

# **The Shadow Among the Stars**

**Book One of the Dread Naught Trilogy**

**By Dylan Sanchez**

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*To the lost, the forgotten, and the oppressed. You are heard, you are loved, and you are important. May you find some small measure of solace in the knowledge that not only will Humanity one day overcome the terrible crimes of our past and present, but that your every effort brings that day closer.*

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*To my wife, the best and funniest woman on the planet. You are without qualification the greatest part of my life, and sharing my existence with you on this Earth is the best thing I will ever be blessed enough to experience. Without your insistent belief in me, this book would simply not have happened. I love you with all of my heart.*

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## A Fraught Future

*More than a century ago, Humanity launched from its Terran cradle and joined the greater galactic community. Humans spread across the stars in leaps and bounds, absorbing every wonder and discovery with the eagerness of bright-eyed children. Greed and malice persisted as always in the hearts of the powerful but, in comparison with past ages, Humankind found itself in the midst of a civilization-wide renaissance.*

*The population and resource woes of Earth had all but vanished. Colonial expeditions and scientific invention wrought better forms of energy and new methods of providing for the Human race. Much of the loss and damage dealt to the venerable planet from internecine conflicts and environmental devastation had been restored.*

*Alien delegations and trade ships began to travel through the Compressed-Space Gate Network into Sol, and a close alliance had been formed with the neighboring Qixing Commonwealth. Though tensions with the strong-willed T'hròstag Empire and temperamental Ly Aulth Stellar Confederacy continued, most Human worlds lived in peace and prosperity.*

*The universe had become more wondrous and amazing with each passing year, until a shadow began to stir among the stars ...*



# **The Shadow Among The Stars**

## **1. The Operative and the Opposition**

**\*\*\* MAYDAY \*\*\***

Time: 0409 UTC; Imminent Danger/Hostility

Response per CSOE Protocol 142.1.5  
Action Approved by Councilwoman Braynard

Condensed abstract follows. Full details attached.

The source of this distress call is a remote laboratory belonging to the United Astro-Spatial Combine, a research institute dedicated to furthering the study of dimensional phenomenon such as the Compressed-Space gates and other more theoretical technologies. Emphasis in this abstract has been placed on the more alarming details of the situation.

Thirty-six minutes from the initial emergency transmission an unidentified contact registered on station radar from less than six

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-thousand kilometers—as if it the contact had simply not existed until a startlingly close distance. The signal—failing to respond to transmissions—bore the apparent mass of a decent-sized craft, or perhaps a cluster of many smaller craft. The small garrison posted to the station went on high alert, locked down the station bulkheads, and prepared for engagement. Warning shots from the station’s cannons failed to dissuade the signal as it neared.

Surviving witnesses report seeing stars in the direction of the signal being blotted out as something passed in front of them. By the time the signal reached the surface of the complex and enveloped it, the personnel of the facility had retreated from an observational position. The first visual confirmation of the interlopers occurred after repeated impacts and weapon signatures began to breach the outer bulkheads.

The Marine garrison took a compact formation defending the approach to the central panic room where the station’s researchers are still sequestered. The men and women of the Astral Marines fought against a seemingly numberless, unidentified foe. After roughly an hour, the assault slackened and then ceased altogether. Within minutes the stellar signal withdrew and vanished from sensors at the same distance it had initially appeared, and no sign of it has yet been detected. Remaining functional security feeds reveal that some of the interlopers remain within the facility. According to eye-witness reports and station sensor data, only a single Marine remains alive.

A Marine escort is en route to accompany you. Eliminate all remaining hostile life forms, re-secure the station, and assess the nature of this threat.

Integrity and Strength,  
Lucinda Braynard

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Four hours from the laboratory’s first Mayday, a bloated, scowling mass of dense armor plates entered the planetary system. The vessel was a Hermes Mass-conveyor sent at the behest of the Colonial Special Operations Executive, a high-level organization tasked with

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helping ensure the security of Human-held space against all manner of threats through diplomatic, logistical, and occasionally military or subversive means. The bulky conveyor craft arrived at speed through the Compression-Gate that lay beyond the orbit of the fifth planet. As its massive Drive Array spun down, the Hermes released a small lifter from among its dozens of empty docking points. The small, needle-like craft darted in toward the besieged facility, located on a moon of the second planet.

The Astral Marines were the finest military force Humanity had ever created; they were a rigidly disciplined and stout-hearted Corps of incredible bravery and sublime skill at arms. The twenty Marines aboard the lifter were clad in the Corps' standard issue pale green combat armor, created from a protective scheme designed by engineers and perfected by artists. The outer, absorptive layer of their breastplates were molded to imitate the shape of their bodies and musculature, while beneath the customized exterior was a rigid, unisex armor plate. Spreading from the torso was a set of full-coverage plating printed to follow the contours of each soldiers' limbs. Their gauntlets were reinforced with external ribbing, and a hydraulic punch plate over each knuckle provided extra force in close combat. The Marines' feet were housed within heavy magnetizing boots, ensuring they maintained control in combat during changing gravitic conditions. The overall thickness of the armor made each soldier appear to be a substantially larger, more intimidating version of themselves, which only helped to enforce the fantastic stories told of the Astral Marines.

In contrast with the more subtly organic design of the rest of the armor, the famous helmet of the Astral Marine Corps was a harshly industrial construct with a thick, oblong visor. The visor culminated in an imposing re-breather which gave each Marine the snarling visage of a fierce, metallic beast. Environmental and communications equipment were contained within a square, armored crest on top.

The entirety of the squadron aboard the lifter sat in silent deference to the unique individual among them. The VIP sat at the halfway point of the lifters' disembarkation hold. Her glossy bronze armor bore blue ambassadorial striping along its seams, and was slimmer than that of the Marines. Several unidentified devices were attached to the VIP's armored waist band, and lighting mounts were

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attached on either side of her collar. The VIP's helm was smoothly curved and bore a trio of rounded crests containing various monitoring, scanning, and communication equipment on the back of the head. The plating's imitative anatomy showed the VIP to be a woman of average height with strong shoulders and hips, stocky limbs, and honed musculature. Her posture was professional but relaxed, her presence calming and assertive. She was performing a final review of her mission particulars on the inner surface of her visor and, as the pilot calmly announced final approach, the VIP smoothly disengaged her harness, stood, and removed her helmet in one motion.

She was well past middle age by Terran standards, with a deep caramel skin tone. Smile lines and crow's feet adorned a storied face rich in the type of timeless beauty achieved only through natural grace and the experiences of a life well-lived. Her short hair was an ever-so-slightly unruly spread of indecisive dusty browns thoroughly adorned with silver flourishes. Full eyebrows accented eyes the color and richness of fertile soil in whose depths could be found wisdom, temperance, and an eternal vigor. Now, as in all times of risk and danger, her pale lips seemed to barely conceal a coy smile. The VIP was Bryluen Branok, a Knight of the Order of Titan and the single most decorated Operative the Colonial Special Operations Executive had ever seen. More legend than woman, Bryluen was more practical and grounded than her numerous titles may suggest.

Bryluen paused for the slightest, tension-building moment as her sudden motion drew the attention of the assembled Marines. Her voice bore a melodious accent of lilting vowels and gently tumbling consonants that filled her surgically precise diction with an infectious vibrancy.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Io 64<sup>th</sup>, I need not remind you that we are heading into an unknown danger. Despite how dearly fond I am of the sound of my voice, you are—each and every one of you—big kids." She smiled and paused as the Marines chuckled. "I can personally confirm that the entities still within the laboratory are unknown to us. CSOE info-miners are already searching for matches in available databases, but for now we only know what Sergeant Audra has been able to relay.

"I know from your records that each and every one of you has a

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minimum of three clean up missions to your name, and enough contact with unfamiliar enemies that I can and do expect the most wariness possible. Due to the limited information we have on the enemy, I am permitting you to discharge your weaponry into shadows or dark spaces in the event of any uncertainty per CSOE discretion. Sergeant Audra has confirmed that she and the researchers remain confined to the central bunker in order to ease the operation and prevent any incidents. Questions?”

A particularly tall and broad man raised a hand, prompting Bryluen to nod in his direction. He snapped a smart salute as he spoke. “Dame, are any stealth or sound protocols in place for this mission?”

She shook her head. “There are not. Sergeant Audra’s experiences lead us to believe the entities are unfailingly, even suicidally aggressive, so assume immediate and continuous action from the first hostility. We know the enemy has ranged capability, but they preferred melee during their attack. Now let’s get in there and raise some hell!”

Without a further word, she smoothly replaced her helmet.

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The UASC facility was a blue-gray blister of concrete and metal on the surface of a small moon. Glittering fragments of metal hovered and swirled in the void, rippling out from the twisted husks of the mass-driver cannons that crowned the laboratory. Large swathes of the facility’s exterior surface appeared to be painted in broad streaks of black powder. A small hangar provided berth for the dagger-like transport. The bay opened as the lifter approached, allowing the Marine pilot to bring the craft inside swiftly, turning a tight circle as they touched down so as to aim the ramp toward the facility entrance. The hangar bay was a decent size, enough to accommodate four or five planetary cargo craft, though it currently housed only several smaller shuttles. A large hatch roughly four meters across kept the corridor connecting the hangar to the rest of the facility tightly sealed. Almost immediately after entry, the exterior hatch closed and the bay began to re-pressurize. Dame Branok and the Marines had no intention of waiting, however, and their sealed armor meant they did not have to. As the landing ramp soared open, the Astral Marines rushed outward into a

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spread formation with Bryluen in the center.

The Io 64<sup>th</sup> was a close-combat unit equipped for battle in the claustrophobic confines of alien hives, starship corridors, cavern systems and, of course, facilities such as these. The majority of the Marines were armed with bulky shotguns, an armored grenade holster along the waist, a compact supply pack between their shoulders, and a gauntlet-mounted rip saw. The two largest members of the squad, however, bore the unit's pragmatically-titled Shotcannons mounted on stabilizing harnesses, each of which included an attached broad rip saw blade beneath the weapons' dual barrels, allowing for close quarters combat.

The Operative had arrived loaded to bear as well. A chunky, light-gray pistol was holstered beneath one arm, and a curiously thin rifle, built of a blue alloy, was gripped in her hands. The exotic firearm possessed a tank rather than a magazine, which jutted from beneath a trio of triangular barrels. Bryluen made a brief hand signal toward the interior hangar door, and in response the squadron took a breaching position around the hatch as she sidled up next to the entryway.

The Operative hunched down by the red activation button that triggered the inner hatch, and commanded her helmet to switch communication channels. "Sergeant Audra, we are arrayed in the Hangar Bay. Do you receive?"

A tense voice answered curtly. "Loud and clear, Dame Branok. I am transferring the station schematics and have researchers watching the remaining security cams. Best guess puts the remaining enemy count at a minimum of two hundred, but coverage is incomplete. Now—I wasn't sure how to communicate this before—but the enemy didn't look solid at first: just shadowy, dark, no specific form my eyes could really trace even though we knew they were there. Over time they've become more visible to me—I can clearly make out limbs and teeth, like my eyes are growing more accustomed to seeing them."

Bryluen mulled over the new information for a moment. "The researchers have been holed up in the bunker the entire time, correct? What does the enemy look like to them in the cameras?"

Sergeant Audra relayed the question to the researchers, and after a moment responded to Bryluen. "They look solid to the researchers, and solid on camera to me as well."

Bryluen nodded to herself. "So it has to do with our eyes rather

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than the visual spectrum itself. What filters did you and your soldiers try?"

"Ultra Violet gave us the best visuals, though even that was incomplete. Thermal is no-go, they may be Silicates or something. X-Ray showed nothing, so again either Silicate or perhaps a Non-Newtonian composition. Motion detection was just fine, but they clump together in swarms so it was more distracting than anything."

Bryluen nodded. "Good to know. Any theories or information on why these ones were left behind, Sergeant?"

Audra sighed. "Not the slightest clue. They seem to be wandering, almost like they're lost. If I had any notion why we'd been attacked or why the attack had ceased in the first place, we might have some theories. For all we know they just didn't get the retreat signal in time. Can't see any meaningful direction among them, and my brief patrol from earlier confirmed they'll just heedlessly attack on sight."

"Right." Bryluen waved one of the Shotcannoniers forward to a position on the other side of the inner hatch. "Last question: were you able to make out a meaningful way to identify the different types of these things? You mentioned some variety in behavior and combat capability."

Audra made a sort of thoughtful, groaning sound. "Most common type seemed to have some way of projecting energy. They're slightly smaller than a person, thin with stringy limbs, and their head looks like a flower or something. The other type was some bigger ones: thick, hunched, horned. Didn't shoot anything, just rushed forward and took a lot of bullets before going down—unless they gored you first. That's really all I can say with confidence, and all this only became apparent about fifteen minutes into the fighting when visibility became enough to really make sense of things."

With a glance, Bryluen confirmed the squadron was in cover behind the abandoned crates and equipment scattered around the forlorn bay. "Thank you, Sergeant. Warn us if anything we need to know about shows up on the cameras. Squadron: arms up, and look alive!"

After a moment, Bryluen stiffly slapped the large red button.

Warning lights overhead began to spin and an alarm signaled the opening of the inner hatchway. The thick doorway raised at what felt like a snail's pace, unveiling a long, metal corridor. The first half of the

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hall was clean and undamaged, whereas the latter portion connecting to the facility was covered in scratches and tears. The damage ran wall to wall, as if the enemy had partially flowed down the corridor before realizing there were no targets toward the hangar. Bryluen signaled the squad to move forward, with a Shotcannonier taking both point and rear, while she followed second in line, shouldering her rifle. The squad smoothly advanced up the empty corridor and then assembled before the entry hall in three rows: the first crouched low, the second hunched, and the third standing erect. Bryluen took up position beside the innermost door and paused as Audra informed the squad a small group of enemies lay beyond the doorway.

The Operative glanced back to the Marines, counted down from three on one hand, and triggered the doorway with her elbow.

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As the door from the hangar corridor to the interior of the facility slid open, a chorus of ululating squawks greeted them. Several creatures stood clumped in the hallway beyond, insubstantial and shadowy even in the well-lit main corridor. Bryluen got the faint impression of lithe, twisted limbs and a petaled head on each creature, but could not pin down any meaningful detail. The creatures had only an instant to comprehend what was about to befall them as, within a fraction of a second, the Marines opened fire with the united concussive pound of eighteen simultaneous shotgun blasts. The thick cloud of shot instantly rendered the group of beasts into little more than dark ribbons of matter twirling down the hallway, and their explosive deaths left black, sooty streaks on the surrounding walls. Bryluen made a quick hand-signal telling the squad to advance while she took a closer look at the remains.

The main corridor of the station passed all the way from the hangar bay to the central panic room, and was lined with identical structural supports at even intervals. Every block of rooms was secured by armored bulkheads—most of which had been torn through during the earlier engagement. The corridor was now a nightmarish wreck, covered in great streaks of black ichor interspersed with spots of Human blood.

Though the main facility lights appeared to be mostly

## 2. Bloody Beginnings

functioning, red emergency lighting had taken over in many of the side rooms. The first block of rooms were the researchers' living chambers on the squad's left, and the station's various amenities on the right. The squad shifted into a defensive posture in the intersection connecting the two blocks with the main hall. The bulkhead into the living chambers was mostly intact, while the bulkhead sealing off the amenities possessed a large, rough gap sheared into its center.

Bryluen knelt where a sufficiently large piece of one of the hazy beasts lay and poked it with the end of her rifle barrel, feeling the creature's solidity in spite of its ethereal lack of visual presence. Any piece of the creature she came into contact with disintegrated into puffs of hazy dust a moment afterward. She used part of a gauntlet plate to scrape up some of the sooty ichor spread about the hall, and watched as it, too, turned to dust on contact. Fortunately, none of the material seemed to damage the gauntlet's surface.

Bryluen took a breath and addressed Sergeant Audra. "Sergeant: estimates? Researchers' quarters versus amenities?"

Audra responded almost immediately. "There have been only a few signs of life in the researchers' quarters. Numerous contacts confirmed in the cafeteria and lounge, however."

"Open every functioning door in the living quarters. Fire-Team One, sweep it. Fire-Team Two, you're with me in Amenities."

The Sergeant's voice cut in curtly. "Dame, movement in Amenities, heading your way!"

The soldiers stiffened and Bryluen slid over to Fire-Team Twos' Shotcannonier. The seasoned marine was leaning around the corner, his imposing weapon staring down the entrance to Amenities.

"Fire-Team One, head out and report in when you have contacts. Fire-Team Two, CC discipline with a wide net. Sergeant Audra, open this bulkhead and hatch, would you?"

The soldiers were already filtering into the Living Quarters with weapons raised, shoulder lights illuminating the dim redness within. The weapons of Fire-Team Two produced a low whine as their ripsaws spun to life. The Marines spread apart from their fellows to take shelter at separate supports along the walls. A series of ululating cries came from the other side of the Amenities door as it slid open, accompanied by several wet growls like rapid choking sounds.

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A flood of shadows burst at speed from the door, and steady weapons fire answered back. Soot splattered all around the entryway as what were presumably the same thinner lifeforms scrambled forward. Intermittently, a yellowish mass of fiery energy would emerge from the mayhem and crackle against a wall support in a swift flare. After a moment, a broad and hulking shape barely able to fit through the doorway came rushing forward, throwing aside its smaller compatriots. As Sergeant Audra had stated, Bryluen received the impression of two long, upward-curved horns jutting from the beast, though it remained too insubstantial for her to make out further detail. The creature had rushed about halfway up the hall before Fire-Team Two's Shotcannonier first pulled the trigger.

With an earth-shaking roar and a startling flash of light, the Shotcannon fired. The weapon's two barrels recoiled into the body of the gun, unleashing a storm of shot and shrapnel so fast and thorough that creatures the entire length of the hallway simply vaporized, and hundreds of tiny holes were instantly rent around the doorway with a deafening clang.

Amazingly the beasts kept coming, accompanied by a second horned creature. This time Bryluen leaned from cover and, with an almost casual air, aimed and fired her thin firearm. With a disproportionately quiet sliding sound somewhere between a jet of water and a metallic slap, an incandescent stream of magnetically-accelerated liquid metal fired from each of the weapon's three barrels. The streams caused a great gout of steam upon contact with the hulking creature, and the third hit caused it to collapse with a thud. The ongoing barrage of shot tore more chunks from its body as it slid to a stop along the floor.

After another minute the assault from Amenities ceased, though it was unclear whether that indicated the creatures' numbers had run out or if they had simply withdrawn for a time. Đặng, the leader of Fire-Team One, reported they had made sporadic contact and were now sweeping room-by-room, mopping up the occasional target in dim conditions. Fire-Team One reported a couple of minor scrapes and scratches from claw swipes, but sustained no real injuries.

The Marines of Fire-Team Two checked in with each other and reloaded. Three Marines bore warped scorch marks on their armor from the alien fireballs, but the plates had maintained their integrity enough to

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protect them from more than minor burns.

Bryluen motioned down the length of the main corridor. "Excellent form, everyone. Falstaff, Cavalcante, Rotimi, and Maalouf, secure this intersection. Rest of you, on me! I know how good you Marines are at cleaning out a cafeteria."

Tense laughter and a few enthusiastic hoots accompanied the remark as Fire-Team Two fell in behind their leader. Bryluen gracefully swept her weapon side to side as she passed from the main hallway into the cafeteria, and the lights mounted on her armor's collar activated. Invisible rays of ultraviolet light caused the sooty "blood" of the creatures, as well as older stains on the furniture and floor, to glow. The cafeteria, as expected, was an open area of long tables and practical metal chairs, with a buffet line and automated food dispensary installed in the rear of the room.

The tables and chairs had been tossed to and fro in the bloodthirsty rush of the shadow creatures. Two doors led out of the cafeteria: one to the station's ample medical bay on the left, the other to a relaxation lounge on the team's right

Bryluen momentarily reflected on the wisdom of requiring medical bay patients to pass through the cafeteria, before motioning for the squad to split between the two side rooms. A brief radio message indicated the four Marines guarding the intersection had brought down a few scattered targets from deeper within the facility. Đặng and his team had finished their sweep of the living quarters and were doubling back to rejoin the Marines at the intersection.

Bryluen accompanied the group heading to sweep the medical bay and again took point. The door to the medical bay was damaged and half-open, so neither she nor the Marines with her stood in front of it lest something snatch at them through the gap beneath. Instead, they spread to the sides with guns ready as Bryluen tested the door mechanism. The door sputtered and coughed, bright sparks shining in the dim redness, before Bryluen motioned to Fire-Team Two's Shotcannonier to open it. He dutifully ejected the current standard ammo from his gun—more cannon shells than anything—and replaced them with special breaching rounds. Bryluen and the Marines moved away from the entryway as the Shotcannonier squared his feet and braced himself about three meters from the door.

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Another almighty roar and a blinding flash took the hatch off of its hinges and sent it rocketing backwards into the med bay. Something within cried out as it was struck by the door, and in response Bryluen swung her weapon into the bay. The ghastly thin shapes of a cluster of fireball throwers bounced back to Bryluen's eyes as they were drenched in ultraviolet light. Thus illuminated, the appearance of the creatures was more apparent. They each had eerily thin, crooked limbs and sickly-looking bodies, crowned by a petaled head like a wilted rose. Even without the ability to make out finer details, the creatures gave the clear impression of a nightmarishly monstrous visage. Their movements were twitchy and stiff, as if they suffered some form of neurological damage, though the intent and efficacy of their motions defied such an explanation.

After an instant of observation, Bryluen eliminated the first two creatures with precise beams from her weapon. The targets' heads melted around the impact point and disintegrated to little more than smoke and steam as they collapsed in different directions. A Marine at the other side of the door pried a grenade from her belt, causing an indicator to appear on the visor HUDs of all her compatriots, triggering her team to pull back from the door as she rolled the grenade inside the bay. The next creatures that jutted from the entryway were splattered back inside by shotgun fire, and many of the rest that had not yet exited the main chamber of the medical bay soon died with a rough bang as the grenade turned them into blackish slop.

Fire-Team Two almost instantly rushed inside the bay, dispersing between rows of hospital beds and blowing apart the surviving creatures. One of the larger beasts came rushing out from a supply room in the rear, issuing a guttural roar. A sweep of Bryluen's ultraviolet lamps showed that the beast was quadrupedal, and confirmed that two, long horns projected from the creature's brow along with a large jaw writhing with tendrils. Bryluen shot the creature and several shotgun blasts followed, striking it across its flanks as it crashed through a row of hospital beds toward the nearest Marine. The Marine dodged a moment too late and was tossed aside as one of the creature's horns tore through his pauldron. Aiming over their prone companion, the Fire-Team's Shotcannonier obliterated the beast. The blast removed the majority of the creature's bodily mass and summarily ended the clean-up operation

## 2. Bloody Beginnings

in the medical bay.

Kosovir—the Marine who had been struck—bled profusely, and though he would be unable to use his arm for the rest of the mission, he had been fortunate to avoid a full-on impact with the tip of the creature's horn. A comrade removed Kosovir's damaged shoulder plate before spraying and wrapping the wound with medical gear from the wounded man's supply pack. Bryluen motioned for the squad to rally and head back out to the main corridor where a new fire fight was occurring. A Shotcannon blast rumbled through the structure as Bryluen sprinted up the hall to the embattled hallway. A horde had poured from the next block of rooms while Fire-Team Two had been occupied in Amenities, and the timely arrival of Fire-Team One had kept the four Marines at the corridor from being overwhelmed.

