with statues, paintings, and other artistic endeavors around a great table with comfortable seats. Along with High Command and the Commandant Prime was one of the Commanders in Chief of the Gate Sentinels, two of the ministers of the Interior Guard, the T’hròstag chancellor, and representatives from Le-tikaak and Rel-ttik cartels.

“Then we agree, combined patrols along the Qixing/T’hròstag border,” The chancellor spoke in a deep melodic wheeze.

Commandant Prime Penashue tapped the table. “And clearance for Dread Naught to operate off T’hròstag intelligence in T’hròstag space.”

“Agreed.”

“Ly Aulth patrols will assist in T’hròstag space, and will not interfere with Dread Naught operations,” said the Le-tikaak cartel representative.

Asmat’s ear piece chirped. “It’s Bryluen. Contact made. Max

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priority intel. I'm coming to you."

Bryluen proceeded to the meeting chamber with the data drive in tow. She knocked lightly on the large wooden door. Asmat answered and quietly exited the room. Bryluen drew the data drive from her top and put it in Asmat's hand.

"The Le-tikaak and Hyluggrayo cartels are planning a big move on the Liminal Stars. A communication black out and a land grab for the populous systems. It would be a blood bath. All you need to prove it is right on that drive."

"Damn. I'll call for a recess and study it on my tab."

She waved the data drive at Bryluen. "Thank you."

"Of course. They asked for protection. I've got Nicadzim watching until we can extract her."

"I'll send someone right away."

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The Ly Aulth dignitary was currently in the food pyramid. They were at the council as a representative of the Mior Plakk cartel, but in truth were a freedom fighter seeking to upset the balance of power and allow a more just government to be formed for all Ly Aulth.

They were sweating bullets. The information was passed off, their job was done. Now they just had to rely on foreign assets to move them to safety. They looked around from their seated position at a table. Food rested in front of them—a type of soup—but they hadn't started to eat it yet.

As they looked around, a Ly Aulth menial servant walked past, smoothly depositing a small amount of powder into their soup. The dignitary looked back to their soup and plunged their spoon into it. Instantly, a large hairy hand stopped them.

"Poison," Nicadzim said. "Stay right here with me. A team will be coming."

A minute later, a pair of women walked up to the table. One of them reached out their hand. "Hey, I haven't seen you in forever! Come on, let's catch up! Walk with me."

The pair of CSOE agents walked off with the dignitary in tow, leading them to a private vehicle just outside the pyramid. They had

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avoided death and were now safe, to be expatriated to the Human systems out of reach of the cartels.

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Asmat returned to the meeting chamber after a short recess, plugging the drive into the table. “We have new information.”

The fleet movements populated on the holographic projection in the center of the room.

“An attempt at a consolidation of power in the Liminal Stars. An act like this could provoke outright war. Move your fleets back or we will be forced to take action.”

Silence reigned for a solid several seconds. Commandant Prime Penashue spoke up next, “This is an outrage. We will not permit the cartels to do this. Any hostility in the Liminal Stars will be met in kind. Do we have an understanding?”

The Le-tikaak representative made a nervous clicking sound. “You have no proof! We aren’t moving on the Liminal Stars!”

Asmat spoke again. “I have tons of proof. Correspondence between cartel leaders, these fleet movements, and numerous other records. We know what you’re trying to do, and it is not going to work.”

The T’hròstag chancellor chimed in, “Motion to censure the Ly Aulth delegation. Immediate trade sanctions will be enacted unless Ly Aulth forces stand down.”

“Motion supported,” said Cabdinuur.

Asmat subtly pumped her fist. “Thank you, Bryl.”

The rest of the second day passed without much incident. Dread Naught lounged about until it was evening and they could retire for the night. Kirby and Runner had gone out dancing, while Bryluen and Bel’Wa had gone back to their room early and ordered room service. Nef, Nico, and Vort spent the day together going from pyramid to pyramid while people-watching.

23. Justice and Jumping

On day three, Bryluen received an early morning message from councilperson Tarif. It read: “Assemble Dread Naught and report to the great meeting chamber at 1500 local. Must be present for orders.”

Bryluen read the message on her tab and rose from bed. “Morning, Bel’Wa. We have marching orders for this afternoon.”

Bel’Wa opened her eyes. “This afternoon? Ugh, let’s sleep in an hour.”

Bryluen smiled. “Alright, we can do that. Let me message the others.”

At that moment Bryluen’s ear piece chirped. She put it on. “Hello?”

“This is Vurkab When Steel Meets Fire, T’hròstag internal intelligence. We have reason to believe a rogue asset has warned Akk’Duun Tuqth When Dawn Becomes Day of nir imminent capture. Co-conspirators are in custody. We request your assistance in cornering Dawnbreaker before ne gets away. Ne is currently at the upper balconies in the Grand Hall. We’re watching all the exits but don’t have the manpower to close in and capture. We need an extra hand.”

Runner was awake. He had barely been able to sleep knowing today was the day. His earpiece sounded off. He picked it up off the side table. “Bryluen?”

“It’s Akk’Duun. Get up and at e’m now. I’m sending you in to

capture nem.”

“Are you serious? Be right there.”

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They met in the hall, still partially arranging their swimsuits. “Ne’s in the Grand Hall balconies. Close in, corner nem, and wait for T’hròstag intelligence to come get nem. Our contact is on channel Lamba Upsilon Delta Alpha. Understood?”

“Understood.”

Runner took off at a jog. His thoughts were rushing at a million miles an hour. He broke into a sprint, dearly wishing he had his boot lifts. He leapt over a food cart in the hall, bounced around the corner, rushed down the stairs, and put on a final burst of speed to the ferry.

The ride over to the main pyramid was interminable, though short. He exited the ferry in a rush, and quickly made his way up the nearby spiral stairs to the balconies. He slowed down now, eyeing through the crowd. There were dozens and dozens of people in the upper balconies. He eyed every T’hròstag he could see, hoping to spot Akk’Duun.