Three Marines sat at the back of the formation with injuries: two from fireball impacts, and one from an abdominal laceration. The ripsaws of Fire-Team one, including the wide blade of their Shotcannonier, were blood-slicked from multiple close encounters. Bryluen slung her rifle, drawing the pistol from under her arm and detaching a small cylinder from her belt as she slid behind a support. She fired it into the horde of enemies with a rude crack. A slug of an ultra-heavy compound accelerated from the auto-stabilized barrel and promptly emptied the chest cavity of the creature it struck. Fireballs raced back up the corridor toward the Marines in clumps, burning the walls and forcing them to duck behind the supports they were using as cover.

One of the thin beasts had managed to rush around its dying compatriots to within melee range of Bryluen. In response, she pressed a stud on the side of the cylinder in her hand and swung the object toward the creature. The end of the cylinder flew off, trailing a thin length of carbon nanowire behind it. The weighty end-cap passed behind the creature, drawing the wire directly through its body with a sharp singing sound. The creature slid into two halves as it collapsed, while a magnetic force smoothly drew the wire back into the cylinder before it could twist far enough to become a danger to its wielder. Bryluen calmly settled back into cover and resumed firing her pistol, noting how much clearer the shapes and details of the horrible creatures had become since she first saw them.

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The pressure from the attack seemed to lessen about a minute after Fire-Team Two's return, and this time proved to truly be the end of the infestation in the laboratory. A several-minute, thorough sweep of the remaining rooms found no additional enemy contacts. Upon receiving final confirmation from Sergeant Audra that no hostile life signs could be detected, Bryluen gathered the Marines back at the central bunker and signaled the all-clear.

### **3. Dead Ends and Directives**

Sergeant Audra pressed the stud that opened the central bunker's hatch. The badly damaged door wrenched itself open in rough, juddering movements. Within was a bank of camera feeds, a console of communications equipment, an array of cots, and a substantial closet of survival supplies. The forty-five researchers who had been in the lab when the initial attack occurred were all present and accounted for. As Brylue entered the inner bunker, the Marines of the Io 64<sup>th</sup> set about gathering and caring for the torn and maimed bodies of Audra's fallen soldiers, still lying about the intersection surrounding the bunker entrance.

Within ten minutes, Brylue had set up the storage closet for use as an interview room and requested that the CSOE dispatch a forensics and clean-up crew. The operation itself had been simple; certainly not the sort of thing an Operative would be dispatched for normally. This attack merited Brylue's attention due to its unanticipated occurrence, the unknown nature of the opposition, and the random cessation of the attack. The fact that some of the creatures were left behind was even more confusing, and seemed as reasonless as the initial assault. But Brylue had made first contact with numerous species in less than ideal circumstances, and had seen enough wonders throughout the cosmos, to

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know nothing was ever truly random. She had already secured the research files of the laboratory, and during the sweep through the lab areas had noted a missing object in a containment cell. The surveillance equipment in Containment had been destroyed soon after the creatures arrived—the surviving recordings showed the creatures were highly destructive even against inanimate objects, as if they were trying to destroy things of value. The incomplete nature of that endeavor lent even more mystery to the event. But where most things were damaged or found in pieces, the object in containment was gone entirely. Bryluen attained files on the absent object: a squared stone about thirty by fifteen by twenty centimeters consisting of an unknown material.

The object had been recovered from an archaeological dig at the northern ice cap of Vehndorgan III, judged to be the tomb of an ancient Loth Törn Hearthlord. Nothing else at the site was made of the same material, and numerous scans showed a series of lines on the surface that composed unknown designs when viewed under certain forms of light. Available dating methods had been unable to yield an age window for the object.

The ‘stone’ responded in odd, esoteric ways to radio waves, x-rays, ultraviolet light, and thermal stimulation in that it echoed certain parts of these waves, while causing weak virtual-particle effects that were poorly understood and had not yet been adequately recorded.

Bryluen questioned the researchers relentlessly for four or five hours, until each had been cross-examined regarding any possible lead on the cause of either the attack or the departure of the creatures. At the conclusion of the interviews, the researchers were taken away for debriefing and extended involuntary vacation time by a UASC shuttle. This left only Sergeant Audra to question.

Bryluen opened the conversation with the haggard Marine by asking how Sergeant Audra felt, and then listened as Audra tersely discussed the loss of her Marines as well as her sheer exhaustion. She was coping as well as any Marine could be expected to in the face of such an onslaught. She had known some of the Marines on the station for more than ten years, and their sudden loss was a lot to cope with. Audra had held to every operational standard there was, and her subordinates made a reckoning for themselves against hopeless odds. Estimates for the numbers of the initial attack from both eye-witness

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impressions and system sensors was anywhere upward of a thousand entities. Audra knew few things of strategic value, but told Brylueen all she did know by filling in some ancillary details that had so far gone unreported. Nonetheless, the missing block remained the only lead—its disappearance was the only meaningful consistency in the entire event. The damage dealt to the station's sensory equipment meant little empirical information was available, unless something came up during the database searches or forensics investigations already being conducted.

Soon after the conclusion of witness interviews Brylueen, the Marines of the *Io 64<sup>th</sup>*, and Sergeant Audra were back aboard the lifter and docking once more with the *Hermes Mass-Conveyor* sitting motionless near the Compressed-Space Gate. The Space Gates were massive constructs consisting of a round outer framework within which three emitters continuously slid, facing the center of the structure. When the gate was engaged, the emitters generated the necessary energy phenomenon in the center of the gate to allow the Compressed-Space effect that made long distance stellar travel practical. The physical necessities of generating the energy to dial the gate dictated only large ships bore their own Compression Drives. This meant most ships had to piggyback on mass-conveyors like the *Hermes* in order to move between systems. The gates themselves were invariably large enough to allow simultaneous travel by an entire armada, with an aperture on the order of dozens of kilometers across.

Once the lifter was clamped to the underside of the *Hermes*, the ship approached the gate and prepared for Compression. The sheer vastness of space and the titanic dimensions of the gate made the constant motion of the emitters appear stately or even sluggish, when in fact they traveled the inner circumference of the structure at an almost unthinkable velocity. The massive power generator mounted to each emitter caused the entire construct to glow in a lurid blue-white light. The moment of gate dilation was a comparatively brief instant, where a catastrophic amount of energy bridged the distance between two gates that were otherwise hundreds of light-years apart. The appearance of the Compression phenomenon itself manifested as a round splotch of utter blackness rimmed in a brilliant band of the local light as it was drawn inward through the gate.

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Despite the incredible forces at play, the actual experience of passing through was as uneventful as walking through a doorway, and perceived by most passengers as a black flash as infinitesimal as blinking. The Hermes slid through the gate straight into the Tereshkova System, home to the nearest major Marine base. Gate Tereshkova was minded by two Astral Marine Gun-forts bristling with anti-starship weaponry. A dozen patrolling Monitor ships stood ready as the Hermes transmitted Bryluen's Identify-Friend-or-Foe registry. Within the next fifteen minutes Bryluen had offloaded onto a CSOE private transport, while the Marines—both living and dead—were taken by the lifter to Tereshkova Marine Base. Routine post-contact counseling and duty review was scheduled in the case of Sergeant Audra. Even had Bryluen not sent her commendations, Audra was certain to be looked upon favorably by the review board.

The private shuttle hitched a ride back through Gate Tereshkova to the Corax system, where Bryluen's home and base of operations was located. The Operative lived on the sparsely inhabited world of Aves Prime, high up the slope of Mount Cunicularia. Her residence, known as Raven's Landing, was a group of circular shapes jutting from the mountainside like a cluster of shelf fungi.

One of the round structures was a sizable landing pad upon which Bryluen was offloaded by the shuttle. On Aves Prime it was early morning, the coming day presaged by a marching line of warm gold. As the light passed over the curled branches of the rolling forest below, hundreds of blossoms burst open in a bewildering array of green, magenta, and yellow. Where the trees thinned out up the slope of the mountain, orange grasses waved in a gentle breeze around reddish shrubs. The gentle creak and squeal of the waking trees was carried upward on a soft wind. The forest branches slowly unfurled as if stretching out to bathe in the warmth of the local star.

An Operative was an incredibly rare individual with extensive operational freedom dispatched by the CSOE when a situation required the utmost care, attention, and skill. There were fewer than three hundred Operatives active at one time, and each was afforded the utmost cooperation and respect by any Human authorities. Operatives were extensively trained and educated in diplomacy, wilderness survival, linguistics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, law, history, and

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numerous martial disciplines, not to mention an increasingly esoteric range of other skills acquired over time or for particular assignments. Dame Branok in particular trailed honors and awards wherever she went, and held a reputation for politesse and class as much as she did for being a natural leader and a fine tactician. Her claims to fame included a number of high-profile missions, not the least of which was a particularly witty and bloodless defeat of a T'hròstag battle-host that led straight into ceasefire negotiations. Numerous CSOE advertisements and posters bore her image, and the CSOE website had been forced to add a question about her marriage status to the FAQ pages after repeated inquiries.

Bryluen gazed out over the colorful panorama around her as she strode over to the hatch leading inside from the landing pad. Within she was greeted by a cool stone interior—aside from defensive additions and hidden structural supports, the building materials of her home were all natural and local. The parts of the house extending from the mountainside had, in fact, been created from the stone quarried to create the interior rooms. The overall aesthetic of the domicile was minimalist, and emphasized the beauty of the materials and surroundings. Counter tops, shelves, and any decorative touches were made of wood taken from dead or dying trees in the surrounding forest, while live trees that had been on the construction site had been migrated elsewhere. Much of the home would have been open to the elements due to panoramic gaps along the outer walls if not for the energetic fields used in place of windows. This afforded an unimpeded scenic view of the endless miles of forest outside.

As both a residence, place of work, and occasionally a site of diplomatic efforts, Raven's Landing not only bore a comfortable bedroom and bathroom, but a lounge with a bar and automated food dispensary, exercise room, office, library, and meeting room. Bryluen could perform research, conduct interviews, and question suspects or information sources for months on end without leaving—any supplies she may need were delivered on a regular schedule by automated delivery craft.

Just inside the landing pad hatch was a short corridor connecting to the main lobby. A stand stood in an alcove by the door awaiting Bryluen's armor suit. She sighed as she dutifully stopped in front of it,

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beginning to detach pieces of her armor and store them on the rack. Underneath her armor, she was clad in gray athletic wear, revealing the hint of a colorful tattoo on the outside of her right leg. On the back of her neck, she bore a monochromatic design centered around the date she first became an Operative in luxurious script. Every limb and part of her body featured an assortment of scars from endless encounters with numerous threats. A notable slash along her right side created a cross-hatching pattern where it passed through the faded stretch marks at her waist line.

She padded on bare feet into the main hub of the home, a round spacious lobby with an open roof beneath which sat a large fountain. Extending from the lobby in all directions were side chambers and hallways connecting to all the other areas of Raven's Landing. The moment she passed into the lobby the fountain began cycling water, like an excited dog awaiting its master. Bryluen took a deep breath of the cleanly, comforting scents of home and then proceeded straight to a side corridor, striding into the mountain toward the entrance to her bedroom.

Her room was a quiet sanctuary, tastefully bedecked in wooden furnishings of the same provenance as the rest of the house and thick, soft carpet. A large four-poster bed layered in black blankets and white pillows dominated the center of the room, with a handsomely carved nightstand on either side. A screen was mounted on the wall opposite the end of the bed, and a tall wardrobe in the corner contained the entirety of Bryluen's clothing. In a back corner was an old-style swinging door to her bathroom, which itself was rough-hewn from the surrounding rock in such a way that it resembled a cavern. A spacious tub was carved into the center of the bathroom like an altar, and past it there was a large shower array built into the back wall. The much less glamorous toilet was sequestered in a secondary chamber.

Bryluen reached down to the control panel on the tub and set it to fill itself with warm water, before she entered the toilet chamber in order to slip into the black bathing suit she kept there. Within ten minutes she was relaxing in her tub, surrounded by bubbles as the water was soothingly stirred about her by a series of jets. She laid her head back into a rest carved into the rim of the tub and breathed in quiet contemplation for a long while as the tension in her body steadily melted away. Bryluen felt uncomfortable speaking to her superiors while naked,

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so due to the urgency and importance of her job she unfailingly bathed wearing garments of some form. This morning, as with many others, her diligence in doing so was rewarded.

A hologram roughly a meter and a half across suddenly unfolded from a projector mounted to the opposite end of the bathtub. It was a standard message, numerous variants of which Bryluen had seen looming over her bath through the years. She had often taken and made calls from her bath, whether querying with CSOE data-miners or submitting reports to her superiors. Video conferencing was as common as exchanging text reports, and even then face-to-face conversations usually took place to supplement such reports. In the case of this particular call, though, the identity of the sender was unusually important—even for her. She sat upright as the initial message unfurled.

**\*URGENT COMMUNIQUÉ\***

THIS CONTACT IS FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

\*\*\*

SENDER: *CSOE HIGH COMMAND (7 ATTENDING)*  
HAS REQUESTED VIDEO CONTACT.

\*\*\*

AUTO-CONFIRMATION IN 10 SECONDS

The CSOE knew she had just returned home to rest, so they wouldn't assign her another mission unless circumstances were dire. They might request a special report, have some unresolved questions, or even ask for her input on one of the many initiatives undertaken by the CSOE—but that would be done through a Handler or Briefing channel. An urgent meeting with the entirety of High Command was rare, even for an Operative of her esteem.

She took a breath and addressed the projector. "Confirm: High Command, what can I do for you?"

The text flashed green and resolved into a split video feed of all seven members of CSOE High Command, reporting in from various

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locales across Human Space. In any other organization it might be strange that Bryluen was actively washing herself at the time, but an urgent communiqué was an urgent communiqué.

She sometimes smiled at the thought of how many naked Operatives High Command had seen and taken perfectly seriously regardless—not all Operatives felt the need to cling onto some form of modesty, and such was the intensity of their job that High Command had a standing rule not to pressure them into doing so. They relied on their Operatives to be as comfortable as possible, given the other sacrifices that went into taking the job. Additionally, the grim and intensive tasks High Command itself dealt with meant occasional nudity was by far the least of their concerns.

The CSOE High Commander Galmaan Maahir Cabdinuur was sitting in his office at the CSOE Central Headquarters, in orbit around Proxima Centauri. He was an older gentleman, dark-skinned and dour, with a shaved head and a short beard of white and silver.

His voice was a cool rumble of surgical pronunciation. "Dame Branok, we know you have recently returned from responding to the UASC station encounter. We have already been appraised of your initial findings and find them to correlate with several similar instances on a smaller scale. Over the past several weeks such attacks have taken place not only in our space, but in that of the Qixing Commonwealth and another in T'hròstag territory. Leads on previous occurrences are being investigated, and the Qixing Gate Sentinels have also confirmed slight fluctuations of standard energy signatures at times that could reasonably have preceded these attacks. If this threat is using the gates their exact methodology is unknown—as you well know, the Sentinels let nothing pass through unscrutinized. The pattern of occurrences appears to demonstrate a steady escalation of force, culminating in the attack you responded to.

“Acting on this intelligence, Councilwoman Braynard summoned High Command to an Emergency Strategic Response meeting two hours ago. We have elected to open a High Dispensation Quick-Response Initiative to learn more about this threat and to counter it to whatever degree is necessary, as well as provide counsel on how to organize available resources to counter this threat wherever the Initiative cannot be present. We are calling this Initiative ‘Dread Naught’. We

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have chosen by unanimous vote to offer you the chance to lead it."

Bryluen took in a deep breath. "High Commander, I would be honored. What Discretionary Framework must I begin with?"

Councilwoman Braynard was a small and intense woman with a billow of blonde hair, who spoke from the video feed to the High Commander's right. "None. As our most decorated Senior Operative and having seen the nature of the threat at hand, we entrust the organization and methodology of this Initiative to you. Do you have any initial requests?"

Bryluen made eye contact with Braynard and nodded, crossing her soapy arms. A glob of shampoo fell down the side of her head. "I do. I want the Initiative based out of Raven's Landing with necessary structural extensions for berthing a long-term Strike Team. That means targeted amenities, a permanent transport solution, and hardened direct-contact lines for liaisons. As well, I request the Strike Team be manned according to my choice of individuals within Human space—under deferred legality if needed. I will handle the recruitment contacts myself."

The High Commander nodded. "Excuse us while we discuss your requests."

The video feeds of High Command switched to a Hold message bearing the CSOE symbol: a gauntlet gripping a flag over a backdrop of a stylized Milky Way. Bryluen finished scrubbing her legs in the tub while the council convened, her eyes casually gazing over dozens of minor scars and the lavish tattoo running down length of her outer thigh. After roughly five minutes, High Command returned and affirmed each of Bryluen's requests. Each Council member signed off in conclusion, with the last being the High Commander himself. He tersely wished Bryluen luck before leaving her alone to her thoughts.

She reached over to the bathtub control console situated to her left and queued herself a shot of whisky. She also used the console to activate a small control surface to her right that manned the large projector, and used it to begin sifting through various personnel files and reports. She rapidly organized the files of possible inclusions on the Strike Team to eventually be whittled down to a small starting squad. She not only considered CSOE contacts and Marine personnel, but also a broad selection of otherwise unaffiliated individuals whose

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personalities and skills could potentially match the task ahead. In her opinion, no training could ever truly prepare someone for a task as demanding and high-pressure as a CSOE initiative without the requisite strength of character and ideals.

Not everyone was made to withstand an environment in which the daily potential for combat was as high as the chance of having to perform delicate negotiations. Bryluen kept herself sane through a number of methods of relaxation, but most of all her temperament was simply an ideal fit for the duties expected of her.

She was invigorated by risk, felt alive when under pressure, received a cool sense of satisfaction from matching her wits with another, and was always driven forward by unbreakable ethics. She recalled most people would not have smiled in the face of peril as she did during her asteroid redirect mission over Roth's World. As the engineers affixed the attitude thrusters to the rock, it had been discovered a hibernating population of parasitic creatures was awakening inside the asteroid. A dizzying zero-gravity battle with the creatures had ensued to buy the engineers time to finish their task. As she and the engineers were ferried away from the asteroid, she watched the thrusters alter its course and thought she needed a cold shower.

With a gentle hum a small round drone flew into the bathroom from a hatchway set high into the wall, and delivered a tumbler of whisky to Bryluen's open hand. Sleep could wait.

## 4. The Vigilante and the Vortex

The veil of a peaceful night had descended over Paris. A sprawling metropolis like the ancient French capital never quite found silence—on an eve like this, in fact, Paris felt more alive than during the day. Among the alleys and back roads, beneath bright street lights, and within the inky shadows of weathered stone monuments, the hiss of shoes brushing cobblestone and the quiet murmurs of distant voices blurred into a great, never-ending breath. The headlights of rail cars rippled up each side of the river Seine like signals along a synapse. A lone man powered along the Pont des Arts, his broad stride swiftly propelling him down the length of the bridge. The man was clad in black, tight-fitting athletic wear from his head to his toes. His thick-soled boots were framed by compact hydraulic lifts that granted his stride extra force. Even in the dark an air of youthful mischief played across every corner of his face, and each flash of his pearly teeth appeared as if he had swallowed a lighthouse.

He found the venerable bridge was always best viewed at night, as during the day it was often packed with tourists. Even at this late hour a couple held hands and looked out across the still waters together, their combined silhouette stark against the moonlit backdrop of the Institut De France. They had placed an antique padlock on a pile of its kin next to

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one of the bridge supports. Over time, the rails of the bridge had been replaced by clear polymer panels to deter the tradition of ‘Love Locks’ placed here by thousands of romantics each year. In past times, the bridge had been badly damaged and even suffered partial collapses from the sheer weight of the locks attached to the bridge. Now with nowhere to affix them, the Love Locks were piled at the sides of the Pont des Arts in great stacks which were regularly swept away by the authorities.

From the long bridge, the man sprinted through narrow side-streets and alleyways. With ease he left the ground to sail over a mailbox before he began to rebound from high curbs and drainage pipes, swinging from window sills and flag poles with the breezy air of a stroll through the park. He hurtled along as if weightless and unstoppable, bouncing high from a trash bin to grasp the bottom of a fire escape. With no loss in momentum he swung his legs up and over the rail overhead, and soon found himself bounding two steps at a time up the winding metal stairs. At the fifth story balcony, he paused and rapped on the chipped door in a patterned, triplicate rhythm, keeping his body tensed. After a moment, he heard a response pattern and relaxed slightly. The door creaked open, the person on the other side of the door nervous about the clandestine encounter. The hand of a young woman sheepishly extended from the shadows, holding a number of bank notes. The man genteelly kissed her hand before politely taking her donation. With no more formalities, he continued up the fire escape stairs at a run as the woman and an unseen man giggled and closed the door.

The man was known simply as “Le Saint-Coureur”—The Saint-Runner. The man’s real name and identity were a mystery to most, though he had arrived in Paris to continue his vigilantism for the past several years. He was a world-class acrobat with renowned aim, well-known for savagely tearing apart the crime network that had previously held sway in much of Western Europe. Such was the popularity and fame of the Saint-Runner among the people of Paris, that a statue approximating his appearance stood near the Sacré-Cœur Basilica. His elevation to folk-hero status had long proved a dilemma for Parisian law enforcement. The police found that they were both sworn to catch him for a number of extra-legal killings, yet were doomed to a public relations nightmare should they succeed.

The Saint-Runner proceeded to the far side of the tenement

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building's roof and dropped down, one by one, from the brick windowsills on each floor. He hit the street running, again launching himself over and around the complex geometry of the aged city. A couple of miles later, he clambered up the side of an abandoned warehouse—aided by the special friction pads on his boots—and propelled himself in through a high, broken window. On the other side he caught himself on an iron support and slid down its length like a firefighter's pole, whereupon he landed next to a small stash of his belongings.

The empty confines of the condemned structure soon echoed with the rapid, staccato rhythm of blows softened by thick padding. Beneath a small mobile lamp, the Saint-Runner stood punishing a punching bag suspended from a metal strut. A gleaming, antique rifle with a dark wood body sat nearby on a small table next to the Saint-Runner's discarded jacket. His skin was almost as dark as his clothing, and the sheen of sweat on his body granted him something like the appearance of polished obsidian. By any measure, he was a strikingly handsome man with the youthful cast of his face balanced by a well-trimmed beard and mustache. His hair was a dark cluster of coarse curls that flowed back from his hairline, and he eyed the punching bag with smoldering brown eyes that would have been considered dark on someone with paler skin.

In the harsh lamp light his close-fit garments made every shifting muscle and twitching tendon visible, demonstrating a slim physique as if someone had painstakingly fitted clothing to a sixteenth century masterwork. He alternated between a flurry of face and torso strikes, interspersing sharp kicks with the grace and poise of a dancer as he worked through a complex routine that would shame an Olympian.

Amidst the sounds of impact and labored breathing, he heard a voice from the darkness beyond the lamp in precise French. "I wanted to speak with you."

In an instant the Saint-Runner had spun past the punching bag to the side of the structural support, snatching his rifle from the table as he did so in one smooth motion. He responded in a rich off-world accent long ago smoothed over by Parisian tones and inflection. "There are many who would wish to 'sp-peak' with me, so I am afraid you will need to be more sp-p-pecific."

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Bryluen stepped from the shadows deep within the warehouse. Her attire was almost suspiciously casual—simply a gray leather jacket over a blouse and slacks, with a pair of comfortable flats. The Saint-Runner recognized her face and relaxed, though he did not yet put down his weapon.

Bryluen strolled forward with her hands in her pockets, and continued to speak in French. “I’ve come with an offer for you.”