He filtered through the crowd, checking each balcony as he went, hoping Akk’Duun was on this side of the Grand Hall. He crept along, looking as easy going and carefree as possible while he did so.

He searched for five, ten, fifteen minutes. The time rolled on to half an hour spent sifting through endless faces. He hoped the exits were truly locked down, because he simply couldn’t find Akk’Duun. He proceeded up the other side of the hall, hoping for more luck.

He paused at a balcony, looking to his left and right. On his left, he finally spotted a silver-haired T’hròstag’s back foot as it exited a balcony. He pulled back and mixed into the crowd but a nearby Human recognized him.

“Hey, the Saint Runner, right?”

“Not right now, sorry. I’m a-after someone.”

Runner tried to catch a glimpse of the T’hròstag once more. He spotted another silvery limb and closed in, following them to a balcony only to see it wasn’t Akk’Duun. He cursed.

But then he got the damnedest feeling. He turned, and Akk’Duun walked directly past him. Runner followed far enough behind and with enough of a delay to not be suspicious—T’hròstag could see all around themselves, after all.

Akk’Duun turned and entered a balcony alone. The people below were a sea of color, life forms from all known space congregated into

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one place with a shared purpose. It was beautiful in its own way, and now it was the backdrop to a conversation twenty years in the making.

Runner cornered Akk'Duun, crossing his arms. He spoke for the benefit of his earpiece to T'hròstag intelligence. "This is Runner. I have him on the fourth eastern balcony."

"Agents on the way, Saint Runner."

Runner spoke loudly. "It's over, Akk'Duun."

Akk'Duun didn't have to turn, since he was technically already facing Runner due to his radial anatomy. "Not yet it isn't."

He shifted to make a break for it. Runner smoothly blocked his path. "I p-promise I am much faster than-n you are."

"What is it you want?"

"Justice. W-well, that's not true. I want to kill you, but justice will have to do."

"What do you need? I can make it happen. Just let me go."

His heart was pounding. He was filled with energy, a fire lit within his chest. "Not a c-chance in hell. Now I'm n-not going to harm you. You left an indelible scare on my life that I will never live without, but my life is not about you. It nev-ver has been. There is only one thing I'm going to get for myself out of this.

"I was thirteen years-s old. My family dead, all I knew and loved burning around me. Eyes t-tearing up from the smoke, skin singed and bleeding, I stumbled from my hom-me and saw you: dismissive and satisfied as you str-rolled up the lander ramp. In that moment, having seen the f-f-face of all that had happened, I stopped b-being afraid. I screamed one thing at you as you glanced at me. I t-told you to never forget it."

Runner took a step toward the T'hròstag. "Remember what it was I told you?"

Akk'Duun shied away from Runner and hesitated for a moment. Runner clenched his fists. "Say it, you hon-norless, degenerate bastard."

Akk'Duun quietly wheezed Runner's words from all those years ago. "Remember my face; I am Sebastien Toussaint, and I will kill you."

Runner smirked. "It's been a l-long journey here. I used to fix-xate on killing you, constantly. I t-trained my body and mind for the task of end-d-ding you. But things changed. I found ne-ew purpose, and now I've found a new family. I don't nee-ed to kill you anymore—I learned

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that recent-ly from a close friend. Your life is-s-s already forfeit, and in the end my l-life is not about ending yours. Time's up."

Two T'hròstag agents came within a minute and quite publicly hauled Akk'Duun off. Akk'Duun was staring agape at Runner as he was taken away. Runner stood blinking his eyes as Akk'Duun receded from sight. He had no words for the building feeling in his stomach. He quietly made his way back down the Grand Hall, out to the ferry, over to the housing pyramid, and to his room in silence. As he entered, Kirby was still tying on her top.

"Oh! Did you catch the son of a bitch?"

Runner nodded numbly. "It's over."

"Well there's going to be a trial and all, but ... yeah, ne's caught."

"All these years I'd d-dreamed of this. And n-now it just ... it just happened. It was so-o easy, Kirby. They came and hauled nem off. Like that, it-t's done."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I'm in shock, hon-nestly."

"I bet you are."

Runner suddenly sniffed, sat down on the bed, put his face in his hands, and began to cry uncontrollably. Kirby sat beside him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

After a couple minutes he took a deep breath. "Sto-ory over. That's it."

Kirby rubbed a hand on his back. "It's all okay now. You did it. You got nem, and ne'll get nirs."

Runner nodded, another tear trailing down his face. "I can't fucking b-believe it."

"I imagine it will take a while. Want to order room service and stay in for a bit?"

Runner nodded. "I'd like that."

"Then we'll do that. A celebration breakfast, as it were."

Runner took a great, shuddering breath. "Okay. Alright. Sounds good to me."

Around 1430 local, Bryluen got a message from Asmat for Dread Naught to report to the grand meeting chamber. She pinged everyone's ear pieces. "Show time, folks. We're gathering outside the meeting

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chamber. Let's go."

Within fifteen minutes the entire team was assembled. Bryluen knocked lightly on the door. A Ly Aulth servant opened it, and Dread Naught filed in. A pair of tactical maps were projected above the table, one a terrain map, and the other a map of a sector of space. Within was the T'hròstag chancellor, several union representatives, the entirety of High Command, Commandant Prime Penashue, Queen Ho'Xal, both Gate Sentinel Commanders in Chief, and representatives from five Ly Aulth cartels.

The T'hròstag chancellor began to speak, "This is IX-921, planet two. Here is located a terrestrial dialing system for an additional Compression Gate within the corona of the local star. With access to this Gate, we can affirmatively identify the Dreaded entry point to this galaxy. To do so, a multi-species battle fleet lead by the *Avatar of W'Solakh* Q.G.S.B. will lead an attack on IX-921. We expect a heavy Dreaded presence once our battle fleet begins Gate Dilation, as the Dreaded are monitoring Gate travel. We expect Jörmungandr to make an appearance."

Bryluen crossed her arms. "Where do we come into this?"