The Saint-Runner stepped out from behind the support and faced Bryluen head on. “I-O-oh ... you really *are* quite an eye-catching woman, aren’t you?” He paused a moment to regain his train of thought. “I-I would be flattered if someone so renowned had come all this way to detain me, but I imagine your offer is more complex than ‘Please come quietly.’”

Bryluen smirked and waved her left ring finger, displaying a finely tattooed devotional band. She shrugged off her jacket, revealing her gray pistol holstered beneath her arm. Tossing the jacket on the small table where the Saint-Runner’s weapon had laid, she stepped in front of the punching bag and seamlessly slipped into an A-frame stance. “Always good to be complimented by a stranger regardless.”

The Saint-Runner dramatically placed a hand on his heart. “Oh I a-a-am quite aware, but the situation war-ranted the comment. She is a *very* lucky wo-oman, I’m sure.”

“Oh, that she is. To reciprocate: the stories have circulated for some years—and I can certainly appreciate that you really are *very* handsome in person. No wonder you raise money so easily.”

The Saint-Runner laughed nervously, surprised and off-put by her comment. Bryluen smiled. Aside from his ever-present stutter, Runner was clearly anxious. She found his unease endearing, considering how comfortable he was with blowing mobsters’ brains out the backs of their heads. “Though trading compliments is quite pleasant, I have come to grant you a unique opportunity. What would you say was the number one motive behind your destruction of the Milieu?”

The Saint-Runner placed his weapon down next to Bryluen’s jacket and placed a hand on the back of his neck. “An interview, then? How unexpect-cted! I would say without a doubt that they had been harming good people f-for too long.” He shrugged. “I decided b-blowing them to shit would just be the right thing to do.”

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“That’s a good reason, and the results were what you intended—a dissolution of a crime order that had defied authorities for many years.” She shook the bag with a harsh uppercut.

“Fascinating,” said the Saint-Runner, tilting his head. “Y-you seem ... less upset about me shooting private citizens than I might have suspected from a w-woman of the Law.”

Bryluen shifted in front of the bag and resumed throwing punches. “As a CSOE Operative I have the privilege of a unique stance. I believe that what you have done is morally justifiable though justifiably illegal.”

The Saint-Runner began to pace. “A-alright, Dame Branok, but if that’s so then how do you reconcile a legal system that outright rejects-s what you say is a moral action?”

She shrugged. “Because matters of morality are not why government exists, Saint-Runner. The nature of the Social Contract—the exchange of certain freedoms for certain securities—is not rooted in morality. Law ideally exists so as to maintain an equitable state of survival that allows people to thrive in peace and happiness. It is a question of how much and what type of order is ideal. Any governing state intent on morality only serves as a tool of ideological oppression.

“Vigilantism *should* be illegal because, through a long series of difficult lessons, civilization has agreed that necessary punishment should be performed through vetted individuals held accountable such that they serve both the stability and freedom society needs—usually this precludes a violent solution. Though of course, this all assumes the law performs its duty otherwise.”

The Saint-Runner smiled. It had been quite a while since he had spoken with someone able to have a decent discussion. “But once someone is-s in power, what exists to s-stop them from using that power to push ideology anyway? Once a party controls the big gu-uns, what stops them from using them?”

Bryluen stopped throwing punches and turned toward the Saint-Runner. “Always a good question. A decent contract has enforceable clauses punishing a party that breaches that contract. In our modern system, free education, accountability requirements for election funds, and the dissolution of political monopolies keep oligarchs from acquiring power. In fact, the strictures on the acquisition of a state office

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ensure the existing practical power of the individual is removed so they cannot use monetary or extra-legal means to assert excess influence. This also serves to de-incentivize them from allowing another official to attempt to abuse their position. That meaningful accountability and involuntary sacrifice is why elected officials can now be trusted and why vigilantes on the whole cannot be.”

The Saint-Runner leaned his elbow against the support, resting his head on his hand. “You’re even more beautiful when pontificating, madame.”

Bryluen reached up and patted him on the shoulder. “That’s sweet for someone with seventy-two counts of pre-meditated murder. I’m sure you say that to *all* the women who come to forebodingly question you in abandoned warehouses. But enough with the pleasantries: I am here on behalf of the CSOE to form a task force to oppose a burgeoning threat against Human and allied space. I have come here to ask you to participate. In exchange, you will be officially pardoned for those murder counts I just mentioned. We already know your actual identity, but that can remain our little secret. You would be required to live at the headquarters for the task force, but would receive pay and as much freedom as can be allowed outside of missions or tasks I assign you. I’ve got the full contract on a drive here with me.

“I know you are extremely agile with incredible aim, a gift for modifying weapons, and have no problem getting your hands dirty. But the true determining reason I’m asking you to join my task force is because I knew what you would say when I asked for your motivation. Good people are going to be hurt, Saint-Runner.”

She placed a storage drive on the table. “Read through and think on it.”

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The world of Pothles IV had been quiet and serene, the pale turquoise grasslands spreading out for thousands of miles around the colony of Daydream. It had been little more than a small habitation with expansive farmlands that harvested various kinds of grass unique to the planet and shipped to other worlds to serve as both base foodstuffs and exotic delicacies. The rural colonists had acquired the quiet, pastoral life

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they had sought—aside from the vortex incident.

One night about six months ago, a great storm of reds and pinks had lit up the sky a little over fifteen miles from the colony. After almost an hour of the terrifying spectacle, a column of fire rushed up into the storm and dissipated. The sky returned to its usual hazy lavender, but *something* had appeared in the glassed-over crater the storm had left. A creature had been spotted by several colonists who went to the site of the storm, and upon seeing them over the lip of the crater it had produced a great gout of flame. Further attempts to see the new arrival had resulted in not only more flame, but arcs of lightning as well. Notably these emissions from the being had been directed away from any who came to take a look, as if it had little choice in creating these emanations.

The CSOE Contact team that soon arrived was awed by the appearance of the being. It was clearly intelligent, but attempts at communication were plagued by an inability to understand one another. The team slid a small modular shelter and various forms of nourishment into the crater, until the creature found something it was willing or at least able to eat. After several communications the creature had begun to attempt vocal sounds with all the carefulness of a master painter, seemingly trying to imitate the Human voices it heard.

Gradually the team was able to demonstrate the alphabet, letter sounds, and words. They watched as the creature started to learn the language, though its methods of generating sound made it unable to speak in the same fashion as a Human. Eventually the team, still maintaining its distance from the being, left a device allowing it to type messages that would be read aloud by an artificial voice. Paired with a series of pictorial explanations of words, phrases, and concepts, this allowed it to slowly begin forming messages that became more and more coherent. The short sentences gave the impression of curiosity, of being lost and confused. The Contact Team was soon able to not only trade questions with the bright creature, but approach it and communicate face-to-face.

At last the alien gave its full formal name, most accurately formatted as:

R'Fl||  
Kth' ||T||

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Rk;  
Oeyauoaeiyuioa

Once the Contact team had determined this was not an error of some manner, it explained the structure of its name as roughly coinciding to Public Name/Personal Name/Matronymic/Clan Name. The creature's native language revolved around a dual alphabet, with one sound set used for narrower, more specific concepts, and the other—mainly a tonal progression dependent more on rhythm than outright sound differentiation—was used for broader ideas. In this instance the first alphabet was used to state his (the alien further identified itself as being approximately male) names, while his clan affiliation was a melodious sound-pattern he had chosen to render in terms of vowels. In light of this cultural and linguistic insight, the Contact Team began to trade information with the being about its whereabouts and intentions. He claimed to have been displaced by an exotic energy source and had little concept of where his home would be located relative to his current surroundings. Initially, he would say little else about his occupation or life situation prior to the event that brought it to Pothles IV. He had not heard of any familiar species or locations the Contact Team brought up, leading them to agree the creature was an unfathomably long way from home. The method of his forced travel remained unknown.

Soon, he was given a customized device that mounted to him and allowed him to type out messages with his snout. The creature eventually revealed he was an explorer among his people, all of whom often “sang” to communicate with one another. When the alien tried to “sing”, he instead produced violent elemental bursts. With great dismay, he attributed this fact to a lack of what the alien referred to as “Peacestone”. This stone was some manner of element important to his native culture, and to be in its absence was to hearken back to a darker and more violent time in his species' history.

The alien voraciously ate up all knowledge he could acquire, and was clearly used to technically advanced societies. Once he learned the language, he was intensely trusting and soon enough was taking an interest in Human affairs. He learned with purpose, and chose not to dwell long on his seemingly hopeless absence from his people. Soon the creature began to experiment with the new results of his “singing”, and

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learned to control the effects when taken to a firing range by CSOE representatives. The creature even allowed scans of his body to study him. In recognition of his willingness to humor the Human researchers, the first accomplishment using those scans was to create a customized translator module allowing him to think messages rather than type them. The module was a small device mounted on its body just above the alien's eyes. During the time he spent with researchers and representatives, the creature was allowed access to equivalent information about Humans and as comfortable a place to live as could be made for him.

It was at this point in the alien's new life that Bryluen came to speak with him. The being had taken the name "Vort"—short for Vortex. Bryluen sat at a metal table across from one of the strangest alien lifeforms she had ever seen. Vort's body was an oblong mass around half a meter long and a quarter meter high, culminating in a sort of trunk vaguely similar to that of an anteater from which he produced sound and 'song'. Two feathery wings capable of easily carrying him grew from his back, and between them protruded a short pair of yellow sensory and heat-dissipating vanes running perpendicular to the wings. When not flying, Vort walked along on ten stumpy legs at surprising speeds. He had three eyes in a triangular pattern near the front slope of his body, each a glossy emerald sphere in which a gray and white swirl—almost like a miniature galaxy—constantly spun at different speeds according to Vort's mood and excitement levels.

The most astounding part of Vort's appearance was that every portion of his skin flowed between numerous, vibrant colors. The tuft-like feathers of his wings were iridescent, and went through the same color cycle as the rest of him. This color change was constant, but also responded to his mood at times in a similar vein to his eyes. Overall, Vort was an astonishing sight to even the most seasoned explorer.

As Bryluen sat across from him taking in his outlandish appearance, she began to ask the alien questions. "Vort, you're familiar with some of the more famous CSOE missions, aren't you?"

A brief bubblegum-pink pulse of excitement rushed across Vort's skin. His speech module lit up and emitted his words in a choppy artificial voice. "I AM! I KNOW YOU ARE DAME BRANOK! I HAVE READ MUCH ABOUT YOU! YOU ARE HERE TO VISIT ME?"

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Vort's excited tone made Bryluen smile. The sum of Vort's absolute bizarreness made him fairly adorable, like a fantastical stuffed animal. His tone through the module gave him a childlike air, belying the fact he was an adult of his species who had experienced plenty of trials in his time.

Bryluen answered him. "More than that, Vort: I'm here to ask for your help with an important initiative."

Vort turned a shade of rich brass as he responded. "YOU MEAN ON A MISSION? I HAD HEARD YOU WERE HEADING A MISSION. SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE SHADOWY ONES."

Bryluen's brow lowered. "Are you familiar with the things that struck the UASC research lab?"

Vort tilted his body to one side, possibly in imitation of Human gestures. "THEY SOUND LIKE SOMETHING MY PEOPLE HAVE BEEN STRUGGLING AGAINST. THE THIN ONES—ONLY FOUR LIMBS LIKE YOU, PETAL HEADS—IS THAT FAMILIAR?"

"They certainly are. So—we aren't the only ones with this problem." Bryluen tilted her chair back and set her feet on the table. "We're going to figure them out and stop them. You can call up firestorms and fly, and though this isn't your home I know you could make a big difference. If you say no, we say no more on the matter and you go on with your life."

"OKAY, LET'S GO!"

Bryluen paused. "Well *that* was easy. This will be extremely dangerous, and I debated coming and asking because of that—the idea to ask was run through the Contractual Ethics department. There's a form to look over so you can be sure."

"THEY ARE A THREAT TO MANY THINGS AND NEED TO BE STOPPED. WITHOUT PEACESTONE I AM A YUUAIOEI—LIKE AN OUTCAST OR ... *ROMIN* TO YOU? I MUST FIGHT FOR THE GREATER GOOD, UNTIL I CAN REJOIN MY PEOPLE AND THE LASTING PEACE. ALSO—YOU GAVE ME FOOD AND SHELTER EVEN THOUGH I ALMOST INCINERATED SOME OF YOU. I LIKE HUMANS." Vort cycled through several shades of deep green as he spoke.

"Alright, then," Bryluen said, clapping her hands. "Read this over and let me know when you're ready, Vort."

## 5. The Prodigy and the Paradox

The Listening Post on Ximenes was discovering firsthand why the initial colonization attempt of the world had failed. The Marines of the watch post had warded off the wildlife for quite some time with electric fields, sentry guns, and various other defenses, but now of all things a major incursion of the local insect population was occurring. As it happened, this specific insectoid life on Ximenes was nearly as large as a man. The colony-based creatures built great underground tunnels, and until now had stayed away from the Listening Post.

A few minutes prior, seismic readings at the post intensified, culminating in a tunnel bursting open just outside the post's exterior wall. After an initial affirmation that the territorial creatures would rather attempt to eat a Human rather than allow themselves to be herded, the Marines had hurtled a dozen grenades into the hole. The tunnel was too sturdy and wide to be collapsed by anything short of proper directional charges, however. A swarm of ponderous, beetle-like creatures were attempting to clamber up the exterior wall and attack the Marines with their chitinous beaks. Organized rifle fire had prevented melee contact so far, but it was only a matter of time until the bugs breached the defenses through sheer mass and insistence.

Fortunately, the Listening Post on Ximenes had one asset most

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posts did not. The large front gate lowered with a rumble. Part of the swarm saw the opening and began to flow toward it as the Listening Post's ace-in-the-hole was revealed.

Standing on the threshold was a hulking exosuit two-and-a-half meters high, thickly plated with an imposing missile rack atop the cockpit. The suit resembled a headless weight-lifter with the proportions to match, its squared armor plates like slabs of muscle across its surface. A thick panel of transparent alloy in the suit's upper chest allowed a hazy view of the pilot within, and an array of weapons were folded on the sides of the chassis where they could slide up rails to the suit's brawny wrists. Currently, an oiled rotary cannon inhabited each weapon mount, whirling idly.

The X-1 Marduk, as the suit was known, was the harsh image of crude, unyielding power both coldly industrial and bombastically intimidating. The Marduk Project had been conducted based on a lofty goal: to create a form of military unit that could withstand the punishment and carry the payload of a Walker, without sacrificing the close combat skill and maneuverability of infantry. Unfortunately, in field tests the finesse required to best utilize the assistive technologies granting the suit its immense strength—as well as the focus and temperament required to use the suit's visual-trigger and voice command systems under duress—had rendered it remarkably difficult to use. As a result, the project had been scrapped in favor of other research avenues. The existing suit—and the one jockey capable of manning it to its full potential—were now relegated to stop-gap tasks at outposts which found themselves temporarily under-supplied.

The jockey of the X-1 Marduk was Sergeant Kirby Furcotte, an eight-year veteran in the Astral Marine Corps. She had received a commendation from her superiors to transfer from her Ninurta Assault Walker Squadron to the Marduk training program two years ago. She was a Polymath when it came to vehicles, and she had several of the highest Vehicular Proficiency ratings in the entire Corps, not to mention an unbroken top rank in Walkers. Her gifts for jockeying and natural fervor in battle made her sublimely dangerous in the Marduk, though this fervor seemed to abandon her when she left the exosuit's armored confines.

The attacking arthropodal creatures, of course, failed to

## 5. The Prodigy and the Paradox

appreciate what made Kirby special and instead suffered the immediate brunt of her wrath. With a brief whine, the rotary cannons reached their maximum rotation speed and began to spray high-velocity rounds at a blistering rate of fire. Kirby panned each arm back and forth, sweeping the bugs back from the gate with the same casual disinterest with which she would have mopped a kitchen floor. Yellowish alien fluids splashed wildly in a one hundred eighty degree arc as Kirby strolled forward, allowing the gate to slide shut behind her. After several straight seconds of furious fire, she had cleared a large perimeter around the gate.

Turning to her right toward the alien tunnel, she swapped weapons. The rotary cannons stopped their rotations, and tucked themselves down onto the weapon rail on each arm. Disengaging with a loud clack, they flew back up Kirby's arms and folded neatly onto the sides of the thickly armored ammo case on her back. A pair of long blades shot out of the backs of her gauntlets. The blades' blueish alloy glittered in the sun as Kirby picked up speed and closed on the alien host.

A moment before Kirby reached the aliens nearest the tunnel opening, the rocket pods atop her cockpit fired off an even spread of small munitions that cleared a hemispherical space with a bright flash. She then fell upon the aliens with broad, scything arcs of her wrist blades that sent chunks of bug rolling away in a series of meaty slaps. The bugs' advance on the wall ceased as Kirby engaged in close combat, allowing the Marines to begin pushing the bugs back toward the tunnel. Within a few minutes, the creatures had been corralled back into their entry point at which time Kirby's rocket pods clanked loudly as they loaded a new form of ammunition. Stepping to the lip of the hole, she aimed for a moment, before carefully spraying a series of rockets evenly around the inner circumference of the tunnel. The breaching munitions sunk into the walls and flashed indicator lights showing they were ready for detonation. Kirby dutifully stepped back and triggered them with a wry smile.

The tunnel collapsed evenly inward with a muffled roar, drawing a cheer from the marines along the outpost walls. None of them had seen meaningful combat for nearly three months and, like most marines, had distinctly felt its absence. Their adrenaline-rush wore off as the last creature was put down, and the garrison soon fell into a chorus of groans

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as the realization set in that they were required to begin cleaning the outpost grounds of the copious mass of insectoid corpses left behind. Around three hours later, as the majority of green blood and shards of chitinous material had been swept away, Brylueen arrived within the listening post perimeter via shuttle. The commander of the Marine garrison had rushed out to meet the operative, but Brylueen had perfunctorily waved her badge and asked where she could find Sergeant Furcotte. Kirby was outside her suit, silently finishing post-action repairs and diagnostics as she always did in the Listening Post vehicle depot.

In a number of ways, Sergeant Kirby Furcotte was the incarnation of a detached shrugging motion. She had a long face and was lanky, with terrible posture and pale skin. She was thin nearly to the point of scrawniness, the visual impression all the more exacerbated by her height. Wherever she wasn't awash in soot or oil, she was awash in ruddy freckles. Even when isolated in sealed facilities on lightless planetoids, she seemed to be eternally nursing sunburns on her face, neck, and shoulders. Her mint-colored eyes bore a yellow tinge around the rim of the irises, and a pair of dark patches had taken up permanent residence beneath them long ago. Her long auburn hair was eternally kinked from constantly being tied back and stuffed under a cap.

She currently wore the fitted olive fatigues of an Astral Marine jockey, though she had removed her jacket and tied it about her waist while working due to the oppressive tropical humidity. Beneath, she wore a white tank top which by this point was thoroughly dabbed in patches of various vehicular fluids. Like many Marines, Kirby was swathed in tattoos of various provenance and quality. The numerous designs were in a mostly solid mass down her back, each shoulder down to her elbow, her shins almost to her ankles, and across her stomach and hips. A stand-alone design was tucked behind her left ear.

Brylueen approached and leaned one hip on a nearby work table. She had eschewed her own jacket due to the rain forest climate, instead wearing a breezy white shirt and fitted jeans with her metal CSOE badge clipped to her waistband. Brylueen spoke in Kirby's native English, though as a Marine Kirby could speak in both Modern Standard Mandarin and Modern Standard Arabic, and as a jockey in particular was familiar with French.

## 5. The Prodigy and the Paradox

“Sergeant Furcotte, I need to speak with you.” Kirby turned from her work, surprise evident on her narrow face. A thick, ragged scar started at her right collar-bone and ran across her chest at a downward angle where it disappeared beneath her tank top. Tattooed flames wreathed the dramatic tear.

She sniffed, blinking hard and twitching her sharp nose. Kirby’s voice bore a thick, lazy drawl that stretched out her vowels. “Uh, yes ma’am?”

“Dame Bryluen Branok, CSOE.”

Kirby instantly snapped to attention, her posture straightening and her combat boots thumping together as she saluted. “Sergeant Furcotte, Dame. What can I do for you?”

“I have something to ask you, Sergeant,” Bryluen casually waved a hand to tell the jockey to be at ease, causing Kirby to slowly relax into her standard posture. “I am forming a strike team to engage a new threat to Human space. Both mobile ordnance and a skilled pilot like yourself would be an enormous boon. Joining up means a long-term assignment with housing—including a workshop for any alterations or improvements to the Marduk you wish to make.”

The last point caused Kirby’s wispy eyebrows to raise in interest. If nothing else she had a penchant for all mechanical endeavors, but had so far been disallowed from altering the Marduk to her liking. “This is a CSOE task force, or a Marine assignment directed by the CSOE, Dame Branok?”

“CSOE entirely. You’ll be honorably discharged from the Marines and will be bound by the CSOE code of conduct under deferred legality—basically just don’t commit war crimes or spit in the faces of important people, pretty easy stuff. The boys and girls here on Ximenes get a courtesy group of patrol drones while you get to wear what you like, lounge about under lax personal behavior requirements when off-duty, and enjoy a set of proper amenities with pay. Moreover, you’ll have a chance to make a big difference against what could be a major threat—in fact, a woman like you could end up helping write the book on engagement practices,” Bryluen spread her hands. “Then again, you could just stay here and bug-hunt if that seems like too much.”

Kirby smiled. “No, ma’am, a task force assignment sounds mighty fine.”

## The Shadow Among The Stars

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The dense taiga stretched out for thousands of miles in each direction across the surface of Glenn's World. The small village of Thales was nearly forty-five kilometers to the northwest of Bryluen's current destination in the woodlands. She was bound in a thick black coat with a neat fur trim to insulate against the bitter, marrow-freezing cold outside. The shuttle buffeted quietly on the arctic wind as it neared the drop-off point. Despite the warmth of the shuttle interior, Bryluen repeatedly flexed her gloved fingers as she considered both the intensely frigid exterior temperatures and the nature of the final person she hoped to acquire for Dread Naught.

Despite Vort, this last recruit may likely have been the most inscrutable Bryluen was going to contact. Nicadzim Alexievich Kuzmako had been under casual surveillance by the CSOE for years. He was, in brief, scientifically unexplainable. The essential characteristic of what made Nicadzim special was that reality *misbehaved* in his presence. He knew things he couldn't have known and spoke of experiences he couldn't have had in orders they couldn't have occurred in, all while bizarre things happened around him. Gravity distortions, isolated instances of objects in time loops, and numerous other impossibilities were the norm around Nicadzim.

He seemed to occasionally ignore some essential rules of Time and Space himself, allowing him to alter his location in a way that wasn't possible. He also appeared to have difficulty interacting with events and people in a chronologically consistent fashion, reflected in the tenses of his speech. In the brief contacts the CSOE had with him he spoke of other planes of existence and impossible beings, and it had been clear the oddities of his presence were not entirely under his control.

More pertinently he had at times demonstrated the ability to call up some forms of abstracted weaponry from the recesses of his mind, and such an instance is what initially drew the CSOE's attention. Regardless, it had been determined Nicadzim was ultimately harmless and mainly desired to be left alone. The CSOE had since directed inquiries and other bothersome types away from him. As such, he had been informed of Bryluen's visit a day prior so as not to overly disturb

## 5. The Prodigy and the Paradox

his peace.

Nicadzim lived in a spartan wood and stone cabin he had erected with his own hands. Food and other supplies were most often delivered to his remote home, but Nicadzim would occasionally go into town for special occasions. When Bryluen's shuttle came in for a landing outside the cabin, Nicadzim was sitting in an old chair on his porch waiting. The mysterious man seemed around Bryluen's age. He had a bald head with bushy eyebrows and a thick, dirty blonde mustache run through with gray and silver. He was subtly tanned and had beady eyes the color of swirling Mediterranean waters. He was a massive wall of a man who must have weighed at least seventy kilograms more than Bryluen. He was barrel-chested with hairy, tree-trunk arms and legs that could prop up a court-house. Had he been standing, Bryluen would have only come up to his chest. A broad bulge above his belt line brought some much-needed reality to his titanic bulk. Nicadzim wore thick jeans and despite gales that would give an exposed person frostbite in less than fifteen minutes, wore a short-sleeved brown shirt. Overall Nicadzim heavily resembled a Strongman from an ancient circus and could almost certainly perform the part.

Frost buffeted in as the transport's loading ramp lowered, and as Bryluen strode downward she could already feel ice crystals accumulating on her eyelashes. Her senses remained ever-sharp from years of experience and training, so in less than three seconds she had noted an entire litany of oddities in the environment.

Firstly she felt the wildly unsettling sensation of every hair on her body shifting about thirty degrees to her left, as if pulled by some unseen magnetic force. The heavy snow fell to the ground at a gentle angle—an angle almost perpendicular to the direction of the harsh winds. A hissing sound arose from the cabin as snowflakes that would otherwise settle on Nicadzim's roof simply slid off, falling faster than they should at an angle too shallow for their apparent trajectory. A cigar nestled in an ash tray behind Nicadzim's chair puffed smoke in time with his breathing.

The huge man paid these things no mind, and as Bryluen approached him she showed no outward concern for her environment. His face was difficult to read as he surveyed the Operative. He rose slowly to his full, impressive height and extended a hand. Bryluen felt

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her own hand enclosed in his warm grip, and she shook firmly despite the fact she was still three meters away from Nicadzim with her arm hanging downward. Her sharp eyes spotted the indentation in Nicadzim's hand where her fingers should be.

He spoke, his voice low and thick with an accent of hard consonants and harsh vowels. His speech possessed a percussive cadence that drove his words along with solemn certainty. "Greetings, Dame Branok; I was aware this day would one day come. In what manner may I have assisted you?"

The CSOE had found almost no meaningful records of Nicadzim. Even his origins were unclear; though he had been heard to speak only English, his accent was indicative of a Slavic native language. "Good afternoon, Nicadzim. I apologize for the intrusion, but I have something very important to ask you. Nothing like studies or research you've refused before."

Nicadzim gazed silently at her, his expression unclear. Bryluen paused as long as was appropriate before continuing. "People are in danger. I'm putting together a task force to fight against a new threat that we know very little about, and you would make an amazing addition the team."

The large man shook his head. "Madame, I will inform you that I am not performing acts of violence."

Bryluen sniffed and rubbed her ever-reddening nose. She would be unsurprised if icicles were growing in her eyebrows. "We both know that's not true. You're good at many things, but lying does not seem to be one of them. We know about both the attempted mugging and the T'hròstag attack at Aldrin's Peak. Or rather, the attack that never actually happened because *you* got there first. If we didn't know about you, we would be clueless to this day about what had wiped out an entire raiding party. We know that you risked your life to thanklessly save many, many others for no reward or acknowledgment."

Nicadzim's expression shifted into a thoughtful cast but he still said nothing. The snow aligned with the wind once more, as the cigar behind Nicadzim became sopping wet. A group of birds fluttered from—or perhaps *into* the trees given each was flying backwards. Bryluen felt her coat begin to float on her body.

The Operative waited again for Nicadzim to speak for a few

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seconds before resuming. “I’ve read the reports, watched the tapes, heard the depositions, parsed theories. All my career I’ve learned to read between the lines, so if I know anything it’s that you are secluded in these woods neither because you don’t care, nor because you’re afraid. I believe that you’re out here because you don’t want others to worry. Not because you’re a danger to others, or to avoid being misunderstood. You’re here because you care enough about the anxieties of people you’ve never met that you would consign yourself to a lonely existence just to grant others one less possible concern in their lives.

“You are a kind man, Nicadzim. I’m not going to try and tempt you by promising any positive end to this endeavor. But what I *can* promise is that joining me will be the best opportunity you will ever have to do as much good for others as possible. I am *only* taking up your time today because what I am asking of you is so important that I would not think to bring it before someone who couldn’t make an enormous difference. You do the impossible, Nicadzim. You are the ultimate clutch-hitter, and we are going in blind.”

The huge man breathed deeply with all the import and restrained power of a sleeping dragon. He nodded slowly. “Your logic and reasoning will be, as I imagine you will become aware, quite sound. You indeed possess the necessary information to best understand the implications of my condition. Therefore I will review the contract and, assuming I do not take issue with any of the particulars therein, I will accept.”

Bryluen breathed out, playing up a feeling of relief. “I will work with you on whatever accommodations you need. *Any* concern you have, you can bring to me personally.”

## **6. Dawn of Dread Naught**

Raven's Landing was expanded greatly in the three months since High Command had granted Bryluen control of Dread Naught. During that period, three more attacks by the shadowy creatures—all on a small scale—had occurred for no obvious reason and with just as sudden an end.

The library and exercise room were extended while a full machine shop, firing range, and an automatic medical bay had been added. Along the corridor leading to Bryluen's room, living spaces tailored to the requests and needs of each task force member were constructed. There were now two storage areas at the beginning of the corridor for excess supplies and equipment. Bryluen's armor stand was now part of a larger equipment area that could accommodate whatever armor and necessary supplies were needed by each task force member during an emergency deployment. The remainder of Raven's Landing was already been intended to accommodate meetings and gatherings of various officials, so further extensions were unnecessary.

That morning was the first time the members of the task force met one another. Each was to arrive via low-key, private transportation arranged by the CSOE. Bryluen waited in the lobby, leaning one hip on the rim of the fountain with a tumbler of whisky in hand. She wore a

## 6. Dawn of Dread Naught

stone-gray set of semi-formal attire, but was barefoot as was her custom when home. Outside a calming rain poured from the pale sky, the drops quietly dissipating against the windows upon the faintly visible haze of the reacting energy shields. The trees were unfurled as widely as possible to catch the nourishing downpour. A flash across the horizon occasionally heralded a gentle roll of thunder.

The Operative gazed into the serene storm and sipped from the swirling darkness in her tumbler, contemplating the feeling of trepidation in her gut. Even for her, Dread Naught was an important and high-risk operation. Nonetheless, she believed fully in each risk she had taken with her task force selections. She had made charts and tables of possible conflicts of methodology or personality, and carefully studied tactical information to generate the most balanced group she could. She had consulted every form of information possible and every angle she could conceive, but nothing so important could ever be predicted or planned for entirely. Even for a group of five it was certain to be a monstrous endeavor—after all, High Dispensation Initiatives were rare and expensive for a reason. The funding and wide purview granted to Dread Naught was itself a sign of how unpredictable and difficult the task was expected to be. It would be foolish for her *not* to feel a tense expectation at the outset of such a mission.

The first member of Dread Naught to arrive was Kirby. Unknown to them, Bryluen had arranged for their arrivals to be evenly staggered a half hour apart, giving her time to introduce each to his or her living space and have them get accustomed to the layout of Raven's Landing. In addition, each member had been given dossiers on the others to reduce the possible amount of surprise—particularly where Vort and Nicadzim were concerned.

Kirby, inside the Marduk, exited the Marine lifter that had carried her to Raven's Landing. A faintly visible haze of energy dissipated the rain falling upon the surface of the landing pad. Kirby had her belongings secured to cargo containers on the exosuit's back. Ducking into the entry hatch, she read the signage in the entry way and backed herself up into the equipment area. Kirby popped her cockpit open and stepped out of the Marduk to grab her belongings. She wore a white tank top beneath a worn denim jacket, while her legs were still clad in her Jockey fatigue pants and combat boots. An orange cap sat

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atop her head. Dragging the pair of Marine-issue metal wheeled cases containing her belongings, she rolled into the lobby. She instinctively popped a sharp salute to Bryluen, who waved her down. Kirby briefly shook her head, realizing she had already forgotten she wasn't reporting to a Marine anymore. Bryluen rose and greeted her before helping Kirby tow her things to her living space.

Being a career Astral Marine, Kirby's tastes were by no means extravagant. A standard twin bed, a practical couch, and a massage chair adorned an otherwise plain room and basic bathroom (albeit with a heated toilet seat). Most of the important parts of Kirby's lifestyle were books contained in her cargo, her small selection of clothing, some basic toiletries, and her favorite hand-portable tools. Bryluen and Kirby made some small talk, mainly about the type of whisky Bryluen drank and the significance of Kirby's book selection.

The second arrival was The Saint-Runner, who had even fewer personal belongings. He unsurprisingly wore his black athletic wear and hydraulic boots. The bulk of what he had brought were his weapons and the tools he used to maintain and improve them. Bryluen again helped the Saint-Runner get settled in, allowing him to awkwardly probe her with several specific questions about the living situation. He was clearly unfamiliar with the mundane aspects of living with others. His living quarters were cozy enough, with a soft carpet and a few pieces of comfortable furniture. For him it was a distinct pleasure to live somewhere in any sort of comfort, so he was quite excited to see his room for the first time—making special note of the roomy shower.

Kirby was sitting in the lounge when the Saint-Runner had finished unpacking. Kirby blinked, wide-eyed, several times in a row as she got her first good look at his face. They recognized one another from the dossiers. Kirby stiffly motioned to the neighboring stool, a smile finding its way onto her face as an afterthought. Runner, apparently used to inspiring silent stares, slid into the stool and extended a hand to her.

"S-so, Sergeant Furcotte," He allowed the phrase to hover for a moment. "I'm pleased to, uh, to meet you."

Kirby briefly lost the ability to greet someone, and seemed to look for it somewhere between the Saint-Runner's eyes. "... Call me wh — ... Kirby."

He grinned. "It's o-okay, I'm used to it."

## 6. Dawn of Dread Naught

“Used to what?” Kirby’s nose twitched.

The Saint-Runner raised his eyebrows, and Kirby cleared her throat. “I’m gonna shake your hand now.”

“I think I’d like that.”

Third came Vort. The chamber made for him had a suitably low roof (and a similarly downsized door) and was an octagonal space with a sunken, padded area in one corner for sleeping. Otherwise the room contained various forms of media, and a device that both lit the area in multiple wavelengths and played tones coordinated with the light as it varied throughout the day. The device was built to Vort’s specifications and was common to find in the homes of his people, its multi-spectral effects apparently providing a certain atmospheric and psychological effect on him that would be important to his comfort. His bathing space was an automated dust bath, alongside a specially developed soap dispenser for his eyes. A Firmware patch had been applied to the Dispensary in the lounge to accommodate for Vort’s dietary concerns.

For obvious reasons the Saint-Runner and Kirby were highly interested in Vort, and the alien was all too happy to humor them. The last to arrive was, of course, Nicadzim. He brought the fewest supplies—simply some clothes and toiletries—and wore the same jeans as the last time Bryluen had seen him, along with a fitted blue shirt that emphasized his muscled bulk. His room was—at his request and warning—built to withstand many kinds of force. The furniture was made of strong materials, the walls were reinforced, and the door to his room was an armored hatch. According to Nicadzim he had more than once been set upon by indescribable entities while dreaming, and did not want to cause lasting damage if such a thing occurred. The only true nod to comfort in his room was a broad fireplace burning 3D-printed wood, with the excess thermal energy and smoke particulates recycled into other systems in Raven’s Landing.

Once Bryluen helped him settle in, she announced to the assembled group in the lounge they would start their inception meeting in a half hour. The group got acquainted with Nicadzim and due to the dossiers were curious but not overly surprised when oddities began to occur. At first all of them began to simultaneously sneeze repeatedly for about ten seconds—including Vort, whose species did not in fact sneeze

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under normal circumstances. Soon after, the alien asked Nicadzim how he had learned Vort's language. This confused the others, who realized they each heard him speaking in their own native languages. The large man was unsurprised by this revelation. Several minutes later, the friction of the bar-top mostly vanished. Kirby attempted to slide a mug over to the Saint-Runner at this time, unwittingly turning it into a high-velocity projectile. Fortunately, the Saint-Runner lashed out a hand and caught it almost instantly.

With each of the task force members having been introduced and beginning to get a feel for one another, they left the lounge to assemble in the handsome meeting room—or more accurately they entered the meeting room to find Nicadzim was already sitting there despite having been with them in the lounge. The meeting room at Raven's Landing was a polished chamber with a long elliptical stone table in the center. A large projector display jutted from the center of the table, and comfortable wheeled chairs were aligned all around. The team sat arranged around the middle of the table with Bryluen standing.

The Operative opened the meeting using English, the language all of the assembled team members had in common. "Welcome to Raven's Landing, your new home. Assembled here is the entirety of the CSOE task force designated: Dread Naught."

The Saint-Runner nodded, clearly approving of the name. A golden wave of color washed over Vort as Bryluen continued. "Before I explain the details of our mission that were disallowed from being revealed until now, let's go over names one more time. We're going to need to be brief with each other in a combat situation. You don't need to remind me I'm your superior, so you can just call me Bryl for short. Kirby and Vort are pretty practical. Saint-Runner?"

He pointed to himself and grinned. "O-oh, just call me Runner. Everyone already knows I'm a Saint."

Bryluen and Kirby snorted. "Fair enough. Nicadzim?"

As always he took a breath before speaking. "I have not objected to being called Nico in the future."

Bryluen clapped. "Excellent, that's sorted. You've all seen your living quarters and been guided around the amenities. Each of you have a computer in your quarters with Gal-Net access as well as internal chat and messaging. I am always at your disposal, period, twenty-six hours a

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day. Questions, concerns, anything. I am used to a job that never ceases and it *is* important that you are comfortable and provided for because a *lot* will be asked of you. Having a private bath is the least compensation for the hardest work any of you will have ever endured.”

Bryluen paused and motioned to Nicadzim. “Well, most of you. Might that statement apply to you, Nico? Now I’m curious.”

The big man tilted his head back and forth for a moment. “This became the most difficult thing I had done *was* possible. I am certain that our work is thoroughly challenging by any standard.”

“Sounds about right to me. That brings us to what actually *will* be asked of you. As you all have heard, we will be engaging in combat against a new foe about which little is known. The framework in which we will be doing that is as follows: We have been given access to not only a newer protocol for Gate Dilation that will allow us more leeway in arrival distance, but an experimental space-faring vehicle that is being christened and delivered in ten days.”

Bryluen looked over to Kirby, whose face immediately shone with excitement. She nodded to the Marine. “Yes, Kirby, you *will* be the designated pilot unless circumstances intervene, and it *is* a beautiful piece of engineering. Though we already have several standard shuttles for other purposes, the quick-response vehicle will be what we use to answer distress calls or priority deployments in order to arrive on site in time to engage the enemy. Such will mainly involve our designated foe, but we may be expected to deal with other situations if no other CSOE personnel are available or if High Command dictates that we are the best for the job for any reason. As specified in your contract, you may also be expected to represent Dread Naught to dignitaries or other officials once we go live. That is, however, only expected to happen sometime after we have an established rhythm of operation. But as you can see, the job will involve quite a few responsibilities aside from the unique struggles of a small-unit operation against superior enemy numbers.

“As for our enemy: They have yet to receive an official designation. They have attacked a variety of targets in large hordes without warning, the largest attack being performed on a science facility with the only apparent result being the removal of an ancient stone. Details can be found in your Initiative On-boarding info packets. The enemy demonstrates no real will to communicate, and are absolutely

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aggressive upon sighting a foe to the degree that we believe the individuals we have encountered are reliant on another being's intellect to provide them any real direction. The method of their appearance and travel is yet to be determined but is so far undetectable, even within ten thousand kilometers. For those unfamiliar with stellar combat, ten thousand kilometers is basically the end of your nose. Even then, visual contact has not been meaningfully established before the enemy lands. Upon first contact they will appear shadowy and insubstantial. Their visual impression becomes more clear in ultraviolet, but will completely solidify after a total of an hour or so of visual exposure. Recordings or camera views have no problems rendering them, however."

With a press of a button on a console jutting from the table, Bryluen triggered an image of one of the thin, energy-projecting creatures. Post-battle reconstruction and the studying of recordings of the attacks made their biology clearer. Their petaled heads were ringed in patches of rough, bony growths like broken teeth. The opening in the head was lined in waves of thin fibers that vibrated when the creature vocalized. They also possessed a short tail for balancing their low, crooked posture. Bryluen allowed the team to look at the creature for a moment.

"This is being referred to as a Rabisu, and is the most commonly encountered enemy thus far. They stand slightly smaller than a Human and have sharp claws on their hands able to damage armor, though it will take them work to get through Marine plate. Through currently unknown methods they can generate and project flaming balls of energy capable of burning flesh and disfiguring standard Marine armor enough to compromise it. They are individually not very dangerous, but usually pour forth in a numerous wave."

Another click, and the image changed to one of the horned, hunched beasts, a single faceted insectoid eye visible above its maw of tendrils. The creature's horns were slightly twisted and crooked and its four muscular legs seemed a strict contrast to the twig-like build of a Rabisu.

"This is a Gugalanna, and is exactly as subtle as it looks. They're as tall as a Human at the shoulder, and probably weigh around three hundred fifty kilograms. Gugalannas charge headlong and can toss aside a fully equipped man with its tendrils if need be. Otherwise it thrashes

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violently with its horns, and the creature's strength means busting through infantry armor is fairly easy for it."

Nicadzim sat forward and rested his elbows on his legs, his brow furrowed in thought like a statue of a stern deity. A sickly purple splashed down Vort's wings as he observed the Gugalanna. Runner made a disgusted face at the projection of the creature, but was quickly distracted as the water in the glass he had brought into the meeting began to migrate sideways, threatening to spill out toward the wall. He quickly turned the glass on its side with a quiet clink and watched the water pool against the bottom. Kirby, who was sat next to him, dipped her finger into the water and watched as it dripped sideways back into the glass. They both stared a moment longer before Runner turned his head on its side and concocted a method of drinking some of his oddly-oriented water.

Bryluen triggered the display one more time to show a new creature, similar to a Rabisu but much taller. It was still lanky overall, and had a warped surface to its body like it was covered in burn scars. A dark, plate-like growth was spread across the front of its torso.

"This is what we're calling an En-Rabisu, encountered only in the latest attack. Their behavior is reasonably similar, but they are a good head and shoulders over your average Marine and tougher than they look. Their energy projection and claws are accordingly much more dangerous. Fortunately, they seem much, much rarer than Rabisus."

Runner had crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "Enbisu. Quicker."

"I'm sorry, what was that, Runner?"

He cleared his throat. "We sh-ould call it an Enbisu."

Bryluen imperiously arched an eyebrow. "Well *we* just might do that, but the *official* name remains En-Rabisu for the purpose of thematic consistency. As of this time, those are the known forms of our enemy. All relevant information, action reports, etc., have been forwarded to your quarters and I expect you to read them. I'll be sorting through further intel and will forward anything vital. Otherwise, anything we get will be available through the data banks in the library, as well as a steady flow of curated Galactic news.

"So, to recap: All amenities are available. I don't care how much you eat, and I don't care when you sleep but you *will* be able to at *all*

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times get out of this door within five minutes if the alarms go off. Period. You can do whatever you want on your personal computers, and whatever you want with your personal time here at Raven's Landing—aside from getting out of shape—but to leave Raven's landing and use a shuttle you are required to get clearance from me. If I'm in the office feel free to come in, and remember to *relax*. This will be stressful and difficult with a number of unique problems and challenges. Any questions?"

Runner raised his hand. "So to be clear I *can* work on my weapons and use the firing range as I want?"

The Operative nodded. "Absolutely. For you and anyone else, if you need supplies of some sort delivered that are directly relevant to the mission, ask me and I can get it arranged. To be honest our funding is enough that getting fancy ammunition and raw materials isn't going to affect much. Anything personal comes out of your pay and can be ordered how you please. Any proper ordnance will need to be tested elsewhere with my approval, and obviously the Renewed Geneva Accords still apply."

Kirby hesitatingly raised her hand. "So, I *really* can use just ... whatever *language* I well want around you?"

Bryluen gave her a quizzical look. "Yes, Kirby, I genuinely do not give a shit. We drank whisky together earlier. You can look up porn on your computer. I am currently barefoot. I've shaved my legs in front of my boss. I'm a CSOE Operative, not your Marine Officer, so while I expect you to help save the galaxy at a moment's notice, I *don't* care if you want to make a nun blush while you do it."

Kirby threw her head back over the top of her chair. "Oh, thank *fuck!* That was *not* gonna be easy on me!"

The group laughed. Runner looked around the room for a few seconds afterward before raising his hand again. "Uh, why is it fair and justifiable that you have the right to kill a Sover-reign citizen without a formal criminal charge?"

Bryluen smiled at the sudden challenge. "The reason my authority is justifiable is that when I *do* shoot someone I have to fill out forms and reports, and I am tracked in many ways. For example, I received a brief inquiry from the CSOE when I last bought a new brand of dandruff shampoo, and High Command spoke to me *on video* about

## 6. Dawn of Dread Naught

leading Dread Naught while I was bathing.

“Few can do my job because the ‘freedom’ to take lives and override local legality and military authority is inextricably linked to a crushing amount of accountability and the surrendering of my privacy. If I’m on a date, the CSOE knows. If I’m asleep? They know. On top of that, *your* contracts are so lax on behavior because if you perform an unethical or illegal action, *I* will be considered responsible. As far as High Command is concerned all of this is entirely on my head. So yes, I can kill someone that needs to die, but I sure as hell can’t be cavalier about it.”

Runner nodded, apparently satisfied with the answer. Vort, having observed the others, raised one silvery wing. “THE CONTRACT MENTIONED ARMOR AND OTHER GEAR BEING PROVIDED?”

“Correct. On the way in you may have noticed a few sets of armor. The olive suit is fitted for Kirby, eigengrau for Runner, cerulean for Nico, and obviously the creme set with the wing guards is for you, Vort.”

Vort’s eyes spun rapidly for a moment. “CREME. SUCH A *PRETTY* COLOR!”

Bryluen smirked and continued on dryly. “Aside from the creative color scheme, each armor set has some unique features, so let me know if you need any adjustments or changes. We’ve also got a selection of standard Marine weaponry in case of any emergencies. Also: no one touch my armor out of curiosity while it is on the stand because it *will* electrocute you. Obviously my armor is the oh-so-sexy bronze set nearest the door.

“At 1400 hours, be in the Workshop so we can go over the usage of standard equipment and get used to assembling and wearing your armor. This is important, you are *required* to know how to use your armor’s features. We’ll have constant training throughout the week and further sessions spread out from there to ensure proficiency and to drill battlefield communication skills. Excellent; meeting over.”

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After the meeting adjourned, the team sat and chatted for a while before heading off to become comfortable with their new environment.

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Bryluen retired to her office to check the latest reports and send updates to High Command. Nicadzim lingered in the lounge scanning through the mind-bogglingly long list of meals available. The muscles along his limbs alone could account for the entirety of Kirby's bodily mass, so it was unsurprising that he ate an impressive amount of food. Vort scuttled around exploring every nook and surface he could for a while before settling in next to Nicadzim and watching a drama on the holoscreen above the bar. The pair eventually chatted about Human dramatic tropes and cinematic conventions.