The Queen spoke next, "You shall be accompanying the ground forces to secure the dialing system, and then you shall take the *Atet* through the Gate to see what lies on the other side. Only your craft is stealthy enough to make the trip and survive. We shall then blockade the Gate for the foreseeable future. This will not prevent them from constructing an additional Gate elsewhere, but it will slow their advance."

Bryluen took a deep breath. "When does the offensive begin?"

Commandant Prime Penashue said, "Fleet elements will be dispatched to the rallying point in bits and peaces. We converge on IX-921 in two days' time."

"Understood. Are we required for anything else?"

Councilwoman Braynard cleared her throat. "Nothing else at this time. We have details to sort out still, but nothing that will concern you. Thank you, Dread Naught."

Bryluen took a bow, then led her team mates back into the Grand Hall. The door closed behind them quietly.

"So, you heard them. We help on the ground, then fly through the

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Gate.”

“But how will we g-get back? What if they have a ground-based dialing system on the other side?” Runner made a confused gesture.

“We can still send an energy pulse back through the Gate without dialing to signal our return, and they’ll dial it for us back home. That’s probably how the Dreaded do it. Keep one Sjorthursar in stealth mode to dial the gate,” Kirby said.

“Okay, that’s that-t problem solved. Nervous about a b-blind jump, though.”

Bryluen waved a hand. “We’ll talk about this more later. For now, let’s relax and let the council wind down.”

The rest of the day passed easily. In the evening, Dread Naught gathered the few belongings they had brought with them—little more than a change of clothes—and took a tram back to the space port. They loaded up into the *Atet*, and Kirby took Dread Naught up and away from Torva’Ang.

The watery world shrunk into the distance behind them, turning dark gray as night fell. The *Atet* received clearance from space traffic control to proceed to the Compression Gate, and soon they were journeying home.

They arrived at Raven’s Landing in the mid-afternoon. Their armor was returned to the entry corridor, and each of them changed out of their swimsuits into something more comfortable. Bel’Wa’s body art would linger for several more days, but other than that all was back to normal.

Nef and Vort met on the balcony to watch the local star set against the backdrop of the aurora. They were silent for some time, until Vort spoke.

“What is it like, being immortal?”

Nef turned and looked down at Vort. “I do not know how to answer that question. I cannot conceive of being mortal, after all.”

“Hadn’t thought of that. Do you feel like you have a purpose in life?”

“... I do. I exist to do battle with the Dreaded.”

“But aside from that. This war can’t last forever. What will you do when it’s over?”

“... I don’t know. I have not considered that, to be honest with

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you. I was created to do this. I have no other purpose. I am not like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was created for specific reason. You exist free to find your own. That is a very powerful gift and one I hope you understand.”

“You’re right, that’s important to think about. But you don’t have to feel limited yourself, you know. Your creator is gone. You are free to find purpose just as I am.”

“You truly believe that? Even though I was made with this mission ingrained into my being?”

Vort focused all three eyes on Nef. “You already find purpose outside of battle. You spend time with us, you read, you learn. You are already making a destiny for yourself.”

“... I had not thought of these things as a purpose, but I see your point. I will think on this further.”

“Good! You deserve to feel like you’ve got more to you than fighting.”

The odd couple watched the sun set and the auroras light up the sky. It was a beautiful sight, observed by two beings light years apart in so many ways, united by something as simple as the night sky.

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Thirty minutes before the jump to IX-921, a combined fleet of Human, Qixing, T’hròstag, and Ly Aulth ships assembled and prepared for Gate transmission. The noble Qixing battleship *Avatar of W’Solakh* was the designated leader of the battle fleet. Attending it was the hulking T’hròstag battleship T.I.C.B. *Pen-dur’s Fury*, the H.S.S.Dr. *Vercingetorix*, and the Ly Aulth dreadnought C.V.Dr. *Cick-ta-tok*.

Aside from this core of heavy firepower, there was an assemblage of five battle cruisers: The Human ships *Lu Bu* and *Julius*, Qixing *Il’tan’s Augury*, T’hròstag *Kar’Tahn*, and Ly Aulth *Rk-t-brak*. In addition to the battle cruisers were fourteen cruisers, twenty destroyers, and thirty frigates. This was the largest fleet ever assembled, and the only fleet to ever feature all four species at once. Long, blocky Human ships sat beside the flat, disc-like Qixing craft, the heavily armed

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hemispherical ships of the T'hròstag, and the odd double-hulled shapes of the Ly Aulth ships. Never before in history had a Human or Qixing vessel ever fought alongside a Ly Aulth vessel, nor had a Human vessel ever fought beside a T'hròstag vessel. This was a unique event, underscoring the growing threat from the Dreaded. If there were ever a force to stop them, this was it.

The fleet was arranged into six battle groups, five led by each battle cruiser, and the sixth under the *Avatar of W'Solakh* directly. The first five battle groups consisted of relatively even amounts of cruisers, destroyers, and frigates. The sixth battle group consisted of the dreadnoughts and battleships, and was intended to engage Jörmungandr directly.

Tide Lord Rey'ivthal presided from the deck of the *Avatar of W'Solakh*, with supreme command over the battle fleet. All other craft acted on haous orders and assembled according to the plan negotiated at the Grand Council. Battle group Beta, led by the *Lu Bu*, would go through the Gate first to assess enemy resistance and clear the Gate for the rest of the battle groups. It was a risky endeavor, but a necessary one. If the Dreaded were waiting on the other side, it would be bloody to get the fleet through. The entire fleet had to pass through an area ten kilometers across, beyond close range, before being able to scatter. The biggest part of the battle plan detailed the ways and order in which each fleet element would exit the Gate and rearrange themselves. It was to be a balletic display, and required excellent organization and control to succeed.

The Tide Lord was up to the task. If the most powerful fleet ever assembled couldn't handle passing through a Gate, there were larger problems at hand.

After the six battle groups were through, a train of transport ships was to cross the threshold and make for the second planet. The *Atet* was part of this group, which was to sprint past the battle and make landfall. The transport group was hauling over twenty thousand soldiers from all four species. This was nearly seven thousand Astral Marines, four thousand Gate Sentinels, six thousand T'hròstag Heavy legionaries, and three thousand Ly Aulth light infantry.