Kirby stomped through the lobby in the Marduk. She entered the Workshop to begin planning improvements and adjustments now that she was permitted to resolve long-standing issues she had complained about. Bryluen had made sure the floors of Raven's Landing could withstand the weight of the exosuit for just that reason, though it was still a bizarre sight to watch the menacing construct advance through the elegant home—it was simply impossible for the hulking death-machine to look casual.

Runner had long since become occupied in the dim, welcoming library, a temperature-controlled space of old lush chairs and hardwood shelves evoking the classic image of what constituted a library, while including numerous modern features. A robust selection of actual books were present but a pair of data banks provided immediate access to a boundless array of knowledge, and there was a holo-projector capable of generating a wide variety of simulations or films in a sequestered viewing booth.

As night fell, the members of Dread Naught each drifted off to their rooms to rest. Bryluen was the last to retire, poring over the latest reports one last time. She had requested High Command look into—at minimum—intel-coordination with the Qixing. She had little hope for any aid or data from the T'hròstag due to ongoing tensions. The threat would have to become much more obviously dire before the strictly prideful beings would be willing to talk, despite their grudging respect for Humanity—or at least Humanity's martial capabilities.

Satisfied she had done her due diligence for the night Bryluen left her office, crossed the lobby, and walked down the living quarters corridor. The storage spaces were the first doors she passed, followed by Vort's short door on the left and Runner's to the right. The next pair was

## **6. Dawn of Dread Naught**

Kirby's door on the left and Nicadzim's hatch on the right. An emergency light was installed over the hatch in case he needed assistance or to warn of any odd occurrences. Bryluen looked back up the hall toward the sleeping task force one last time. Deep in her bones, she felt the weighty sensation of something profound and inevitable awaiting them all. She took a last, deep breath and entered her room.

## 7. The *Atet* and the Alarm

On the morning of the quick response vehicle's delivery, Bryluen woke before dawn. An early bath was followed by a quiet hour or two at the lounge drinking coffee and eating her breakfast. She read morning updates and news off a wafer-thin tab she held in one hand, its soft glow the only illumination other than the gentle under-lighting of the bar top.

Outside, the local star had not yet begun to peek up over the horizon. The unindustrialized surface of *Aves Prime* was rendered a void of absolute darkness broken only by the occasional, distant flashes of bio-luminescent, tree-dwelling reptilians.

Above the harsh silhouettes of the trees and mountains the Milky Way was easily visible, a brilliant swath across the sky like a glittering streak of paint. Thousands of stars, unhindered by light pollution, twinkled in the firmament above like a distant candlelight vigil. Somewhere in the inky blackness, Dread Naught's transport was on its way.

A notification populated on Bryluen's tab. She smiled wryly at its contents and used the tab to send a message to Kirby's private computer, knowing the Jockey would almost certainly be awake in excited anticipation.

## 7. The Atet and the Alarm

**Op. B. Branok:** *She's in system. She's coming.*

**K. Furcotte:** *Oh shit, oh shit, should I wear makeup? I wanna look pretty when she first sees me.*

**Op. B. Branok:** *I would address your need to feel attractive for a spaceship, but instead I'll first point out that you don't own makeup.*

**K. Furcotte:** *Let me borrow some of yours!*

**Op. B. Branok:** *I don't own makeup.*

**K. Furcotte:** *Goddamn, what are ya, self-confident?*

**Op. B. Branok:** *I once spent two months as a Geisha in order to ambush a slaver that had kidnapped a diplomat.*

**K. Furcotte:** *...*

**K. Furcotte:** *You coulda just said yes.*

Within the next minute or so, Kirby had thrown on a green sports bra and ragged pair of shorts. Bryluen, wearing an elegant black silk bathrobe and red woolen pants, shoved a steaming mug of coffee into Kirby's hand as they met at the lobby. Kirby was not particularly a morning person, and it showed in the unenviable deadness of her eyes. She sipped the black coffee without comment. Her eyes slowly widened as the pleasant, hot liquid flowed down her throat. "What ... what *is* this?"

"One of my most important supplies. No mortal coffee would do the job. Let's get out to the pad and watch her come down. She should be visible in about three minutes."

The pair stood outside with the darkness stretching out around them for miles. The tentative flicker of light behind the far mountains began to slowly fill the sky with golden warmth. In a couple of minutes, a burning point of light began to shine as the ship descended through the atmosphere. As the craft's sleek shape touched down followed by three shuttles, the first beams of daylight glinted off of its glossy surface.

The craft was a few dozen meters of silver and blue alloy rife in the unique type of curved sensuality only precise aerodynamic math could provide. The ship was a cross between a long, beautiful dancer's leg and a rapier, its pointed nose artfully sweeping back and out to flare into the set of four primary thrusters at the rear. The various lateral adjustment and attitude thrusters across the surface were gracefully inset so as not to interrupt the ship's luxurious lines, and a pair of long, thin

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cannons were tucked in close to the bottom surface on a shallow turret. The craft rested on four chromed feet, and the slender landing ramp opened midway down the ship's belly.

In proud, white letters the ship declared itself along the side of the nose: H.S.S.X.4-A *Atet*.

Kirby sighed wistfully like a modest, Victorian maiden gazing at her soon-to-be-lover. "You are a sexy, *sexy* bitch."

Bryluen smiled, her eyes narrowed from the glare of the rising star. "I'm guessing you'd like to see her insides?"

The CSOE pilot that brought the *Atet* in for landing—as well as the pilots of the three shuttles to be left for Dread Naught's use—left together on the fourth shuttle, giving Kirby and Bryluen free reign of the craft.

Within was a series of chambers and rooms free of any design excess. The bridge at the heart of the vehicle was a bright space loaded with readouts and exterior displays. The rest of the ship was arranged around it, featuring storage space, the disembarkation bay at the top of the ramp, a triage bay, the drive core, and access to the weapon systems.

It was a fine, beautiful craft intended entirely for ferrying its occupants as quickly as possible from one point to the next. To accompany the ship, a floating Compression Drive frame had been placed near the gate. The *Atet* would dock in the center of the frame and push it along, remotely triggering the Drive on approach to a gate. This allowed the *Atet* to use gates without piggy-backing on a larger vehicle, but was prohibitively expensive as a solution for individual craft on a wider scale. Nonetheless, the independence it afforded Dread Naught was invaluable.

Kirby sat in the pilot's seat, setting her coffee mug in the cup holder next to her in triumph. She soon began fondling the control surfaces in a way that could easily be considered inappropriate. The majority of the craft's operation was handled by the pilot, though a second individual could monitor diagnostic information and the long-range displays. She looked back at Bryluen and was about to speak, but the Operative knew what she was going to ask.

"Go ahead and take her for a lap, Furcotte. I'll stay down here."

Kirby made a sort of squealing gasp and began start-up procedures, appreciating the intuitive placement of the controls. The

## 7. The Atet and the Alarm

craft could be landed or set to take off on auto-pilot, which would allow Kirby to leave the *Atet* to take her suit into battle when required. For the time being she simply prepared to take the craft on a cruise around the planet, a simple feat for such an extraordinarily fast vehicle.

Bryluen strolled out of the *Atet* and back inside the house, more than satisfied with the quick response craft. She queued another mug of coffee and returned to reading her tab in the lounge. Fifteen minutes later Nicadzim arose, a storm of foreign gasses and sand blowing out his room's hatch as he emerged. The air system kicked in and began to cycle out the sudden pollutants. Nicadzim himself was dusty as he slumped into a chair next to Bryluen.

She cocked an eyebrow. "You ... look like you had a busy night."

The big man queued a cup of coffee. "I often did. I spent the evening journeying through a land where it rained sand and distant memories of pain. Above are masses of fulgurites, and I walk upon clouds. The precipitation will at best be unpleasant, but the sky whales will be quite beautiful in the cooler months."

Bryluen froze. "You *went* somewhere?"

"I did or will, but I also did not. I am rested, yet will venture. In sleep I often visit places difficult to describe, see glimpses of the dead, and pass fragments of the future. The best analogue was to describe it to you as journeying around a vast, endless puzzle. I carry with me fragments of now, and of what was, of what could be, and of what will be, and when luck smiled I could fit those pieces into their proper places as I happened to pass the correctly-shaped holes. Indeed I seem to bear the physical evidence of a trek that occurred ... yet did not, and will not, and could not." He smiled thinly. "Such things were part of my normal daily experience. To me, you were skinning your knee in Primary School while playing, but shed no tears. You are walking to the nurse yourself, annoyed at what you will regard as clumsiness—"

"—rather than the fact that I was in pain. You've seen a memory of mine? It's still happening for you?" A drone placed Nicadzim's coffee in front of him.

"That I will, as well as other things, many more fragmentary and puzzling. I have been told I often will not be keeping events in their 'proper' order, without mention of grammatical tenses. In truth, I speak

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to how I am perceiving events as closely as language allows. Part of me, past or present or future, is here acting. That part was not always the same as the part of me to speak, or to think—my words were rarely entirely in sync with what I was doing, or what I am doing, or what I will do.”

Nicadzim moved to tell the dispensary to give him creamer for his coffee, but with a swift crack Bryluen slapped his hand. The big man glanced at his hand as if making a small realization, then looked up at Bryluen.

She was sipping from her coffee and giving him a sideways, innately threatening glance. “You may have impossible adventures each night, but don’t you *dare* ruin the perfect coffee with cream, you son of a bitch.”

Nicadzim smiled. “Ah, you will say it will be *that* fine a brew?” He took a sip, and immediately a dreadfully serious look came over his face. “I saw. You saved me from a terrible crime. From where has this coffee originated?”

The Operative sat back in satisfaction. “The moon of Navis Prima, inside a controlled environment custom-built with precision soil, air, and wildlife to create the perfect coffee blend. It took them one hundred forty iterations of their bean to get to this point.”

“Their effort will be well-spent.” Nicadzim’s hand darted out to pre-emptively have another cup prepared.

Soon the remainder of the team had awoken. Kirby returned with the *Atet*, her face glowing. A fairly normal day progressed from there. Runner exercised or used the workshop, Nicadzim read, and Kirby tweaked the Marduk, while Bryluen looked over papers and spent time with Vort on the balcony that wrapped around the outside of the lounge. The past days had seen each settle into nice routines in the comfort of Raven’s Landing, with breaks for afternoon and evening drills.

The team had progressed quickly, as far as battlefield communication and the use of their armor. Bryluen knew their dynamics in teamwork would really only come out through experience together—it was her intention that the bizarre composition of Dread Naught would result in emergent tactics. Individually, she had no doubt of the combat capabilities of each member. She simply knew the bonds of camaraderie would do more to forge the team into a well-oiled machine than

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anything else.

So far, things had gone well on that front. Runner and Kirby were developing a quiet rapport and both spent a good amount of time in the Workshop—Kirby especially so. Vort got along with everyone, and everyone got along with him. It was difficult not to, given his bright-eyed curiosity and unshielded earnestness. He made it difficult to believe he was an experienced explorer, or perhaps he simply came from a kinder place.

Nicadzim's oddities had created a number of strange situations resulting in Runner or Kirby giving him a look, but they had not expressed anything untoward—after all, he couldn't help his essential nature. They otherwise got along with Nicadzim in conversation, easy-going as he was. It still usually took the others a moment or two to digest the intent of his statements by mentally sorting out the most likely timescale he intended to communicate.

Bryluen was so far satisfied, but had begun to feel an itch. Only a fool welcomed combat in and of itself, but she certainly desired a test for Dread Naught to cut its teeth on.

That itch was promptly rewarded. The tab in her pocket sounded a tinny clarion tone, prompting her to take it out and gaze over the info provided. She took a breath as Vort sensed her tension and gazed up at her. Looking down at the alien, she nodded before using the tab to trigger the alarms and speak over the intercom.

“Dread Naught, we have a distress call; Hit the landing pad in full gear. Enemy incursion is under way on the colony world of Democritus. We're being sent as a stop-gap for the evacuation. See you top side!”

Vort took a shortcut and flew over the roof to his armor in the Landing Pad corridor. All the lights within Raven's Landing had turned red and a loud klaxon sounded throughout the facility. Bryluen sprinted inside, immediately shedding her robe and loose woolen pants just inside the lounge. Beneath she wore a gray athletic top and shorts. Bereft of her outer clothing she pounded across the lobby and up the entry corridor, sliding to a stop before her armor stand. Vort and Kirby were already present and getting equipped, while Nicadzim and Runner came running next in short order.

With practiced motions Bryluen attached the pieces of her armor,

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quickly enveloping herself in the sleek bronze plating, the molded exterior a glinting metallic accentuation of her silhouette. Her pistol was, as always, holstered beneath her arm, and a blocky firearm lay across her back. A rigid belt secured a number of devices to her waist, including her nanowhip.

As she jogged out to the *Atet* she barked through her helmet speaker, her voice magnified to a mighty din. “Furcotte, up front! Get this bird on and ready to fly!”

Within seconds Kirby stomped onto the pad in the Marduk, its heavy footfalls ringing out across the valley. Within she wore her slim suit of olive jockey’s armor which made the lengthy proportions of her limbs and the toned wiriness of her build all the more evident. While less protective than other Marine armor the suit possessed interfaces for haptic integration, allowing Kirby to share physical sensations with her vehicles and thus reduce her reaction time to external stimuli.

She moved at the determined canter that was the Marduk’s maximum speed, servos whirring and humming as she charged up the *Atet*’s ramp and into the walker harness inside the ship’s bay. She flew out the front of the suit, and sprinted to the bridge as the harness clamps secured the Marduk’s limbs for transport.

Runner was next up the ramp, his deep gray suit a close fit, its molded exterior made his musculature appear even more statuesque. Metal mounting clamps on the surface of his armor secured his antique rifle and a pair of three-barreled sidearms to his person. Lifts on his boots granted him extra jump strength, and friction pads on his palms and the soles of his feet made climbing easier. He soared up the *Atet*’s ramp in one leap, and rapidly secured himself into a harness.

Vort flew out onto the pad and inside the *Atet* with great strokes of his wings. His light armor suit was a round construct that accommodated for his eyes’ orientation with a hemispherical bubble visor on top. Metal armatures were fitted to the bones of his wings, from where thin panels stretched over the feathered surfaces to defend him while his wings were folded without impeding his flight. He fluttered to his custom harness next to the Marduk and got fastened in.

The last to enter the *Atet* was Nicadzim. He wore a suit of Heavy Assault Armor that traded the molded exterior surfaces for additional armor plating, with a several-centimeter gap between the outer plates

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and inner armor to cause projectile deflection. Each gauntlet was slightly enlarged and further reinforced for close combat. While for many purposes Heavy Assault Armor was not mobile enough, Nicadzim had assured Bryluen it would not be a problem for him. When he appeared secured in his harness across from Runner he seemed unarmed, but this was decidedly a falsehood. Runner shook his head as he realized Nicadzim had not been present an instant prior.

Kirby lined up her spine with the pilot's chair, allowing her suit to interface with the plugs therein to grant her additional feedback and input. Bryluen had taken the second bridge seat to handle communications, and serve as observer for the long-range scanners and diagnostic readouts.

Within four minutes of the first alarm, the *Atet's* ramp closed and the vessel lifted up and away from Raven's Landing at a pulse-pounding speed as near to the edge of gravitational discomfort as possible. Bryluen began to transmit mission information to the team's visors as the sky gave away to the inimitable blackness beyond the atmosphere. Gravity faded away quickly, leaving them floating slightly in their harnesses—a smaller ship like the *Atet* wasn't worth equipping with an artificial gravity system. Kirby had a strong hand, guiding the *Atet* at blistering speeds toward the Drive Harness near the Corax Gate.

After roughly a half hour of outbound travel, a smooth deceleration led to a near-seamless docking procedure as Kirby attached the *Atet* to the harness device. Soon they began to speed back up, bearing for the center of the gate with the harness in tow. Like other Human gates, the Corax Gate was a practical construct that used as little extraneous material as possible. It was burnished and elegant, an engineering achievement even though it was technically inherited technology.

The technology for the gates had been passed between species in this part of the Milky Way as the most efficient form of travel. Some say the initial gates were discovered rather than invented, but most species seemed to eventually come to the same conclusion that such gates were ideal for galactic travel and in turn met others with similar ideas. Sharing or learning the Gate methods of others, the travel system had been reasonably homogenized to the degree that there was little that needed to be done to travel through foreign gates even as far out as the

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Hassallcötallā Regency.

The moment the *Atet* hit the outer range for the Drive, Kirby triggered the harness. The Corax Gate sped its constant rotation to dilation speed and came to life in response. The vacuum of space prevented the transfer of sound and pressure, but in an atmospheric environ the velocity of an active gate mechanism would be great enough to send planetary weather systems into a rolling catastrophe. Aside from even that, the sound would be unbearable if not outright deadly to those who could hear it.

On the outer edges of the system however, the massive device was a silent monolith looming over them in imposing grandeur. As they approached the edge of the vast opening, the light-ringed splotch of the Compression phenomenon opened before them, neatly swallowing up the *Atet* as it passed through to the Aristarchus system.

Slowing the ship and detaching the harness on the other side of the gate with a laudable amount of finesse, Kirby sped the *Atet* toward Democritus, the third planet. Her displays indicated they were forty-five minutes from touch down at the colony's most secure landing site.

Democritus was a bluish-gray world with splotches of yellow-green across its major land masses. The world had a pleasant atmosphere and predictable weather patterns which allowed it to develop in safety, if not in luxury. For almost fifteen years little but steady expansion efforts had happened in the Aristarchus system, not to mention on Democritus itself. A network of colonial establishments had steadily spread outward from the initial colonization site in a regulated example of planned growth.

The colony under attack was the world's first colony and capital, named Pisistratus. It had begun as a prefab modular colony like so many other Human colonization efforts, and since its founding had expanded into a town with a population of roughly fifty thousand.

The populace was in the process of being evacuated, with the Marines on Democritus deployed in force to repel the sudden attack as best they could. Civilian casualties at this point were not entirely known, but were mercifully low. Bryluen tracked orbital movements on the long-range scanner, watching a group of System Defense Monitor ships on a geosynchronous route over the outer stretches of Pisistratus.

Easily the smallest space-borne vessels Humanity had seen fit for

## 7. The Atet and the Alarm

combat, the Monitor ships were hardly more than glorified shuttles mainly used for minor orbital enforcement and occasional grouped fire support in larger scale battles. They were squat, squared shapes that, like most Human ships, consisted of more armored plates than interior space. A mass driver turret hunched menacingly on what were nominally the top and bottom of the craft, and a short laser array guarded each flank as both point defense and for targeting enemy sub-systems.

Though each could rain merry hell compared to most atmospheric vehicles, they would be swatted from the sky three at a time by a proper Marine Frigate. Occasionally one of their cannon mounts would flash, and send a heavy slug downward as they received fire orders from the Marine Commander on the ground. The fearsome velocity of the projectiles from even a small ship meant the impact was sure to be severe enough that the ships were aiming carefully outside the range of any structures below to avoid collateral damage. To allow orbital bombardment to begin with, the colony's orbital defense matrix had been disabled.

Bryluen used the long-range communicator to query the leader of the ground forces for updated information. She received a return packet within a minute detailing that several dozen Marines were down and an estimate that from three to five thousand enemy contacts were present. The line was holding, though a breakthrough near the eastern docks was in progress—if unchecked, the evacuation would be put in terrible peril. While outside the normal scope of a strike team deployment, Dread Naught was able to arrive on-site much faster than Marine reinforcements in order to prevent casualties. The energy projectiles from the hordes of Rabisus present had ignited fires in several commercial and residential districts, but were the fires were being contained by the remaining Firefighting Drones on site.

The Marines had opted to bog down the attacking hordes in building-to-building fighting where the enemy's numerical advantage would not serve them well. Regardless, the speed and viciousness of the foe as well as the fact their bodies did not obstruct their fellows meant the fighting was still difficult and risky. The formerly three hundred-strong Marine contingent had already been forced to fall back more than thirty blocks on all sides since they first engaged.

Bryluen fired back a response to the commander asking if he

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knew of any archaeological finds that were held in the city. The Marine Commander knew of none but would ask around on the Operative's behalf, choosing not to address the purpose of her line of questioning. Bryluen assured the Commander her team would deploy near the docks to shore up the defense there, and gave her their estimated time of arrival before relaying what she had learned to the team's visors.

The members of Dread Naught waiting in the hold were mainly quiet and tense, the air thick with uncertainty. Vort glanced toward Runner and Nicadzim with two of his eyes. It began to dawn on all of them they were being plunged into a full-scale battle for the first time in their lives.

"I HAVE FOUGHT BEFORE WHILE EXPLORING. BUT I HAVE NOT SEEN A BATTLE LIKE THIS FIRSTHAND."

Runner looked down at Vort from his harness. "Neither have I. Fire-fights? Plenty. But not like this. What a-about you, Nico?"

He breathed. "I have and will witness battles of sorts, myself, but I do not participate in anything so large. I imagine the din will be ... distracting."

Bryluen's voice came through their helmet speakers in a tone of steely calm. "I know this is new for you three. Kirby and I have been in our share of battle, but know that I have faith in all of you. Focus on your own actions and your own presence. The big picture is between the Commander and I. Keep your mind in your own space, and stay alive. We've got objective and teammate overlays and constant communication between us regardless, so just keep your eyes where the danger is each moment. If you pray or meditate, now is a fine time. You won't have another chance until this is over."

Runner and Vort took deep breaths. Runner closed his eyes as Nicadzim responded to the Operative. "Will you believe we will win this battle?"

"Victory is a relative condition. Right now, this is about evacuation, so yes, I think we will. We're here to make time more than anything. Beating a horde this big, with the numbers we have, in the situation we're in? That's dicier, but ideally we won't have to. We're going to focus on making time for Evac and we'll handle whatever else may come.

A brief pause occurred. "... I AM ACTUALLY KIND OF EXCITED

## 7. The Atet and the Alarm

BECAUSE I GET TO SPEW LIGHTNING AT BAD THINGS! SPEWING LIGHTNING AT BAD THINGS IS A RARE OPPORTUNITY!”

Runner laughed hard, immediately descending into a brief coughing fit. “T-that’s true! Shooting b-bad things *is* pretty rewarding. I-I g-guess that’s a good way to think of it.”

“Yeah, it’s gonna be all right,” Kirby radioed from the pilot’s seat. “Folks back home tend not to ‘ppreciate hearin’ it, but shootin’ things that need shootin’ is a hell of a lot of fun. Ridin’ my old girl makes me feel better than ... well, everything, really. Life’s been better since they gave me a missile rack.”

Nicadzim nodded slowly. “I have admitted that there was a certain aesthetic pleasure in having watched something detonate. In most forms of polite company we are dissuaded from discussing how *poetic* fire was, but this did not alter that opinion.”

Runner sighed. “Damn, you have *n-no* idea how much better it feels kno-owing you aren’t going to judge how g-g-g-giddy I get firing my gun.”

“Oh, honey, I’m a Marine,” Kirby quipped. “The grounded philosophy education is nice and all, but got-damn do I have some stories that’ll make ya grow some hair on your chest!”

“N-not to nitpick, but d-do you think I *haven’t* grown h-h-hair on my chest?”

“Gotta be honest, hon, you shave your arms, and that makes me think you might shave everything else.”

“... A-a-alright, y-you’ve got my number.”

Nicadzim took a big breath. “I in fact never shaved much of anything, should anyone care to inquire.”

## 8. Premiere at Pistratus

The remainder of the ride in was uneventful, with the battle line at the docks continuing to slowly slip backwards. As the *Atet* screamed down through the lower atmosphere, the radio chatter became increasingly frantic from the Marine fire teams trying to hold back the swarm. The sun was lowering steadily, casting the battle in the dramatic hues of the oncoming evening.

Pistratus was a fine example of modern city planning and colonial design. Bright, glittering towers jutted into the sky at equal intervals, each bearing rings of hydroponic domes and curved solar arrays like extravagant jewelry dangling down ivory necks. Between the towers, organized clusters of buildings connected by sky-bridges formed neat webs of glistening glass and alloys. Faint blue tram rails grew along the ground like vines, and during a normal day hundreds of cars would be neatly passing one another along those rails in every direction like a bustling colony of ants. Between every rail junction, along every bridge, and on top of every roof were installations of local plant life, public art displays, fountains, and parks. A casual gaze gave the impression of a chaotic panorama bursting with life, when in fact the city was painstakingly planned for convenience and efficiency. The fact that many of those gardens, art pieces, and carefully laid out networks of

## 8. Premiere at Pisistratus

civil architecture were currently burning, was a true crime.

Kirby swung the *Atet* in low, locking in a landing area on a cleared portion of the docks. A number of more conventional sea vessels, as well as lifters and shuttles were evacuating people to sites further down the coast as well as to waiting orbital transports to escape the destruction. The *Atet*'s shadow fell over one such shuttle as the vessel went in for final approach on auto-pilot. Kirby and Bryluen left their seats and rushed to the disembarkation bay with the others. Kirby ran past Runner and Vort on her way to climb into the *Marduk*, her leggy frame sailing by at high speed.

"*Damn*, we look g-good in our armor," Runner commented as Kirby dashed by.

Kirby had leaped into the *Marduk*'s open cockpit, situating herself in the harness and aligning her spine with the interface plugs. "Yeah, I feel like a sexy killin' machine, myself."

Bryluen held onto a harness grip in one gauntleted hand. "Well that's good to hear, given the suits were all fitted to scans of your bodies. I'd comment on how nicely I fill out *my* armor, but if I ever stopped doing so it would just mean that I needed to gain a couple pounds."

The klaxon in the bay lit up and began to cry out. The team's harnesses burst open, and Dread Naught assembled in the agreed-upon order. Kirby in the heavily armored *Marduk* took point, with Bryluen and Nicadzim just behind. Runner and Vort took up the rear. With a loud hum, a pair of large-barreled auto-cannons slid up to Kirby's wrists and loaded with a menacing series of clanks and clacks. She hunched slightly as she braced herself to burst into motion. Bryluen unslung the flat weapon from her back, resting its ergonomic stock against her shoulder and cracking her neck. Nicadzim clenched his fists while Runner unclipped and braced his rifle. He pushed a breath out through his mouth as Vort swayed on his legs impatiently.

The *Atet* was setting down just behind a makeshift barrier of cargo crates, a site soon to be the front line against the oncoming enemies. Several Marine teams were fighting on various rooftops attempting to slow the advance with grenades and suppressive fire, while keeping themselves out of the path of the main body of the horde.

Bryluen flared her nostrils. "Three ..."

The *Atet*'s course shifted slightly as it slowed and began to lower.

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“Two ...”

The two rear landing feet set down smoothly, followed rapidly by the third.

“One ...”

With one final alarm cry, the loading ramp shot open with a loud hiss, clanging on the concrete of the dock area.

“Forward, Dread Naught!”

A long barrier stretched out before them, having been hauled or pushed into place by nearby vehicles earlier in the battle. Smaller crates and pallets had been used to create ramps to the top of the four meter wall of metal cargo boxes. Kirby stormed down the *Atet*'s ramp straight to the nearest container. Her huge, articulated hands grabbed the handle and pulled it askew with little effort, creating an opening in the wall. Through it she could see a second, shorter barrier of spread out firing positions, and beyond that a paved area stretching from the docks to the nearest line of buildings. As large a space as possible had been cleared, leaving an open no man's land between the final structures and their defensive line.

The sound of battle emanating from the bowels of the city was deafening. The crunches and rumbles of heavy weapons, grenades, and other detonations were undercut by the rapid crack and cough of shotguns, rifles, and desperate sidearms. Interspersed through it all was the whine of rockets in flight, and the hum and hiss of directed energy weapons in a ceaselessly echoing cacophony of devastation. In addition to the overwhelming wall of sound, the visceral sights of war illuminated the quickly dimming sky. A blackish swarm of shady forms poured from between the buildings and toward the docks in a torrent, their hazy shapes blending together for the members of the team who had not seen them before. Tracer fire and muzzle flashes flared from the top of several buildings in yellow and orange bursts of violence, causing blackish soot to jet up from the horde where they hit. A block or street would be briefly rendered a white after-image when a grenade or rocket exploded, the flash illuminating the spirals and puffs of dark smoke cavorting overhead like the crazed pen-strokes of a madman.

The faint glint of darting drones crossed back and forth through the sky as they delivered crates of ammunition. Brilliant blue and green glows emanated from windows and roofs, as bolts of plasma and laser

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beams turned whatever they struck to ash and steam. Now and then a red and orange streak rained from orbit in a disconcertingly neat, straight line—a starship slug that shook the earth with a deep, roaring impact. The glittering towers rose far above the havoc, spires of civilization suspended in dusk.

Nearby, the small fortifications constituting the outer barrier were manned by five squads of Marines, three with a tripod-mounted machine gun, and two with mounted plasma repeaters. A pair of M6-C4 Rubicon Light Battle Tanks stood behind them. Each tank was armed with a pair of sponson-mounted machine guns, and a hefty main cannon that hurled accelerated high-explosive shells. In an era where larger vehicles and walkers were mainstays on the battlefield, many newer tanks had been designed for speed, focusing on mounting a fast-aiming and devastatingly accurate main weapon. This transformed them from close-in bruisers that lead assaults, to long-ranged weapon platforms capable of sniping armored targets and providing fast-moving fire support.

The Marines panned their large-caliber guns back and forth across the horde, stitching tracer rounds and wailing streaks of crackling plasma over the broad, concrete plain. Every two or three seconds one of the Rubicons would fire a shell from its main cannon with a whizzing crack of thunder, rewarded a split second later by a dark burst of shredded enemies. Even so, the enemy numbers were significant enough they would invariably reach the defenses before too long.

A distance behind the *Atet*, a panicking mass of Humanity clustered at the docks fighting for places on the latest round of ships and shuttles. Men, women, and children of every description clamored and wailed as the latest craft left the dock at speed, trying their best to get as many people away from the rapidly approaching threat as possible.

Some of the citizens nearby stopped and wondered at the unique craft that had just landed, as well as the eclectic shapes of its departing crew. Most others were too occupied as they reflected on their lives and continuously diminishing chances of survival. Thousands like them had already been taken from the embattled colony, but for those who remained this fact was of little comfort.

Bryluen had seen such frenzied relocation efforts before in the wake of natural disasters, T'hròstog raids, and even industrial accidents

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among the far-flung “Free Thinker” communes. This last group, she briefly reflected, was measurably more surly when confronted with the critical flaw in their anti-Government lifestyles, despite the increased need for relief efforts resulting from a suicidal opposition to oversight or culpability. Regardless, in all cases the other similarities were pervasive—the chilling, hissed tone of thousands of tense voices, and an impotent doldrums of fear weighing on every shoulder.

Bryluen ordered the squad forward. Nicadzim smirked as if the terrible panorama of war reminded him of something quaint, as he moved forward to the nearest Marine position. Runner and Vort advanced past the main barrier, then paused as their eyes took in the overwhelming spectacle. Kirby dragged the barrier closed behind them, then stomped forth to stand next to one of the Rubicons as she leveled her cannons.

Bryluen leaned slightly, allowing her to smack both Runner and Vort on their backs to bring their attention back. “Runner! First gun nest on the right—just stare down your scope and pick off any big shapes. Vort! First nest on the left and give whatever broad cover you can. Go!”

The pair was snapped out of their reverie and rushed forward to fulfill their given directives. Vort took off and swooped down next to the Marines manning one of the plasma repeaters. The loader and spotter gave Vort startled looks, but didn’t have the luxury to wonder further as they resumed firing their rifles down range. Runner cleared the distance to the nest in one long leap, the lifts on his boots arresting his fall as he landed and laid his rifle along the top of the nearest crate.

Bryluen took up a position next to Nicadzim and the Marine squad leader at the central nest, and raised her own weapon. She yelled over the noise to the squad leader next to her, an older man with dark, hard eyes. “Bryluen Branok, CSOE. How are the kids?”

The squad leader nodded toward Bryluen without leaving his firing posture. “Lieutenant Lapahie, Ma’am. We’re holding out, ammo’s at a good state, but we’re the lucky ones. You can see the boys and girls on the roofs aren’t having as much fun. They’re just staying above water at the moment. Lucky these things don’t seem too interested in climbing up there to get ‘em. Thank God we aren’t having to fight for airspace or this would be much worse.”

Kirby opened fire, bright mini-shells sailing forward on thin

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streams of smoke in a funerary rhythm rewarded by tumbling, shattered shapes among the distant horde. With a whoop, she let a bright tangle of rockets whistle from her pods, striking the enemy in a cluster of detonations a second later.

Runner's rifle appeared to be wooden, with oxidized metal bands along its thin barrel. The weapon's antique exterior, however, belied its thoroughly modern nature. With a slap and brief crackle, a focused bolt of energy magnetically adhered to a dense projectile flew outward. An instant later, the shot blew a surgically clean hole in a horned Gugalanna's forehead. The creature skidded to a stop, causing several lanky Rabisus to trip over it as it gasped out a last breath. Runner inhaled, took new aim, and fired again with a steady exhalation. Through his visor, his eyes seemed almost glossed over as he tuned out the incredible noise around him to descend into a focused pattern of breathing and firing. He slowly began to feel a warmth build in his stomach as he delivered rhythmic, precise head shots.

Bryluen's squared weapon had two thin, vertical barrels on the end. As she pulled the trigger, a sharp zip heralded a pair of discs no more than three millimeters apart being projected in parallel at supersonic speeds. As they simultaneously struck a target, each broke releasing an infinitesimal amount of two precise chemical mixtures. As the two chemicals met in the air at the instant of impact they reacted violently, unleashing a three meter high whirlwind of fire that incinerated a cluster of Rabisus in a brief instant.

She slightly adjusted her aim and fired again while addressing the Lieutenant. "The enemies' numbers say they're going to get here eventually. When I signal, I want you and your charges to go and set up on the main wall to get some height and keep the guns out of melee. We'll cover you while you reposition."

Vort paced impatiently on top of the boxes next to the Marines. He couldn't yet reach the enemy with his singing, but he knew the time was coming soon. Nicadzim extended one heavily armored arm. Within his open hand a squared piece of what seemed to be metal instantly appeared, its edges rough as if it had been somehow whittled from a larger block. The exact shape of the object changed subtly whenever an observer blinked, but it retained an open aperture at the end. The aperture spat a tongue of flame as a glowing orb, like a ball of molten

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steel, rushed forth at a blinding speed. The ball struck a Rabisu and blew out its chest, causing the creature to collapse with a strangulated wheeze. Nicadzim continued firing the fiery orbs into the oncoming enemy without suffering from any obvious recoil.

The Lieutenant put a cluster of bullets through a Gugalanna's face. "Yes, ma'am. Hadn't thought we'd be needing the top of this wall, but shows what I know. You're an Operative, I know, but who are the rest of your pals? Never seen anything like you folks. Exosuit, that alien over there is ... I don't know, and the big guy here—I don't have a clue what's going on with him."

Bryluen laughed. "We're a task force that's been kept hush-hush until now. Nothing secret, per se. You're the first to see us in action. Hopefully we won't have to meet again, but if you stumble across these things after today, we just might."

"Got it. Well it's an honor, and I can't tell you how glad I am to see you here. If nothing else you can definitely lay down some firepower!"

The vanguard of the hostile group had been noticeably whittled down by the added gunfire, and the overall formation began to become narrower as the foe began to concentrate its bulk directly toward their attackers. At around two hundred meters the Rabisus began to fire back, their aim wide of the mark at first. But soon, flares of energy began to kick up around them and occasionally against one of the crates or the side of one of the Rubicons.

Kirby noisily swapped weapons, producing two flak cannons with triad barrels. After taking a moment to adjust the weapons' choke, she began spraying the oncoming group with shaped metal shards that sawed through flesh in a wide, conical spread. Runner's rate of fire increased as the enemy ranged closer. Nicadzim began to aim less, the bulk of the nearing enemy making a missed shot difficult. Bryluen continued to fire her weapon at the densest visible portions of the enemy mass. But most importantly, Vort was finally in range.

The alien hunkered down on his ten feet for a moment before producing a bizarre sound—something between the whine produced by holding a magnet near an antique radio and the haunting melodiousness of whale song—as a valve on the end of his segmented trunk armor popped open. A cluster of lightning bolts burst forth from the end of his

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trunk with a deafening clap of compressed air. The bolts struck the nearest foes and instantly danced through them to the next, and the next, and the next a dozen ranks deep. The rapid temperature change induced by the bolts caused parts of the struck creatures to burst and burn, hurling the afflicted enemies through the air in a simultaneous display lit in blinding white. Half a platoon's worth of enemies were struck dead in a single, overwhelmingly violent moment.

The group's firing seemed to hesitate for a split second at the unexpected onrush of destruction, after which Runner cheered enthusiastically and Nicadzim grunted. Kirby unleashed another rack of rockets at she howled in approval.

Bryluen smiled inside her helmet. "Pace yourself, but ... damn if that doesn't do the job."

Nicadzim shook his hand, the metal block replaced by a long tapering conical object that appeared to be shaped from mother of pearl. He rested the larger end in his left hand and lobbed a series of bouncing, spiked spheroids from the end of the object. The spheres bounced several times to reach the enemy, before splitting open and unleashing clusters of glowing darts. The darts lodged themselves in the front rank of the foe, emitting oily smoke as they burned through them. A number of creatures fell screeching as he continued to pepper them with more of the spheres.

Bryluen motioned over her shoulder. "Alright, Lieutenant, time to get up the wall. Vort, hop up there with them, will you?"

Lieutenant Lapahie signaled his squad to redeploy, as Vort fluttered to the top of the barrier and loosed another storm of lightning. The Marines rapidly unloaded and disassembled their weapons, before lugging them in pieces up ladders mounted to the front of the barrier. There they took cover behind some smaller crates stacked on top of the wall, and set their guns back into position in a similar layout as before. The tanks stayed in place, laying down punishing covering fire to distract the enemy from the temporarily vulnerable soldiers. Soon the heavy weapons spoke again, once more lighting up the night with an intense blanket of munitions.

Bryluen magnified her voice to be heard by both Dread Naught and the Marines. "Melee contact in twelve. We can't let any of these bastards pass this wall! So grenades out, boys and girls—and get ready

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to smash some heads!”

Bryluen, Runner, and the Marines not firing the heavy weapons pulled grenades from their belts and lobbed them forward in long arcs, red grenade indicators tracing their path on the team’s visor HUDs. A series of harsh detonations followed seconds later among the enemy front line, pulverizing dozens of individuals in a frantic burst of fire and thick smoke. The seconds afforded by the cluster of explosions allowed Dread Naught to prepare for melee. By forcing the enemy to engage in front of the wall, Bryluen hoped to keep them from both overwhelming the mounted weapons and from simply flowing past the wall itself.

The Operative detached the nanowhip cylinder from her belt and clenched her fingers around it, using one thumb to adjust the whip’s length with a slider on the side of the cylinder. After slinging the disc gun on her back, she drew her pistol in her free hand and placed the barrel against her helmet for a moment as if kissing it. Runner clipped his rifle back in place before drawing his paired tri-pistols, and began to flex his legs in anticipation. Nicadzim now held a glowing blue rod shaped like an antique police baton, and puffed a harsh breath through his mustache.

A long, tempered blade slid out the back of each of Kirby’s gauntlets as she struck a sideways fighting posture. Behind the thick cockpit glass she smirked. The sounds of hundreds of running feet and the gunfire overhead had been constant and unyielding. As the first enemy reached the members of Dread Naught, the soundscape shifted to include a chaotic sputter of footwork, a whole new series of cries, and a substantial array of wet, squelching impacts.

Bryluen began to whip the wire through groups of Rabisus with constant, fluid motions like a carnival performer, causing enemy limbs and torsos to be strewn around her. In the brief gap between swings she would fire her pistol, pulping chest cavities and plant-like heads at an even tempo.

Runner’s pistols fired a wide spread of heavy shot with each trigger pull. He dodged and weaved with economical motions, occasionally leaping or somersaulting over an enemy. He unleashed punishing blasts as he flew to and fro in an airy, easy fashion made possible by the lifts on his armor boots.

Nicadzim’s baton flared with exotic energy as it struck home,

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and each enemy recoiled from multiple strikes for every one Nicadzim appeared to make. He accomplished motions and dealt attacks faster than he should have been able to in his heavy armor, his spatial-warping eccentricities applying to his melee attacks in a whirling storm of violence. A nearby Rabisu tried to hurl a fireball in his direction, only to die as the same fireball somehow struck the Rabisu at the base of its neck.

Bryluen glanced upwards as a disemboweled Rabisu passed overhead. Kirby was raging like an angered bear, the immense strength of her artificial musculature allowing her to swing her blades through groups of enemies with wild abandon. With an open palm she slapped a charging Gugalanna on the top of the head so hard it was forced onto its stomach. With a roar, she grabbed its horns, spun on her heels, and hurled the heavy creature into a crowd of its compatriots. The Rabisus around her shied away to make for less imposing targets as she stepped forward, her blades already coated in a layer of filmy black matter.

The Marines poured fire at the outer edges of the enemy horde as it tried to overwhelm Dread Naught with sheer numbers. The two Rubicons rolled around slowly, grinding enemies beneath their treads as they fired all about, gathering superficial scorch marks and long tears from Gugalanna horns along their tread guards. Occasionally a crew member would peer from the top hatch to shoot a few Rabisus off the top of their respective vehicle.

A torrent of red and orange flame rained down from Vort as he flew overhead, all but erasing an entire flank of the enemy advance in a roaring wave of incineration. He darted and jinked like a fighter as Rabisus not otherwise involved in the brawl fired at him. A persistent cloud of black ichor materialized around the melee fighters as the vicious fighting continued in a brutal maelstrom.

Kirby had been struck by at least a dozen futile fireballs, and she had taken minor armor damage from horn strikes, but was little worse for the wear. Runner experienced a few close calls but his agility had allowed him to leap and spin out of the way of danger over and over again in a series of acrobatic, gravity-defying maneuvers. Nicadzim's heavy armor allowed him less caution than the others, his excess plating taking the brunt of the many claw strikes that had come his way as he swung through the foe in broad motions. The ichor splashing about him

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tended to float slowly or accelerate in the wrong direction. Several Rabisu fireballs that passed near him simply fell to the ground, as if they had been spiked by a volleyball player. Bryluen sidestepped a Gugalanna, taking off its horns with an upward stroke of her nanowhip. The creature, paying no heed to the loss of its bony extremities, slowed to aim toward her once more but buckled as Runner landed on its back and emptied both his pistols directly into its broad skull.

The otherwise numerous enemy had been bogged down in the melee as the heavy weaponry on hand—as well as Vort's artillery-like destructive capacity—had reduced the enemy's advantage to nothing. Finishing off an injured Gugalanna with a mercy shot through the eye, Bryluen's honed battle sense detected the most important moment in almost any close combat situation.

The prime currency of any melee was momentum. When two lines clashed, if one side could be pushed out of place or bent, they would be torn apart. Coherency ensured the enemy could not maintain its momentum, and maintaining coherency prevented a weakness from presenting itself.

When a numerically superior enemy relied on its weight to provide it the needed momentum to break apart a smaller formation, the smaller formation must always fight in such a way the enemy's weight cannot properly be brought to bear—thus equalizing the momentum of each side. This forces the battle into a grind where the foe's numbers would either not matter, or would actively work against them. Whenever such a grind occurred it was more of a tug of war as each side pushed at the other, and the moment one side lost its footing was the precise moment for its opposition to make one final effort to finish the battle.

Identifying such a moment was less a matter of visuals and more of a broad sensation. A subtle shift in the sounds of combat, a change in the tone of voices, and the slightest, rolling hesitation in enemy actions preceded the instant a rout or retreat reached the front line.

Bryluen felt such a thing as a gradual reversal of motion passed through the enemy horde from the rear, and immediately seized the moment. "Dread Naught, fifteen more seconds and then rally to the *Atet!* We're going to see where these things run to!"

## 9. Realizations and Rest

The foe began to fall back, the members of the task force firing into their backs or finishing foes they had already engaged. Lieutenant Lapahie ordered the Rubicons to pursue and harry the survivors, as the mounted weaponry continued to stitch trails of munitions into the receding mass of enemies. Radio chatter from across the city indicated the same occurrence—the enemy, all across Pisistratus, had begun to flee toward the unidentified point east of the city where the attack had originated.

Dread Naught began to pull back and run up the ramp of the *Atet*. Kirby, knowing it was her responsibility to fly the ship, came up first. She docked the dented and singed Marduk before sprinting to the bridge to begin take-off procedures. Bryluen waited by the top of the ramp for the rest of the team, glancing briefly at the burn marks on the outside of her left leg and her right arm near the elbow. Vort flew past, apparently unharmed, then Runner with a long scratch across his lower back from a close encounter with a horn. Nicadzim's outer armor plates were scratched, dented, and scorched all over, but his heavy armor had held and protected the man inside.

As the ramp closed, Bryluen spoke over team communications as she again proceeded to the second seat on the bridge. "Folks: we all

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lived! Congratulate yourselves. We left a hell of a lot of corpses, and not a damn thing got past!”

The team cheered raucously, their blood pumping and adrenaline still surging. Nicadzim simply smiled as Vort cycled through several bright colors. Runner and Kirby both seemed elated and even relaxed, like they had just come back from a trip to a spa.

Bryluen spoke again. “Kirby is gonna follow these things out. Today shows that they’ve definitely moved past isolated raids. This was a full on assault, and it didn’t end because we were beating them throughout the city—they’re leaving for some reason as they’ve done previously, and I want to know why.”

Bryluen relaxed into her chair as the *Atet* lifted off and flew to the furthest extent of the enemy retreat, at a height far exceeding the foes’ ability to reach them. A dark streak of over two thousand remaining enemies flowed from the beleaguered city out to the eastern plains like a trail of ants. Kirby grunted the first time she had to circle back around. The *Atet*, even with every conceivable method of braking, moved at a speed that vastly outstripped the running speed of their target.

Bryluen and Kirby’s breaths were gradually slowing down in tandem, as their bodies relaxed from the strenuous activity they had just experienced. Bryluen was first to remove her helmet, her skin shining and her short hair a wet explosion of silver and brown. She wiped some of the excess moisture from her face with one gauntlet and sniffed as a drop of sweat coalesced on the end of her nose for a moment.

“You were amazing out there, Furcotte. That kind of fighting spirit isn’t something you can buy or train. *That’s* what makes you the best at what you do.”

Through Kirby’s broad visor it was obvious she was beaming from Bryluen’s assessment. She took one breath as if deciding something, then removed her own helmet with one hand. She, too, was sweaty, her pony tail a kinked and gravity-defying disaster after being crammed into the back of her head-gear. The sweat bath her hair had been given had caused it to shift from its usual reddish tones to a dark brown. Her pale complexion was visibly reddened, and what had previously been a grease mark on one cheek had slowly melted down the side of her face.