The Astral Marines would serve as the mainstay of the center of the battle line, while the Gate Sentinels and legionaries pushed up on the

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flanks. The Ly Aulth forces would remain in reserve to protect and support the vehicle column, consisting of eight dozen Marine tanks one hundred fifty Qixing lancers, forty five T'hròstag artillery pieces, and two Ly Aulth colossi with twenty-six automated fire support vehicles.

The battle plan prevented Ly Aulth from being on the front line, in case drawing near the dialing system caused them to behave strangely. There was no way to accurately predict the strength of Dreaded forces on the ground, as it would depend on how strongly the fleet was embattled. If there was any room for the Dreaded to breathe, they could assuredly offload an enormous quantity of ground forces. If the plan went as intended, that wouldn't be the case.

When the hour arrived, each battle group was assembled at Gate Sagan in formation. There would be a thirty second gap between each battle group passing through.

Kirby was tense in the seat of the *Atet*. She never relished flying through a battle, and now this was the third time in a couple month's period. She cracked her neck and breathed out hard.

Bryluen looked over at her. "Nervous?"

Kirby nodded. "You know it."

"We'll be on solid ground soon enough. Just get us there."

"Just get us there. That's the fuckin' problem. I don't like this. So many ships in such a small period."

"It's all been planned out. Try to have a little faith." Bryluen smiled. She was tense as well. Not just for the flight in, but for the final step of the plan: The *Atet* passing through the far Gate. They had no idea what to expect, and she hated that thought. She meticulously planned almost everything in her life, and missions were no exception. She didn't like the idea of going in blind, but it was a logical step to take. They needed answers.

Tide Lord Rey'ivthal gave the signal to begin the assault. The first battle group translated through the Gate. There was silence for several seconds, then a flurry of confirmations of Sjorthursar contacts near the second planet in system IX-921.

The first battle group began exchanging distant shots with the Sjorthursars, detecting an initial wave fifteen strong. As the second battle group proceeded through the Gate the Sjorthursar count was up to twenty-five. With the third battle group, thirty-seven. With the fourth

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group the number reached forty-eight, and with the fifth group the count topped out at sixty-two. The allied fleet had the numbers advantage so far.

The *Avatar of W'Solakh* and its battle group crossed the threshold of the Gate, and signaled for the transports to follow. Kirby guided the *Atet* forward as the Gate was exchanged once more. They breached the Compression Phenomenon and were greeted by dozens of voices calling out commands and status reports.

The allied fleet had just enough time to scatter before the Sjorthursars were in effective range. They had spread to a stellar distance of tens of thousands of kilometers apart, each battle group taking a different sector of space. As the fleets reached the effective range of their weapons, orders to fire resounded across the shared comms.

An almighty storm of lasers, cannon shells, missiles, drones, darts, plasma bolts, and particle beams tore across the void. Six Sjorthursars and four frigates perished in the opening salvo alone.

Battle group Alpha, the group containing the battleships and dreadnoughts, proceeded to the center of the melee where their numerous weapon mounts could wreak havoc on the enemy formation. Jörmungandr had yet to appear, but it was expected to reinforce the Sjorthursar swarm sooner rather than later.

Alarms blared inside the *Atet*, warning of nearby—in stellar terms—projectiles and laser beams. The holographic display showed the erratic movements of the dozens of vessels vying for dominance. It was chaotic and obscenely violent, with ships twirling into pieces and dancing with their foes in every part of the battlefield. Kirby held close to the nearest transport, white-knuckled and gritting her teeth.

The fleet had already drawn the full attention of the Dreaded forces—whatever ground units had been deployed weren't going to receive reinforcements while the Sjorthursars were embattled.

Kirby struggled to keep the *Atet* going slow enough to stick with the transports. It would be a good fifteen minutes before they would be entering the atmosphere.

Already some front line ships were withdrawing for emergency repairs, their surfaces teeming with drones and workers struggling to fix system damage and clear debris from weapon mounts. This cycle of

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craft would continue throughout the battle, however long it would last. Most starship battles were not to the death; this was to be a major exception. A loss here in IX-921 would be devastating for the allied forces. As it was, it would take months for repairs to be completed on all the involved craft. They had to kill Jörmungandr to make the fight worth it.

Several frigates were adjudicated to escort duty, warding Sjorthursars away from the ponderous transport train. Kirby watched as one of the frigates took a blow from a Dreaded dart that sent it spinning away. It's attitude thrusters fired madly to cancel out the spin, and it's weapons compensated and still fired when facing the enemy. It was a desperate sight.

"Fuck this, fuck this, fuuuuck this," Kirby said under her breath.

The *Lu Bu*'s aft laser array carved the heart out of a Sjorthursar merely eighteen-thousand kilometers away. A cannon barrage sailed past the venerable ship as it shifted course and returned fire with cannons of its own. It unleashed a particle beam from a prow mount, dissolving another Sjorthursar. Dozens of point defense turrets whipped shrapnel and micro-lasers into the void as black dust approached and began to form Dreaded on the ship's surface. They clawed at the mighty hull, attempting to find access to the inside. The ship would remain impregnable so long as it's hull wasn't cracked open. Given the size of the battle, however, it was doubtful they would remain unscathed. The Marines aboard the ship moved to ready positions, their armor magnetically clamping them to the floor.

The craft shook slightly as a dart rebounded from the armor, leaving an ugly welt on the exterior layers of the *Lu Bu*. The Sjorthursars were highly coordinated, mostly focusing fire on individual ships in groups instead of simply firing at the nearest target. It was an effective strategy, disabling individual craft instead of spreading the damage around. This tactic had already claimed a cruiser and several more frigates.

The first transport hit the upper atmosphere of the second planet and began its violent descent. Kirby drew the *Atet* alongside it and dived. Fire howled around the prow of the ship as they tore downward. She was glad to be somewhere with air, even if it wasn't breathable.

"Well that's the easy part done," Bryluen noted.

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Kirby smiled. "At least we have some control over this part."