## 9. Realizations and Rest

“Thank you, ma’am. You were pretty fuckin’ awesome yourself. I did never think what it would look like for an Operative to get into a fight, but got damn! Makes me wanna make a big ole’ whip for myself, that was some kinky shit.”

Bryluen laughed, white teeth flashing. “Well, it’s a lot less glamorous when you have to hear all the squishing and slopping sounds.”

“Well hell, Bryl, that kinda language ain’t helpin’ your case.” Kirby smiled and laughed. “That was ... a hell of a thing. Those critters really are somethin’ else, aren’t they? They act like they’ve got brains, but they have *no* concern for keepin’ alive. Like you said, it’s like they’re bein’ controlled or somethin’.”

Bryluen rested her helmet on her knee and nodded. “Yeah, they’re a mystery right now. I’ll just be glad to know how they get between worlds. They don’t have any obvious technology, but they pass through atmospheres and don’t get caught by sensors. I *hate* not knowing something that basic.”

In the bay, Runner’s head was laid back as far as the harness would allow. He had discarded his helmet, his coarse hair frizzy and chaotically protruding in all directions, from a combination of its former confinement and the sweat he had worked up during the battle. Nicadzim’s head shone in the dim lighting of the bay, his own helmet in an empty harness next to him. His sweat was forming into drops that lobbed themselves at a gentle angle from his skull to splash on the deck.

Rather than sweat, Vort steadily ejected body heat from the thin vanes on his back, accommodated by valves on his armor. His singing attacks were almost as tiring to him as they were effective. “So. YOUR SPECIES’ WATER-COOLING: WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?”

Nicadzim took a breath. “We became somewhat slimy to the touch once it had occurred, but there was no sensation as our bodies produced the sweat. To our senses it simply condenses on our skin and is pulled downward by gravity.”

Vort made a sound as he absorbed the information. Runner sighed. “I am both ex-xhausted, and fe-eel incredible at the same time. We’re alive, and we kicked s-s-so much ass I’m still strugglin-ng to believe it.”

“FOR A BEING WITHOUT WINGS YOU ARE REMARKABLY MOBILE. IT

## The Shadow Among The Stars

WAS DIFFICULT TO NOT BE DISTRACTED BY YOU!”

Runner smiled and pointed at the alien. “You’re f-far from the f-first to tell me I’m distr-racting, but *definitely* the first with te-en legs!”

Nicadzim’s eyebrows raised. “Will I understand via omission that you *have* been hearing such a thing from a winged individual?”

“Ly Aulth. T-they both had *such* beaut-tiful feathers. Very different patterns for sib-blings, too,” Runner intoned nostalgically. “So, N-nico, your, uh, weapons?” Runner completed his sentence by shrugging.

Nicadzim cleared his throat. “They are ... constructs, not truly physical entities, but real as far as such concepts matter. I won’t *make* them, per se, the process was more a matter of ... finding them? They will come from within me and once embodied they will remained the same.”

Runner nodded slowly. Vort shifted. “I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT DID LITTLE TO EXPLAIN THINGS.”

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Kirby continued to lazily circle around the head of the enemy tide for a time. She and Bryluen kept checking the sensors and cameras, finding nothing but more grass and rocks as far as the eye could see. There was no sign of anything that could transport the swarming enemies gathered below, so when they began to ascend it was quite unexpected.

Starting from the front of the group a few kilometers outside of Pisistratus, the dark shapes began to dissolve into a black dust. The dust formed into a narrow trail that curved upward and accelerated rapidly skyward. Kirby quickly had the flight computer project a course into orbit the dust was likely to take, and sped upward through the atmosphere.

Bryluen dialed into the comm channel for Democritus’ Orbital Guard, her security clearance granting her unfettered access. What she found was the beginnings of panicked Monitor captains indicating an unknown contact had blipped onto their systems. The Orbital Defense Matrix was being reactivated as the Monitors moved to confront the contact. As the *Atet* burst out into the exosphere, Bryluen and Kirby

## 9. Realizations and Rest

simultaneously took a sharp breath at the sight awaiting them.

In low orbit a dark shape had materialized, something vaguely like an elongated horseshoe crab. It was a chitinous-looking, almost serpentine thing with thin claws around what appeared to be a central maw. The thing was dotted in a number of blank, eye-like hemispheres across its carapace. The stream of black dust began to strike the surface of the horrible thing, accumulating across its surface and adding to it mass.

Overall, the leviathan was many times larger than the Monitors or the *Atet*, though still not large in the overall scheme of starships. The large eye-like protrusions, each several meters across, rotated toward the Monitor formation as it approached. The small ships stopped at close weapons range near the far curve of the planet, closer than pointblank by the measure of most space battles. Swiftly turning, they brought their flank laser arrays to bear. As the last of the dust reached the creature, it swung away from Democritus and accelerated out toward the gate.

The Monitors opened fire, bright beams of light aiming at the creature's eyes in silent concert. Near the monstrosity's surface some force seemed to disperse the lasers, making their impact less effective. It was difficult to tell if any appreciable damage was dealt in the brief moment of weapons fire, as soon after the monster simply fizzled out of sight. Further lasers fired off into perpetuity through the place the beast had occupied a moment before.

Kirby rapidly cycled through scanning schemas, but nothing produced results revealing the location or bearing of the creature. Bryluen curtly radioed the Monitors to resume their patrol, and relayed a recording of the contact to the other team members' suits. Each received a notification beep through their collar mics, urging them to replace their helmets and see the thing for themselves.

"So, Dread Naught ... they're part of a *much* bigger beast. One which can just ... vanish. We knew they had to have a method of travel, but *damn*. Non-terrestrial life of that scale is ... uncommon, at best." Bryluen took another breath. "They didn't appear to have technology of a visible sort before, and this confirms it. If that many enemies can account for that small a proportion of the creature's mass, they can put out a *lot* of soldiery, maybe only limited by the mass it needs to maintain orbit, depending on how it's propelled. This ... is big, but I don't really

## The Shadow Among The Stars

need to tell you that. That's our job cut out for us, folks, so don't forget it."

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"Exactly how large would you estimate the creature's size to be?"

Bryluen stood in the meeting room in Raven's Landing. A projection of High Commander Galmaan floated above the table. She had removed her armor, leaving her again standing in her athletic wear as she had gone straight from landing to reporting to the High Commander, still sweat-sheened and haggard.

The door was closed behind her, the other members of Dread Naught off relaxing after the battle. Runner had gone off to the exercise room for a cool down and to clear his mind, while Kirby had taken the Marduk straight to the workshop for diagnostics and repairs. Nicadzim reclined on the couch in the lounge while Vort had simply gone to his room for the time being. Each of them were digesting the scale of their task: a battle was an easy enough thing to visualize. Defeating giant disappearing space monsters was, however, more difficult to face down.

Bryluen placed her hands on the edge of the meeting table. "Scans gave the beast's dimensions as being a little larger than the average Destroyer class vessel. Definitely outweighing a heavy Frigate. Compositionally, we couldn't get a proper read on it even with the *Atet's* pinpoint arrays. As I describe in the report it was obviously more creature than craft, but given how Rabisus hurl fireballs I wouldn't be too surprised if it had some form of offensive weaponry. Its method of propulsion is uncertain but it can sure move—our pilot read its acceleration rate at about that of an Icenic class Frigate. I definitely got the impression it operates as a blockade runner, and excels at the task. Stealth in, drop your troops, hide until you need to go, reappear to pick them up, and skip town. Whether it runs because it's efficient or because it can't survive a fight, I don't know.

The High Commander steepled his fingers. "Hm. Assuming some degree of biological parity with the ground forms, we must assume it is decently resilient at the least. We will consult the Commandant Prime about reassigning our battle groups from internal patrol, to the

## 9. Realizations and Rest

outer border systems and Qixing rim-space. We will need fast, substantial firepower if we hope to catch and eliminate one of these creatures. Perhaps then we can study them and possibly begin to determine their intent. We will ponder this intelligence further, and reach out to the Qixing in order to negotiate cooperation with Dread Naught. Thank you and good job as always, Dame Branok.”

“High Commander?”

Galmaan stopped before he pressed the disconnect button. “Yes, Dame?”

“It’s the Stones. Whatever they are. They’re after these Stones.”

“We haven’t yet found evidence that a similar stone was present in Pisistratus yet, Dame.”

“Not yet, but we did find a similar object was missing at Galhoun. They don’t stay and fight even when they could undoubtedly win. They don’t even care to take up all of their own troops. Those Stones are the *only* link.”

“That’s true enough. We have nothing else, and if Pisistratus has such a stone, that will prove important. Your intuition and reasoning is something we have always trusted and respected, so even though we lack hard evidence I wager you are correct. I promise we’re looking—we didn’t assign this task to you just to ignore your input.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I’m just aware that mystery rocks are going to be a hard sell to the Colonial Arbiters, not to mention the Terran Prime Minister—she’s a tough customer at the best of times. The Commandant Prime will probably will be easier to convince—obviously ne’s got a history of acting on CSOE intel sooner rather than later. I just hope that when we discover the purpose of the Stones, we can convince everyone of the best course of action.”

The High Commander’s voice took on an uncharacteristic softness. “We will, Bryluen. We have always kept Humanity safe, and all those people you mentioned want the best for us all. We will get the information we need to, and we will get all the pieces to move together.”

“Yeah,” Bryluen scratched her nose with her thumb. “This is only going to become greater in scale and worse in intensity. Thank you, High Commander.”

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## The Shadow Among The Stars

Runner crossed the lobby from the exercise room toward the living quarters barefoot with his sweat-soaked shirt hanging around his neck. A precise geometric design was tattooed in faintly visible dark ink across the entire right-side of his chest. He had tied his thick hair back to keep it out of his way, but released it from his confinement as he walked. Thus unsecured, his hair immediately burst outward into its natural, plume-shaped form. He paused at the entryway of the living quarters corridor, and instead took a left to enter the neighboring hall leading to the workshop, firing range, and med bay. He leaned into the workshop door and caught sight of Kirby in the far corner, her exosuit standing proudly against the wall.

She was gazing closely at part of the Marduk's exposed waist assembly, with the discarded armor plates stacked on a table nearby. She was stimulating part of the suit's inner workings with a diagnostic tool, watching the mechanisms operate back and forth in subtle twitches. Kirby still wore the same clothes she'd worn since that morning. This had proven wise, as she was blackened with oil and lubricant almost to her shoulders and all down her legs from the work she had been furiously performing on the suit.

After a moment, Kirby spoke up without turning around. "Runner, hon, could you pass me the Voss E-Mag on the table there?"

He started and then immediately strode to the table near her, picking up a slender tool and placing it into her outstretched hand.

"Thank ya, darlin'."

Runner leaned on the wall and crossed his arms as Kirby began to collect information with her latest tool. "How did you kn-now it was me?"

Kirby stopped and turned toward him, her long face smeared with various mechanical fluids. She glanced down at Runner's exposed torso for a instant, then smirked. "Well you're the only one here that would just hang back at the door and say not a damn thing. And that's your contraption over there, so I figured you'd be familiar with handheld E-Mags."

Pieces of a weapon in progress sat on a table across the room. Runner had been tuning and completing the gun, a long-term project he was finally close to finishing. "That's a f-fair point. I'm used to coming and going quietly. Haven't lived with other people in a long time.

## 9. Realizations and Rest

More accustomed to windows th-than doors.”

“Huh, hadn’t thought about that, you ain’t exactly been livin’ on the up and up, have you? Whatta *you* think of the digs here? Hell of a lot nicer than I’ve had in a very long time.” A brief, distant look passed over Kirby’s eyes.

Runner saw something personal had passed through Kirby’s mind, like a hatch had slammed shut in her sub-conscious. “O-oh, I ... enjoy it.”

Kirby slowly narrowed her eyes at him. Runner stood silent for a few seconds but found he couldn’t really resist answering properly. He sighed with a smile. “I’m not acc-cclimatized yet. I don’t like being w-watched, I’m not used to being seen. I know I get immunity and I know we’re doing a g-g-g-great thing but it’s all just so ... backwards for how I’ve s-s-spent so much of my life.”

Kirby shrugged. “Well that makes sense to me. No shame in it. I mean, I feel wrong in my own skin if I’m away from my suit for long. Ridin’ this baby’s when I’m home, so I bet gettin’ it takin’ away would be real tough. And if I’m makin’ you uncomfortable askin’ questions, you just lemme know, hon.”

Runner put up his hands. “Oh, no, no, no, this is fine and all, it’s def-f-finitely not you. I j-just ... have to get used to having people around whether or not I w-want them to be—though I, uh, do w-want them around.”

Kirby smiled. “Well, I hope you can get used to having me around before long. Why don’t you tell me all about your pet project over there?”

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Nicadzim had retired to his quarters. He stood under his broad chromed shower head, the water circuitously reaching his body in wide, spiraling arcs and splashing off the broad slabs of his muscles. Between the gravitic anomalies and his bulk, the shower was behaving more like a shuttle wash than a normal shower.

The water was hot and steaming, the ventilation system neatly catching any wisps of vapor escaping the tall shower stall. He grunted in

## The Shadow Among The Stars

a long, relaxed exhalation. He had forgotten how nice it was to have hot water, and had been relishing it every moment he wasn't deeply appreciating the wide food selection available from the dispensary. He was a man of simple luxuries, which was unsurprising given how stimulating and unpredictable his daily existence could often be. He could hardly have hoped for more than what was provided at Raven's Landing: comfort, order, a chance to do good. Most of all, he was unexpectedly excited to be around people again.

He had never felt an overriding need to talk or interact with others, but having colorful team members living and interacting around him brought a wonderful, lively warmth to his life. He was especially thankful that Bryluen, the central locus of everything at Raven's Landing, was always curious and non-judgmental of anything he had experienced or could describe. He supposed it made sense that she could keep a straight face at any cost, but he felt she held a genuine empathy and desire to understand him and his needs as much as her natural urge to learn and explore.

Nicadzim in particular felt a connection to Vort. Both of them were difficult or impossible for the others to truly understand. Vort was lost and separated from all he knew, while Nicadzim was tossed nightly into unknowable foreign scenarios and never really knew what to expect from each day. They had both talked a little about their personal lives, but Nicadzim was by nature not given to over-sharing, and even across species lines sensed Vort held some deeply personal concerns and worries about his isolation.

Nicadzim could hardly blame him, but Vort had told him his species were a social people. So if nothing else Nicadzim made sure to chat with Vort and spend time with him daily, to make sure the alien did not spend the day alone in his room. They watched movies or shows, and discussed literature and history often. Music was one of Vort's favorite subjects, though he was overtaken by a nostalgic melancholy whenever he heard most kinds of mid-century Power Opera. The others did, of course, spend time with the distinctly likable alien as well. Kirby was fond of Vort, eagerly answering his questions when he would float overhead and watch her work.

Nicadzim finished bathing himself, then dried off and entered his bedroom with a long towel wrapped around his pillar of a waist. A

## 9. Realizations and Rest

mewling, twisted *something* like a tumbleweed made of centipedes was busy tossing his bed sheets aside. Nicadzim raised a hand as he walked over to his dresser. The metal block appeared in his grip and incinerated the squirming thing. He gave it no second thought as he picked out a fresh set of clothes.

## 10. Sit Downs and Sleep, Interrupted

As evening arrived, Bryluen called Dread Naught to the meeting room. She leaned against the wall in a thick bathrobe, her hair still damp. The team filed in from their various activities throughout Raven's Landing, and by this point were each washed up and wore fresh clothing. The greatly renewed team arrayed around a still of the *Atet's* footage of the massive creature they had witnessed earlier.

"So, what's got you taking casual w-wear to the next level?" Runner slumped into a chair with a smile.

Bryluen grinned. "Let's see, what have I done today? I showered, had a video chat with the Missus, and—oh! You may recall, that battle we survived? *That* might be what it was. Now I've got some updates from the CSOE, nothing enormous at the moment, but I wanted to let you all know. The behemoth here and any others like it have been classified as a Sjorthursar, so that's the official name for this ugly son of a bitch. Secondly, our enemy has itself been granted an overall term that encompasses whatsoever many forms it will take. Be honored, because it's named after us. Our enemy will be known internally as The Dreaded."

She paused as the team took in the name. It was just barely short of a pun but had a nice, neat ring to it bordering on the dramatic. After

## 10. Sit Downs and Sleep, Interrupted

this pause, she continued.

“High Command has a preliminary agreement with the Commandant Prime of the Astral Marine Corps to begin raising patrol counts in our border systems. In three days’ time a Qixing diplomatic party will arrive at Raven’s Landing to discuss cooperation and the ability to enter Qixing space if needed.”

The Operative straightened up and began to pace. “This means that this Thursday, as of 0930 hours local time, we will be hosting a diplomatic negotiation. It’s going to be a minimal, private affair given that it’s really just two intelligence agencies talking to each other, but a meeting does mean there will be protocols to observe. I’ve sent you each an etiquette packet. Mostly it’s reasonably common sense, but you *need* to learn the Qixing formal greeting. It’s particular, so don’t screw it up. For those who have never met our allies, they are people who respect formality and orderliness to the utmost during official functions. I trust each of you to treat them with respect and dignity, as representatives of the CSOE and Humanity in this endeavor.

“That said, I’m going to be the one doing business, so don’t get worried if you’re a shy public speaker. You are expected to greet the diplomats on the landing pad when they arrive, and after that you will need to socialize with and otherwise entertain the retainers—we’ll go over anything else the morning of the event. Send any questions or concerns my way, and remember to recycle your damaged armor plates and print replacements in the workshop before you head off to bed. Questions?”

Vort raised a wing, and Bryluen nodded at him. “WHAT DO YOU THINK THE DREADED ACTUALLY *ARE*? WE KNOW THEY ARE VICIOUS AND SEEM TO LIKE WEIRD ROCKS, BUT WHAT *ARE* THEY? WHY HAVEN’T THEY BEEN ENCOUNTERED BEFORE? WHY HERE? AND ALSO WHY DOES THE DATABASE STATE THE DREADED ARE BLACK?”

“I honestly don’t have any clue, Vort. Maybe they were hibernating or migrated from elsewhere. I’m certain the Stones have some answers, but we’ll need to find one to study for ourselves to get any actual information. Until we know more about the Stones it’s more than a little difficult to ask every installation, museum, and hab structure in Human space if they have any particularly suspicious black rocks on hand. The CSOE’s got data miners on the case, but we just don’t have

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leads.” She looked about the room. “I know we don’t have much yet, and that’s frustrating. But we’re going to get what we need. We’ll find a way to get a Stone and make it tell us how to find its friends. We’re *going* to figure this out. To answer your last question, Vort ... we probably just can’t see whatever you’re seeing. Do they have color to you? In infrared or ultraviolet?”

“All sorts of colors, shifting and pulsing constantly.”

Kirby grunted at Vort’s answer and raised a hand. “Have you dealt with a situation like this before, Bryl?”

“In some ways. I’ve reverse engineered motives and tracked insignificant things that ended up blowing a case open. It does happen, and the CSOE at large has experience with it. Dread Naught just has to do what we can to facilitate that. We will be getting called the instant a Stone is identified by any CSOE branch, and we’ll be on site to get one, mark my words.”

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After the meeting, Dread Naught began to drift off to bed. Kirby was first off, having worked most of the day to begin with. She chatted with Runner in the hall for a short time before entering her room. Runner entered his own shortly after, then Nicadzim wandered off to bed. Bryluen sat in her office researching every angle she could think of regarding the mysterious Stones and The Dreaded. Archaeology, cryptozoology, T’hròstag oral records, and more, trying to find anything she could work off of or send as a query to the CSOE Info teams.

Bryluen’s office was a small, calming space anchored by a heavy faux-wood desk with a wide, deeply cushioned swiveling chair. An antique lamp sat atop the desk, bathing the wide surface in a cool white light. A squat bookshelf held physical copies of a range of Bryluen’s favorite tomes on law, philosophy, history, and CSOE case reports. A display was embedded into the wall above the desk, where she could summon database information or contact anyone.

She heard someone enter the room, and turned her chair to find Vort standing in the doorway, shining in goldenrod. “MAY I ENTER?”

“Of course, Vort. What’s going on?”

He imitated a shrug with his wings. “I’M JUST UP AND HAVE BEEN

## 10. Sit Downs and Sleep, Interrupted

THINKING ABOUT THE DREADED.”

“You and me, both. You said your people were encountering The Dreaded. What did you know about them?”

“NOT MUCH. I ... WAS AN EXPLORER. MY PEOPLE ONLY OCCUPIED A SMALL CLUSTER OF SYSTEMS SO I RANGED OUTSIDE OF OUR BOUNDARIES DOCUMENTING DISCOVERIES AND TRANSMITTING THEM BACK TO WAYSTATIONS. I WAS TOO FAR OUT TO KEEP UP WITH NEWS OR DAILY EVENTS, BUT GOT WIND OF ENCOUNTERS WITH WHAT I NOW KNOW TO BE RABISUS. I DON'T KNOW HOW BAD THE CONFLICT GOT, BUT IF IT WAS BAD ENOUGH FOR MY PEOPLE THEY WOULD HAVE RECALLED US EXPLORERS TO THE CORE WORLDS. WHO KNOWS, MAYBE THEY HAVE BY NOW.”

Bryluen thought about this for a moment, crossing one leg over the other. “Vort, can you tell me what happened before you ended up on Pothles IV?”

Vort slowly turned puce. “M-MAY I SHUT THE DOOR? IT ... CONCERNS ME BUT I KNOW I CAN TRUST YOU WITH THIS.”

“Absolutely, Vort. You know I can keep secrets, it's my job.”

The alien pushed the button to close the door with a wing tip. It whisked closed, taking every exterior sound with it. The office fell silent. “THEN I WILL SHARE IT. SADLY I KNOW VERY LITTLE REAL DETAIL. I HAD PICKED UP A VAGUE PARTIAL TRANSMISSION A WEEK EARLIER, SOMETHING ABOUT SOME ... PLAN? IT WAS GARBLED BUT THE VOICE SOUNDED LIKE IT WAS A BIG ANNOUNCEMENT OF SOME SORT, PUBLIC.

“I HEARD NOTHING MORE AND WAS CROSSING THROUGH THE GATE FROM TS-DRNM'PLZ TO T'TH-THKN WHEN MY SENSORS MAXED OUT FROM A HUGE ENERGY READING. I SAW IN MY DISPLAYS A MASSIVE WAVE OF ENERGY FROM WHAT SEEMED TO BE THE DIRECTION OF THE HOME WORLDS: A STELLAR SHOCK WAVE BIGGER THAN ANYTHING I'VE EVER SEEN, SUPER NOVAS INCLUDED. IT WAS LOSING SPEED AND GAVE OUT RIGHT AS IT REACHED ME.

“I ... FELL? I FELT A THOUSAND DIFFERENT THINGS AT ONCE, IMAGES AND PANORAMAS THAT COME BACK TO ME IN DREAMS SOMETIMES. COLORS I CAN'T DESCRIBE, AND EMOTIONS I DIDN'T KNOW EXISTED. IT FELT LIKE I REMAINED THAT WAY FOR A HUNDRED YEARS WHEN SUDDENLY, WITH A ... SCREAM, LIKE THE VERY CRADLE BURST OF CREATION, I FOUND MYSELF ON POTHLES IV BEREFT OF MY CRAFT OR BELONGINGS. I ONLY SURVIVED DUE TO THE BIOLOGICAL ALTERATIONS THAT ALLOW US EXPLORERS TO BREATHE

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ALMOST ANY ATMOSPHERE.”