Each transport followed in turn. They were to set down on a wide plateau about a kilometer and a half from the dialing system. From the air the Dreaded force was visible, a mass of at least thirty thousand strong surrounding the dialing platform, and they rushed toward the landing zone in a swarm of raw aggression.

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The first transport settled down and vomited forth its contents. Several hundred Marines rushed down the ramp in full gear, followed by a number of tanks. The transports all set down in turn, unleashing mass infantry and vehicles. The Marines established a front line and took cover, preparing to counter the enemy charge. The Gate Sentinels made landfall to the left flank, then the T'hròstag on the right. The Ly Aulth followed behind with the main mass of the vehicular column, including two colossi. The Ly Aulth colossi were massive tracked vehicles brimming with large scale weapon mounts. Their sheer size and heavy armor plating made them unbelievably fearsome in a firefight, with impressive range and the ability to fire in all directions.

Dread Naught was already at the front. Bryluen had her rotary cannon at hand, as well as her trusty pistol and whip. Runner had his ax, tri-pistols, and adjustable plasma cannon. He had it set to an explosive burst as this was no time for subtlety. Nicadzim had his honeycomb launcher out and ready. Bel'Wa had her shield propped up for protection and prepared to use her shield cannon and arm cannon both - her arm cannon loaded with explosive rounds. Vort had taken flight to accompany the swarm of Qixing lancers overhead, while Nef and Kirby were at each side of their infantry compatriots. Kirby had deployed the Imhullu, with all her impressive weapon mounts prepared for instructions.

The terrain was craggy, providing ample cover for the infantry to use as they advanced. The T'hròstag artillery had already begun to fire,

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arcing shells and missiles over the heads of their allies. Return fire came from a battery of Tauriz deep behind Dreaded lines. Heavy projectiles burst among the infantry, devastating ranks and scattering platoons.

The black wave surmounted a hill a quarter kilometer away. The lancers darted overhead to harass the front line, Vort alongside them. Yellow Omukade bolts flew up at them, as well as acidic projectiles from a large number of Kukulkan above the ground forces. Missile batteries lent their support to down the Kukulkans, while the Lancers dodged about and rained down fire as best they could without getting hit.

As one, the infantry began to fire. Bullets, shot, coil guns, plasma blasts, laser beams, shoulder-mounted rockets, and micro-explosive rounds thundered from twenty-thousand guns. The sound was awe-inspiring, a storm of raw violence whipped forth into the Dreaded.

The first ranks of Dreaded died quickly, blasted to pieces so thoroughly they barely felt it. The next rank fell a step further. The third rank further than that. Even against such firepower they were advancing, such was their ferocity and numbers.

The Dreaded began to fire back. Fireballs in their hundreds slapped against berms and hillsides, or found their targets and melted armor plate. The volume of fire soon matched that of the allied infantry. The front lines found themselves pinned down between the fireballs and artillery strikes.

Bryluen ducked as another fireball sailed her way. It impacted in a flare of energy where her face had been a moment earlier. Runner was to her right, steadily picking off groups with his plasma cannon. Nicadzim, located to Bryluen's left, unleashed volley after volley of shard missiles from his shoulder-mounted construct. Kirby's multiple gun mounts howled angrily, unleashing a prodigious number of bullets and rockets into the horde. Vort careened overhead, unleashing blast after blast. Nef stood to Dread Naught's left, firing devastating energy discs from their visor. They were in a crouched position, the occasional fireball flaring against their armor. There was no art or grace here, only endless firing into an endless storm.

"God damn, this is going to be a massacre if they reach us like this."

She brought up comms and addressed the commander of the

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ground forces, a T'hròstag Legatus named Ulthan Night's Whimsy. "Legatus, the front line is suppressed. We cannot move under these conditions."

"Affirmative," came the immediate response. "The Legionaries will press from the side with the armored column. We have a flanking position. Hold fast."

Behind the lines, the artillery thundered loudly. Rockets, shells, and arced energetic projectiles rained down Hell on the Dreaded. Gradually the Dreaded were approaching the center of the line, which would surely buckle under the pressure.

Bryluen then noticed a slight shift. Some of the Dreaded were moving to her right, changing course to address a new challenge. On the right flank, numerous tanks advanced on the enemy, sponson weapons and main cannons blazing. Before them marched the T'hròstag Legionaries. Each Legionary was a heavily armored soldier equipped with a melee weapon and a two-handed ranged weapon. In each squad one member bore a three-handed heavy weapon system, granting the squad anti-vehicle capabilities. The T'hròstag fired jagged shot and bullets from their weapons, made to inflict grievous wounds at short range. The effect was immediate: the Dreaded could not ignore the thousands of Legionaries firing upon them from the side. With tank support, they were able to draw off enough enemies to grant the Marines reprieve.

Regardless, a large portion of the Dreaded force was destined to reach Marine lines and orders rang out to prepare for close combat. Marines equipped ripsaws, unsheathed gauntlet blades, and attached punch daggers. The Gate Sentinels at the left of the formation signaled a charge into the left flank, blades and sidearms drawn and ready. The Ly Aulth colossi fired overhead at target points marked by the Lancers. One of the Tauriz received a trio of large caliber shells through its carapace, groaning loudly as it collapsed. The combination of reduced artillery bombardment and lessened pressure from the front line freed the Marines to move up.

As one, thousands of Marines stood and dashed to the next available piece of cover. Shot cannons, rocket launchers, and beam cannons provided covering fire as the assault rifle and shotgun Marines dashed forward. Dread Naught remained at the very front, moving from

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the berm they had been behind to a sharp rock formation jutting from the earth. They were now a mere thirty meters from the Dreaded, receiving intense fire and returning it in equal measure. A Marine near Nef staggered back as an En-Rabisu's fireball struck them in the chest, knocking them off their feet.

To the right, Kirby took a hit to the Imhullu's frame, but her armor held. An Aeshma emerged from the rear lines, roaring terribly as it charged straight for Dread Naught. Nef stood straight and Kirby redirected all her turrets and rotary cannons to target the horrible beast.

As it advanced, a great explosion struck its chest. One of the colossi had taken interest in it, and struck it three more times with great balls of plasma. The beast slowed and fell to one knee, then fell over dead as a shell passed through its head.

Three Kukulkans swept low, bombarding the front edge of the Marine formation. Bryluen ducked as an acidic projectile struck nearby, burning a gouge into the dirt. Several lancers and Vort were pursuing close behind, weapons blazing.

The plan was to get the flank pressure on the Dreaded hard enough to force them on the back foot. Once the pressure relented, the Marines would charge in and wipe the Dreaded out in close combat with fire support from the vehicles. This couldn't be done until the Tauriz and Kukulkan were dealt with, otherwise they would be out in the open and exposed to fire. Losses would be tremendous.

Bryluen spoke on the team channel. "Vort, I need you to mark the Tauriz for the colossi. We need them down yesterday."

"YES, MA'AM," Vort responded.

He shifted course from pursuing the Kukulkan by bending his wings. He rapidly changed direction and propelled himself toward the Dreaded rear lines. Fireballs and bolts raked up at him from below, so he swung side to side as he flew. There were five remaining Tauriz scattered among the horde. He pinged the first one, swung about to ping the second, marked the third Tauriz in turn, then the fourth, and with a turn back toward allied lines he marked the fifth.

The colossis' missile launchers roared as they unleashed their massive payload. The first Tauriz died in a conflagration of detonating warheads. Satisfied the rest would be dealt with, Vort, resumed chasing a Kukulkan. They were faster than him, but less spry. He could

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outmaneuver them when they came about for a ground strike. As he flew he set on an intercept course with one Kukulkan currently bombarding the T'hròstag legionaries trying to advance past the safety of the tanks.

Vort watched one of the tanks detonate into a fireball as a Tauriz shell impacted it's turret. Luckily that particular issue was being handled by the colossi and artillery pieces. Behind him, a lancer exploded and hurtled its occupant to oblivion as an Omukade struck home. Vort took the hint and pulled back toward allied lines to avoid being shot down too easily. He would at least make them work for it.

The Qixing charge on the left flank had received a hefty countercharge from the Dreaded forces, but as a result the Marines were able to focus their fire on larger threats rather than having to purely shoot the nearest part of the horde. On the right, the T'hròstag pressed in further, shoving the Dreaded lines back away from them due to support from the tanks. The Tauriz, now all eliminated, had prevented an advance but with them gone the infantry was in a much better position. Regardless, the fighting was hard, and another two Aeshma assaulted the T'hròstag vanguard. The tanks focused their fire on them, but not before they had reaped a toll among the T'hròstag infantry.

The lancers were being forced back by steadily increasing Omukade firepower. They had lost thirty lancers so far, and the number was rising steadily. The lancers pulled back over allied lines to minimize the damage, but were still being preyed upon by the Kukulkans. Anti-air missile batteries fended off the flying Dreaded as best they could. Unfortunately the Omukade were short enough to remain hidden in the horde, with any painted targets from the Lancers being a best guess. The artillery dutifully bombarded every given target, but the firepower of the Omukades didn't seem to lessen. This would be a bloody day for the air forces no matter how it was cut.

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The space battle was grinding on. Two cruisers, six destroyers, and twelve frigates had been lost so far. The Dreaded were being pushed back at a great cost, but the allied fleet held the advantage. The Tide Lord kept the formations tight and fire control coordinated to maximize the fleet's various elements and their ability to cover for one another.

24. Coordination and Close Combat

Smaller ships were cycled out of combat when targeted by multiple Sjorthursars, with the bigger ships moving in to shield them. The frigates were relegated to fire support for the destroyers and cruisers to form fire teams more able to combat the Dreaded's own focus-firing tactic.

An alarm went off on the deck of the *Avatar of W'Solakh*. A new Compression Phenomenon, a big one, had appeared. Soon after, confirmation arrived from a distant scanning drone - Jörmungandr had arrived. It rapidly traveled from the Gate to distant range and made itself known with a volley of plasma bolts and laser beams that claimed a destroyer. Moving in toward the main mass of the battle, Jörmungandr engaged several craft at once with its numerous weapons. It rapidly targeted the biggest craft, and began a vicious duel with the *Avatar of W'Solakh* and *Pen-dur's Fury*. The two battleships reassigned their over eighty weapon mounts to focus entirely on Jörmungandr. The two dreadnoughts, *Vercingetorix* and *Cick-ta-tok* moved in to support the battleships. The team of four immediately scored several successful hits against Jörmungandr, disabling several of its numerous weapons.

A return volley struck the *Pen-dur's Fury*, shearing several weapon mounts from the surface of the craft and cracking its armor. The entire ship shuddered with the impact, but stood strong and returned fire. A great particle beam struck the *Vercingetorix*, damaging one of its engines in a wave of dissolving energy.

This left the rest of the battle without the support of the fleet's largest craft. To slay Jörmungandr would take focus, but the battle was hard-pressed elsewhere. The battle cruisers moved in toward the heart of their assigned sectors of space, using their own heavy weaponry to support the destroyers and frigates doing the majority of the grunt work. Sectors two and four were heavily embattled and beginning to lose more and more vessels, while sector three was mostly empty, with the Sjorthursars in that sector being picked off one by one. Tide Lord Rey'ivthal gave the order for sector three's craft to move to sectors two and four, while sector one was re-established further into the fray. The battle was reaching a late stage where almost all ships were damaged and suffering from various problems. There was no available reinforcements, as three concurrent Dreaded attacks were occurring across inhabited space at that very moment. The thought that this wasn't

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the Dreaded's whole fleet was not a detail that went missed by the top brass. The full number of Sjorthursars could be immense. The truth lay beyond the far Gate.

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The signal for the Marines to advance went out across comms. Joining the Qixing, the Marines charged into close combat. The Dreaded were on the back foot: without their artillery they were vulnerable to a mass charge, and the numbers of combatants were close enough that the allied forces could win. It would likely be bloody, but they had to claim the dialing platform, and the best way to do that was to push the Dreaded off of it.

Bryluen lead Dread Naught into the fray, wielding her pistol and whip. Runner accelerated ahead of her with his ax held high, while Nico charged up on the other side with his frosty flywheel at the ready. Kirby loped forward in her exo-frame, firing all weapons and bracing her fists for close combat. Nef's long legs carried them ahead into battle with their khopesh at the ready. Bel'Wa held her shield up, firing shot after shot from her shield cannon and readying her long blade for blood.

The Dreaded were just as eager to enter close combat. A group of Gugalannas broke from the formation and charged Dread Naught. Two of them immediately fell to Kirby's plasma guns, then a third to an energy disc from Nef's visor. Bryluen was still not sure if the helmet had the capacity to discharge energy, or if it was Nef's eyes. Neither would be surprising at this point.

Bryluen slid on her knees and lashed her whip out to her side, taking the legs off one of the Gugalannas as it misjudged its charge and rushed past. She stood and shot another through the eye, then watched as Nico buried his flywheel deep in the face of another. Runner leapt over one's head, dragging his ax along its spine. It collapsed without another sound.

The team had come a very long way since they had been together. Their skills were sharp, their talents honed and mastered. From that first combat on Pisistratus they had all grown closer and learned to work together intimately. She was proud of them all, and knew they would carry the allied forces to victory in this battle.

24. Coordination and Close Combat

The Marines howled as they joined Dread Naught, firing point-blank shotguns and carving in with rip-saws and punch blades. The sound of the battle changed as the melee began, from constant thundering explosions to the muffled booms of shotguns and the sounds of tearing flesh.

All was chaos and blood. Bryluen could see the holo-banners of the Qixing to their left, and the bigger T'hròstag legionaries could be seen towering over Rabisus to the right. Heavy firepower fell ahead of them as the Dreaded rearguard were bombarded by the numerous T'hròstag artillery pieces. The tanks supporting the legionaries had moved on to assault the rear as well, so as to be out of the way of the melee. The battle was going well, but this fight would be a matter of attrition.

Bryluen shot an En-Rabisu three times in the face. It folded over like clean laundry, and she next drew her attention to a gaggle of Rabisus headed straight for her. She dialed her whip to its max length and lashed out, halving them before they could so much as squawk.

Next to her, Runner wielded his ax with unnatural precision and grace. He was a dynamo, flipping over enemies and twirling with his blade, dissolving flesh and cleaving limbs like a master butcher. Runner smiled much more now than he used to. He'd had a direly serious streak as a vigilante, and it had taken him some time to acclimate to a team environment. Now he was confident, proud, and energetic, as well as a ridiculously skilled combatant.

Nef was, as always, a terrifying opponent, wading through lesser Dreaded with disdain. They arced their sword in great, reaping swings accentuated by blasts from their visor. Bryluen briefly watched as Nef made a figure-eight motion to cut all four limbs off an Ur-Rabisu before head-butting it to the ground. Bryluen had taken some time to get a read off of Nef. She was suspicious of the deity at first, but had grown to trust them both on and off the battlefield. They were certainly a great ally in combat, but moreover they were an interesting conversationalist.

Kirby was raging among the melee, using her great bladed fists to spear individual Dreaded while her plasma mounts auto-acquired nearby targets and rained energy down on everything within reach. The Imhullu truly upped the ante of what Kirby was capable of. Like Runner, she had come a long way since being recruited to join Dread Naught.

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Her relationship with Runner had revitalized her, and helped her grow as a person. She was much more hopeful and glowing than ever before, and had only become tougher and more determined.

Vort swept low and vanished a swarm of Gugalannas with a rush of blue flame. He pulled back up into the air, dodging up and down to avoid fire from the Omukades as he came around for another pass. Vort had matured considerably with Dread Naught. He was always reliable and cheerful, but recent events had hurt him deeply. It was a credit to his resolve and personality that he remained so loyal and dedicated. Vort was kind and empathetic, and had so much heart that he could fight for the future of another species as hard as his own.

Nicadzim swept his flywheel through a group of Rabisus, then switched to his baton and struck an En-Rabisu upside the head. It twitched and bounced away as its head was pulped by multiple hits. Nicadzim switched back to his flywheel and continued to reap a tally among the smaller Dreaded. Nicadzim had grown in power during his tenure with Dread Naught, and Brylueen imagined he would continue to do so. As a person, Nicadzim was less suspicious of others, and had rapidly shown himself to be warm and caring. His future was not written in stone, however, and Brylueen wondered where life would take him. He was in flux, a collection of possibility.

Bel'Wa kept her shield up and firing, darting her blade around to fend off smaller Dreaded or cleave limbs from larger ones. Every once in a while she raised her arm and fired an explosive round when she had the space for it. She was entrancing, dancing about with her shining blade like she was born to do so. Bel'Wa. What more could Brylueen say about her? They had never been closer, and Bel'Wa's English had improved ten-fold. Brylueen loved her deeply, and could not be any more thankful for being able to live with her. It had been an enormous change in Brylueen's life to have the woman she loved on hand, but a welcome one.

As for herself? Brylueen had become much more understanding and patient with others now that she didn't live alone. It was a good change, and she found comfort in her ability to do so at her age. In this unusual group she was learning everyday more about being Human.

So it was that Dread Naught held the line against the Dreaded.

Vigilance, Part Two

The *Vercingetorix* spun away, bleeding metal and air as it listed. The latest salvo had crashed through layers of hardened alloy and impact-absorptive padding. The *Sjorthursars* had been wrangled down to twenty, but the fleet had suffered dearly. Five cruisers were lost and six badly damaged. Eight destroyers were down, with all the others damaged to one degree or another. Seventeen frigates had met their end, but still the battle raged on.

If it were just the *Sjorthursars* the battle would be coming to its end, but *Jörmungandr* still lived. The *Avatar of W'Solakh* had lost fifteen weapon mounts and one engine. The *Pen'dur's Fury* had lost half its lateral thrusters and eighteen weapon mounts. The two dreadnoughts had suffered heavy damage to their hulls and weapon systems, and the *Vercingetorix* only had intermittent comms.

Jörmungandr was not uninjured, however. It was bleeding vast quantities of black powder into space, and had lost at least thirty weapons—though it had an estimated count of one-hundred-fifty. A great particle beam from the *Avatar of W'Solakh* struck home, and a miracle occurred: *Jörmungandr* began to turn away.

The Tide Lord laughed bitterly. “Battle group Alpha, move in pursuit! This day does not end until that thing is dead!”

Jörmungandr turned around toward the Gate, eager to survive its encounter. The dreadnoughts were quick enough to intercept it and

pressure it to turn back by leading its course with their siege arrays. The abusive firepower seemed to confuse Jörmungandr, causing its path to waver as it considered changing course. It slowed down. The two battleships immediately targeted the same wounded section of Jörmungandr's main mass and focused all their weapons on that point.

Their cannons thundered, lasers fired, plasma batteries unleashed dozens of bolts, missiles sailed outward, and drone attack ships closed in. Jörmungandr twisted and thrashed as the shots struck home. It stopped accelerating and seemed to howl into the nothingness as it came apart, tearing in half as the heavy fire finally shredded it. Instantly, all the Sjorthursars began to cut and run, and the allied fleet moved in pursuit. A miracle had occurred.

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Bryluen ducked as the En-Rabisu swung for her, then counter-attacked with her whip. She claimed the En-Rabisu's legs and finished it with her pistol. She quickly swung her whip back in the other direction as a Gugalanna made for her, cutting off its legs. Cutting off legs had been a running theme of the melee, as it was the best way to keep a clear area around herself.

Runner leapt upward, slicing his ax into an Ur-Rabisu's face before bouncing out of its reach. It roared and swung at him, but he was a phantom. He dodged and weaved like a boxer, lashing out with his ax at any part of the Ur-Rabisu that got close. He pinged Nicadzim, who blinked next to the Ur-Rabisu and swung his flywheel into the back of its knee. It fell down, and Runner finished it with three heavy ax blows to its neck. He waved to Nicadzim and turned to the next opponent.

The Marines had pushed the Dreaded back a considerable distance, paying for that progress in lives. Losses were substantial, but the battle was being won. The Qixing charge had been robbed of its momentum and devolved into a slog, while the T'hròstag had advanced to within sight of the dialing platform.

Dread Naught continued fighting the remains of the horde of Dreaded. Kirby punched an Ur-Rabisu in the face as her plasma emplacements traced fire across its body. It rallied and clawed at her, damaging a support on her exo frame. The Imhullu held, however, and Kirby's return strike put it down with a vicious stab to the chest. She roared in triumph and turned to face down another Ur-Rabisu.

The terrible sound of an Aeshma roar came from the left, where Nef was located. Nef squared up with the attacker, and rushed in. The Aeshma struck them with its tendrils, causing them to roll to one side. Regaining their feet, Nef chopped off the Aeshma's left cluster of

tendrils and tried to stay at it's disarmed side, dealing blow after blow to its body. They found an opening and stabbed into the beast's chest. It twisted, grabbed Nef with its other tendrils, and tried to pick them up, finding them to be much heavier than they appeared. Nef fired an energy disc into its face, causing it to drop them. They pulled their khopesh from the Aeshma's chest and summarily sliced into its head. Its body sagged and folded in on itself as it died.

Bryluen received word: The T'hròstag had reached the dialing platform. It only required a rod to activate, a rod which lay with one of the rear Marine squads. Only a minute later, Bryluen received word that the rod had been destroyed during the artillery bombardment. She cursed. Their mission may be delayed.

Dread Naught pushed forward, and soon found themselves face to face with the platform. The Qixing had rallied and pushed off the left flank, while the Legionaries had sustained their assault and slaughtered the right flank. Though some fighting was still occurring on the periphery of the formation, the battle was won.

Being near the dialing system was awful. It felt deeply wrong, as bad as the Stone discovered at Gru'Thiall, or even worse. As the last Dreaded were hunted down, Bryluen and Bel'Wa climbed onto the platform.

Bel'Wa knelt down to take a look at the locking mechanism, then released a small gasp.

“What is it, Bel'Wa?”

Bel'Wa reverently produced the rod Nicadzim had given her during Brightstar, and slotted it into the locking mechanism. It fit perfectly. She heaved the lever over, and the runes on the dialing system lit up in response. Nicadzim's powers had proven useful once again.

Kirby took Dread Naught and the *Atet* up and out to the Gate in short order. It, too, was constructed of a ceaselessly dark material, but otherwise was recognizably a Compression Gate. Kirby brought the *Atet* to the threshold, and signaled readiness. The Gate was dialed, and a Compression Phenomenon opened up ahead of them.

They passed through the Gate into a dark, starless expanse. They were beyond the edge of the galaxy, where all life and light stopped cold for thousands of light years. They were alone as the Compression Phenomenon closed behind them.

This was the furthest a Human ship had ever gone from Earth. The Milky Way lay behind them in all its splendor, but facing forward there was nothing but distant galaxies. The stark emptiness of their surroundings was troubling on a primal level. This was Dark Space, the majority of creation, where nothing existed and nothing ever would exist. Massive galaxies were rendered as scant lights here, distant and small.

Kirby began a scan to detect any objects in the stellar vicinity. The secret of what lay beyond the Gate, the origin of the Dreaded, was hidden somewhere within that empty space.

About the Author

Dylan Wayne Sanchez is a lifetime nerd with a long list of conquered books. Holding a degree in Classic Studies, and thus familiarity with Greco-Roman narrative structures, he has written on topics from Superman to Warhammer 40k.

Dylan has been a sci-fi junkie ever since his mother read him the John Carter of Mars series at age four, and hasn't slowed down yet. He lives in St. Louis, Missouri with his wife. She is his muse, and spends far too much of her time trying to keep him alive. Follow Dylan on Facebook as Author Dylan Sanchez, and on Twitter as @CaptainVentris.