Bryluen slowly sat back in her chair and began to wag her elevated foot. “Do you have any theories on this? You mentioned it, so you must feel that the shock wave and that transmission were related?”

Vort was silent for minute, his skin boiling between yellows and bruised purples. “... I DON’T KNOW. MY PEOPLE DID NOT SPEND MUCH TIME ON WEAPONS OR FIGHTING. WHATEVER IT WAS, IT ... PROBABLY WASN’T A WEAPON, BUT I DON’T KNOW WHAT IT WOULD BE. I THINK: WHAT IF IT WAS A RESPONSE TO THE DREADED? WHAT IF IT WAS BAD ENOUGH THAT THEY SHOULD HAVE RECALLED ME?”

Bryluen fell still. “... Vort. I need you to answer me as honestly as possible.”

Vort tilted slightly, his skin settling on a dizzying magenta tone. Bryluen breathed. “You said you couldn’t chart your way home ... but you’re an *explorer*. You’ve seen our star charts, so I don’t think you were *lying* about being unable to find your way home, you truly are unable to do so—just not for the reasons you let us believe.”

Vort froze as she continued. “... You already *know* your home *isn’t* in the Milky Way. You *know* that energy wave somehow made you hop galaxies.”

The alien shrank back, becoming a sickly reddish tone. “I ... YES.”

Bryluen’s voice became quiet, her voice a tense, sibilant whisper pushed through clenched teeth. “Why have you said nothing? The Dreaded exist in multiple galaxies, Vort? That is important information! We are facing something that can travel between *galaxies*. That exponentially raises the roof on how many of them there may be!”

Heat jetted from Vort’s back for a moment. “I ... I ... DIDN’T WANT TO THINK ABOUT THE IMPLICATIONS. I DIDN’T WANT TO THINK IF MY PEOPLE WERE WHOLLY UNDER SIEGE, IF THE DREADED ARE SOME VAST UNIVERSAL PLAGUE. AND IF THEY WERE, WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THEM REGARDLESS?”

Bryluen’s voice raised back to a normal volume. “I’d still want to know. I would want to know everything I could for the *smallest* chance at survival, or even just answers ...” She closed her eyes for a moment. “But I guess I can see what you’re saying. Though answer me honestly: were you ever going to tell me this unprompted?”

## 10. Sit Downs and Sleep, Interrupted

Vort's vanes emanated heat with a sound similar to a sigh. "I KNEW YOU WOULD ASK IF I CAME IN HERE TONIGHT AND TOLD YOU WHO I WAS."

Bryluen relaxed. "That's something. There are many different variations of how this is explained, and all of them are *very* bad. Not only can we not see them when they travel, but they've got branches in different galaxies ... Shit. But for now you—" She pointed at the diminutive alien. "*—anything* else you know, you *will* bring to me. Our lives and maybe the lives of everyone in Human space depend on me knowing everything I can. Even if it hurts, don't you *dare* play with our lives and withhold a single thing. Do you understand me?"

Vort made a slight mewling sound and darkened to a rich maroon. "... YES MA'AM. I PROMISE I KNOW NOTHING ELSE. I AM SORRY FOR DISTRESSING YOU."

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Afterward, Vort headed off to bed. Bryluen stayed up a little longer continuing her research, the increasing scale of the potential threat spinning in her mind. Eventually she headed to her own bed, opting to send a sentimental message to her wife. They corresponded often and were used to being apart for long periods due to their respective careers. But when things seemed bad, Bryluen's thoughts always bent toward the person who made her feel happy and loved through it all. The message sent, something private and meaningful, she continued to ponder Vort's story as she drifted off into a fitful sleep.

The next thing she knew she was torn back into consciousness—the alarm above Nicadzim's door was going off, its blaring cry relayed into the team's rooms through the intercom system. Bryluen burst into the hall, nabbing her sidearm from beneath her pillow as she flew out the door in a silken night gown. The door burst open to a scene of pure havoc. Nicadzim was stumbling into the hall, baton in hand, the weapon flashing as he swatted at a group of horrid things flowing after him from inside his room. Each was a tumbling orange mass of hissing, vine-like appendages. Each appendage bore mandibles and rows of small legs that took turns rotating the total mass in a sickening, rolling motion. Each of the wretched things was slightly flattened, as if accustomed to slightly

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lower gravity. Vort was already in the hall, and puffed a gout of flame through Nicadzim's door, burning away a great part of the hostile mass. Bryluen began to shoot the individuals around Nicadzim, her pistol's harsh muzzle flash lighting the hall in staccato bursts. Runner burst into the hall with a tri-pistol, followed shortly by Kirby with an old shotgun in her fists and a wild look in her eyes.

The team rapidly blew the creatures back into the room, advancing after them to the doorway. A rough hole, like a bullet wound in reality, hovered in the air near Nicadzim's bed. Beyond the hole—clearly some sort of portal—was an unreal landscape of blue floating islands and neon green electrical storms. Closer to them a ravine stretched away into the distance, winding like a riverbed. Rather than water, however, it was filled with untold thousands of the horrid beings. The awful creatures tumbled out of the portal in a continuous, wriggling mass like a living pipe leak of the most abhorrent kind.

Nicadzim shouted over the team's gunfire. "The gateway closes about two minutes from now!"

Mainly due to brief puffs of flame and lightning from Vort, the creatures continued to lose ground until they stopped being able to come through the portal without being immediately blown to pieces or turned to ash. After a short time, the opening began to contract and fizzle out. The entire firefight lasted less than three minutes. Dread Naught stood around Nicadzim's bed, glancing around at the writhing pieces left of the horrible creatures.

Kirby whooped, a distant look in her eyes. "That ... I think I need new panties now."

At about that time, they collectively realized Bryluen's night gown was by far the closest any of them were to being properly clothed.

Bryluen nodded toward Runner. "Kirby was right, you *do* shave everything. I like the pattern on your, uh, hammock, there."

Runner's chest tattoo glowed softly in the dim room. He followed Bryluen's gaze downward, then shrugged. "Paisley never ages."

"And neither should you if you're gonna keep wearin' that!" Kirby chimed in.

Runner looked offended. "Well, *you* ... a-actually are coordinated, Kirby. I'm-m surprised, but *proud* of you."

## 10. Sit Downs and Sleep, Interrupted

Kirby curtsied, producing a laugh from Nicadzim and Bryluen. “Well thank ya muchly. Buuut, this is probably the only time it’s gonna happen. New set and all.”

Nicadzim looked around at his compatriots. He was wearing burgundy briefs whose scale meant they could have been convincingly hung on a flag pole. “Please inform me once the calendar photo-shoot begins. Additionally, thank you all for when you helped me avoid being eaten by these ... chewing-ball monsters.”

Bryluen kicked a still-squirming piece of creature into the hall. “No problem, but I’m honestly all for continuing to ogle each others’ underwear if that means *not* discussing these things, because almost everything about them makes me want to throw up in my mouth.”

“IN THAT CASE: I CONTINUE TO BE OF THE OPINION THAT NON-INSULATING CLOTHES ARE ODD!”, Vort chirped.

Runner looked down at the ten-legged alien. “It’d be a hell of a thing to get you fit-tted for pants, that’s for sure.”

Bryluen spread her hands. “Vort, I’m going to venture a guess that having internal genitalia likely contributes to that opinion. Regardless, as an unbiased observer, you can see that *obviously* I’m the best dressed here.”

“YOUR NAME IS ON MY PAYCHECK, SO I WILL GLEEFULLY AFFIRM YOUR OPINION.”

Kirby snapped her fingers. “Uh, by the way, Nico, you can sleep on my couch if ya need. Let the drones pick up all the gross shit?”

“That will be quite generous given what is occurring in the *last* place I slept. Given that my existing bedding will be mostly incinerated, the discarded body parts *are* only one of many problematic facts that afflicted my living situation, so I thank you for your consideration.”

Bryluen shook her head. “Alright, all of you—I’m going to bed, because I am an old lady who needs her beauty rest. Try not to get eaten any more tonight if you don’t mind.”

The others said good night to Bryluen, and continued chatting in the hall for a time as the small automated drones set about cleaning the hall and Nicadzim’s bedroom. After a time they each retired, Kirby helping Nicadzim gather a few things to take with him so he could crash on her couch.

## 11. Firefighting and Formalities

Eight squads of twelve armored figures slid through the underbrush. Each was clad in full-coverage plates whose rigid dedication to convex angles did little to distract from their elegant craftsmanship and worshipful attention to detail. The soldiers' elbows, knees, feet, and gauntlets were sealed in a sound-absorbent coating allowing them to climb, crawl, and stalk silently. Their long, rectangular shoulder pads extended out past the joint, and the flared neck guards on the backs of their helmets gave them an intimidating profile.

In their hands they each held black, slender firearms and long straight blades slung across their backs. The leader of each squad held their blade in one hand unsheathed, the tempered edges a matte blue in the shade of the undergrowth. In their other fists they held sidearms—essentially a pair of brass knuckles that projected bolts of energy outward from between a pair of prongs. The warrior in the rear of each squad bore a pack on their back containing the squad's banner, both a woven flag and a device that securely transmitted their location to the orbiting ship when activated.

The platoon of Qixing Gate Sentinels had been rapidly laying traps throughout the forested reaches of Gru'Thiall. The world's orbital surveillance suite had detected an unknown contact, and the Sentinels

## 11. Firefighting and Formalities

deployed to confront them. Visual confirmation from one of the surveillance drones confirmed a similarity to the recent threat reported by the Human CSOE. The Sentinels were to eliminate every available target. The wide enemy advance rushed like stampeding luxan through the jungle toward their uncertain goal. Gru'Thiall was uninhabited, its surface watched by the Gate Sentinels due purely to its proximity to Compression Gates on the border of Qixing territory facing the galactic rim.

The Sentinels' commander directed the squads to disperse and prepare their positions for a holding action, impassive through their opaque chevron-shaped visors. Each squad toted a heavy weapon, either a rapid-fire self-propelling munitions launcher or a coilgun mounted on a slender swiveling stand. The heavy weapons were set up on the edge of a long incline overlooking where the enemy was soon to pass.

Sonic and flash projectors were set up to disorient the foe on the approach toward the heavy weaponry. Sharpshooters climbed into thick tree boughs, and the others took cover behind trees, rocks, and berms. After a minute of frenzied activity, the Sentinels disappeared from sight, their sudden stillness and the density of their surroundings allowing them to go unobserved. Orbital data continued to relay the distance between the enemy advance and the Sentinels.

The Dreaded initially landed and headed off in a number of directions at once as if searching for something, before coalescing and heading out on their current course as one mass.

The Sentinels were sworn to stop them from reaching their goal regardless of the cost. The incursion was comparatively small, but all battles were dire matters and each life counted. The Qixing were outnumbered but expected as much. The Sentinels were accustomed to performing vicious ambushes and hit-and-fade attacks that harried invaders who dared set foot on Qixing worlds, often dispersing threats long before action by the Interior Guard became necessary.

The enemy would reach the front-most traps in eighteen seconds at their current speed. Hands clamped on weapon grips and blades; The launchers were armed and the coilguns silently accelerated to their idle oscillation speeds. The intervening seconds were tense, the sound of hundreds of oncoming feet building in volume as The Dreaded crashed through the purple 'ferns' and creepers that filled the space beneath the

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tall Orcsha trees. The sun passing through the leaves above cast the scene in a copper tint. The foot of a rushing Gugalanna passed near a small, white device concealed in the dirt. The mine sprung from the ground and burst in a brief wave of ionized gasses, flash-frying a radius of Dreaded in a blue flash of light. The survivors cried out, but their continued motion caused more and more mines to leap and burst in turn.

The commander gave a curt command, and the Qixing opened fire. White streaks of the Sentinel's infamous corkscrew bullets and the crack of energetic bolts sailed forward in neat salvos that cut into the oncoming enemy. The launchers began to spit exploding munitions at a rate of four a second, trailing explosions in a lazy arc through the enemy mass. The coilguns screamed like banshees. Their whirling circular frames projected a stream of miniature projectiles through the woods that struck in a devastating, disintegrating impact.

The Dreaded began to fall by the dozens due to the sudden onslaught, the mines slowing the advance as the weapons-fire mercilessly carved into the horde. A brisk, easterly gust of wind dispersed the dusty soot spurting from the rents and bullet holes wrought upon the falling Dreaded. Regardless, due to sheer numbers, the horde began to approach the Qixing front line. The line soldiery, on the hill below the heavy weapon emplacements, drew their swords and prepared for melee. However, they did retain one final trick: this was a joint deployment.

A squadron of five Astral Marine Ninurta Class Heavy Walkers burst through the tree line toward the enemy flank. Each was a chunky, bipedal war machine eight meters high. Their legs allowed them to traverse any form of rough terrain, bringing vehicle-class weaponry to the battlefield with great maneuverability. The Ninurtas hosted an array of weapons mounted to their chassis on sponsons, each of which was capable of demolishing buildings and slaughtering infantry positions. Within the armored depths of the chassis three crew members operated the walker's movement, weaponry, and communication systems. It took concerted anti-tank weaponry to down the hulking machines—and even then their ability to crouch, side-step, hop, or even lean in and out of cover made them much more difficult targets than traditional tanks. Despite their expense and the specialist knowledge required to maintain and operate them, the Ninurta and smaller walker classes had proven

## 11. Firefighting and Formalities

excellent additions to the Marine arsenal since their introduction.

The Ninurtas opened up with dual rotary cannons, the soil hurtling skyward in huge swaths as ten spinning firearms unloaded thousands of rounds per minute into the enemy. Rocket mounts and a large-bore cannon on the upper surfaces of the chassis lit up as well, loosing high-explosive ordnance into the enemy mass. A pulsing plasma gun at each walker's chin gushed energized projectiles whose light produced a glow that suffused the oily smoke coating the battlefield with an ethereal aura. The Dreaded hesitated in their advance, and began to shift some of their mass to attempt to overwhelm the walkers. In response, flames billowed from defensive armaments on the leg assemblies, wreathing the Ninurtas in a hellish glow.

After several minutes The Dreaded began to fall back, pursued closely by both the walkers and fleet-footed Sentinels. Surely, these creatures could not pose so great a threat against the full might of the allied forces?

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The morning the Qixing diplomats were due to arrive, Dread Naught sat on the couches in the lounge at the time Bryluen had instructed them. Each held a cup of coffee—excluding Vort, who drank green tea from a special cup better equipped to accommodate both his lack of hands and his trunk. They had all learned, in somewhat slapstick fashion, that coffee put Vort to sleep with the same force and suddenness as if he had been struck by an elephant tranquilizer. Kirby was in pajamas with a towel holding her drying hair. Runner sat next to her wearing pajama pants and an athletic top, his bare feet on the glass coffee table in between the couches. Vort was next to them on the first couch cradling his cup with the side of his body, sipping idly from it as his eyes wheeled around the room. Across the table on the second couch Nicadzim sat in shorts and a loose shirt, drinking from a thin stream of coffee that was sluggishly rising from his cup toward the ceiling.

The confident pound of heavy shoes preceded Bryluen's arrival. She wore a charcoal tailored jacket secured by a length of silver cording. Beneath it the neat, high collar of her crisp white blouse stood out. She wore a matching tapered skirt, her pleasantly toffee-colored skin a warm

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contrast to the cool tones of her clothing. A few inches of the complex tattoo on her right leg emerged from the bottom of the skirt, a colorful sweep of two designs that intertwined ever tighter as the tattoo advanced from just above her knee up to its end at her hip. One design was an aquatic motif of coral and alien fish envisioned in warm colors, and the second an aerial scene of birds, floating leaves, and clouds rendered in cool tones. The brilliant colors of the artwork stood out beautifully from her skin tone. Just above her high collar, the top of her neck tattoo was visible. She wore graceful black platform shoes, her hair was neatly styled, one wrist bore a finely tooled silver chain, and understated black studs were mounted in her ears.

The other members of the team silently observed her heightened state of dress. Runner took a breath. "... so b-b-basically we were supposed to be here *and* dressed?"

Bryluen smiled sweetly and took her cup of coffee from a passing drone. She sipped the drink without further comment, gazing expectantly past a small, black nose ring in her left nostril. The team, excluding Vort, simultaneously rushed out from the lounge to their rooms to put on the business-appropriate attire she ensured they ordered days prior.

Fifteen minutes later they began to file back out in appropriate clothing. Runner wore a handsome dark brown suit with a crème shirt. Additionally, he adorned himself with a thin tie, cuff links, and pointed dress shoes. He had wrangled his hair into neat braids that hung down his back, appearing perfectly comfortable in an elevated state of dress. Nicadzim as well wore a suit, in his case a more traditional gray affair with suspenders over a dress shirt. He had brushed and plucked his mustache, and his massive feet were bound in black shoes. Kirby emerged in a simple green dress, wearing green earrings and flats. Her hair was neatly secured behind her head, with a decorative pin of the Astral Marine Corps crest. She emerged into the hallway with the wary discomfort of a cat that had been sprayed with a garden hose.

Bryluen was waiting at the end of the corridor and flashed her a thumbs up, at which point Kirby let out a pent-up breath. "Oh god, I decided to punch holes back in my ears, it's been *forever*. At no time did I think about havin' to do all this actin' nice and dressin' up shit! This dress *is* on forward, right?"

## 11. Firefighting and Formalities

Bryluen put a hand on her shoulder as they walked together back to the lounge. “Given the slit in the back, the dress would be somewhat daring had you worn it backwards—maybe next time? Just breathe, remember that you could kill any of these people if you really wanted to, and that this is in no way, shape, or form a high pressure engagement for you.”

Bryluen paused. “Actually, don’t think about that last thing I said—when something high pressure *does* come around I don’t want you passing out on me.”

The team again gathered in the lounge in the same seating order, with Bryluen sitting next to Nicadzim. She sat stock straight with her legs crossed, a bastion of imperiousness worthy of Parliament.

She placed her coffee cup onto the table. “You have all gone over the etiquette packets, so I wished to brush up on a few other points that don’t usually make it into the standard papers. The Qixing, as you may know, are a people that highly respect formality and professionalism when dealing in business or politics. Their negotiating party is a rigidly organized group: one ranking ambassador who does the talking, and two secondary ambassadors, each of whom has a specialty relevant to the negotiation at hand and provides information or insight when needed. Each diplomat will be accompanied by a number of retainers both to exhibit rank and to perform mundane tasks: four retainers for the head diplomat, and two for each secondary. Generally speaking these retainers will consist of one body-guard and one secretary, while the two extras afforded for the primary will be yolnfa—*basically* geishas.

“After initial introductions I’ll be taking the diplomats to our meeting room to do the official work, which is the complex part. The secretaries will be inside the room for that, while the body guards and yolnfas will be out in the lounge with all of you. Qixing warriors are disciplined and very externally quiet—they may just stay outside on the landing pad. That won’t be true of the yolnfas, who are experts at conversation. Luckily you’re all interesting people, so don’t get nervous—no one will be bored. Rant about yourself if you need to.

“On the topic of socialization, there are a couple of things you need to understand going in: Qixing *don’t* discuss the personal physical details of others *ever* unless such a subject is volunteered—this includes commenting on tattoos, jewelry, hair, *anything* like that, so wait until

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they offer up the subject. I know that feels strange to us, but please keep it in mind. The other huge difference in conversational standards is, and I *cannot* stress this enough: the Qixing are *extremely* forward about sexuality. That sounds counter-intuitive, I'm sure, but while it is considered impolite to address someone's physical appearance unbidden, they have almost no hangups about sex. It's possible to be propositioned at some point, just a warning.

"In a species where it takes three to tango—in two combinations, several months apart—accidental pregnancy is rare and difficult. The Qixing thus never developed the shame complex much of Humanity developed from our early history. When two curious teenagers can slip out to the barn and accidentally make a kid, it's tougher to control your population growth. The Qixing, on the other hand, think little more of it than you or I would of asking someone if they want a sandwich. They're almost certainly not going to ask due to this being a diplomatic event, but I thought I'd cover it just in case."

The team paused in contemplation. Vort cycled a few odd colors as he tried to comprehend how the Qixing reproduced. Runner raised a hand. "Okay, but most important qu-uestion ... could we say yes?"

Bryluen paused, fixing Runner with a stare so blank it could strip the color from a wall. In an equally emotionless voice she pushed a response through her lips. "Correct me if I am mistaken, but I believe you just asked me for clarification on whether or not it would be okay to take someone's retainer out back to fornicate during an official CSOE function."

Runner pursed his lips. "... o-oh, no, that's ... d-d-d-definitely ... not what I asked?"

The Operative's face lit up again and she resumed her usual tone. "Well that's good! Just remember this is easy on you folks—there would be ceremonial sparring with big sticks if this was a summit with the T'hròstag."

Nicadzim leaned forward and put his hands on the table. "What ... what happened if all three species arrive at one conference to have negotiated?"

The Operative sat back. "You have never seen a more wretched social labyrinth. Inter-species meeting organizers have life-long job security, trust me. I'll summarize: Qixing think the T'hròstag's symbolic

## 11. Firefighting and Formalities

combat is barbaric, while *we* think it's inherently threatening to have blatantly armed individuals standing around inside a negotiating space. Therefore, the Human and Qixing body guards and the T'hròstag Champions do what needs to be done in an exterior arena prepared out of sight of where the Qixing diplomats are to enter. Meanwhile, the Human and Qixing retainers socialize in an area out of sight of the T'hròstag because the T'hròstag think small talk is immoral, and they find any sort of sexuality absolutely abhorrent thing to such a degree that a tell-tale eyelash flutter will upset them as if they were being actively vomited on.

“Also: the Qixing and T'hròstag find hors d'oeuvres respectively petty and insulting for various cultural reasons, which means a proper meal has to be provided, and that is one of the most awe-inspiring tasks this side of Compressed Space calculations due to divergent dietary needs and *vastly* separated food cultures. There's a reason the CSOE uses 'Serving yogurt to a Ly Aulth' as a metaphor for fucking something up so badly it could cause a war.

“The actual meeting itself similarly incorporates a triumvirate of standards. This means talks occur in a two-tiered chamber because, while the Qixing insist on having their secretary fetch a yolnfa to feed them food or drinks by hand during big meetings in order to demonstrate culture and sophistication, the T'hròstag believe individuals present in a different capacity should not be on the same physical elevation as the diplomats during business. This makes for a lot of leaning for the Qixing delegation unless you provide step ladders. We then pass a ceremonial staff around to speak while the head Human declares who has the floor, and the acceptable ways to ask for and pass the staff depend on what species currently holds it.”

Kirby looked actively distressed. “But ... why?! Why not just ... show up in a room and *talk*?”

Bryluen shrugged. “Because we're all different and deserve to feel comfortable. Communicating between nations is a joke compared to doing so between species. We are all very different, so trust me when I tell you that organizing such an event to accommodate all needs and preferences is far better and makes for far more amenable results than either forcing one party to conform to the other, or having everyone stand around in an empty room. We need everyone to feel equal,

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represented, and respected or we'd never get anything done. Trust me, the Qixing and T'hròstag feel like we're fussy jackasses as much as we might feel that way about them at a conference—but we all play nice.”

Kirby sheepishly raised a hand. “Not to take away from that grand cultural relativity lecture, but to jump back to the whole thing about gettin’ propositioned by an alien for a second: isn’t Qixing skin *rough*? Wouldn’t that ...”, she squirmed for a moment, squeezing her knees together and making a sound of discomfort deep in her throat.

Runner was about to speak, but Bryluen intercepted. “That’s often overstated regardless, but their scales are much smoother in some places. Otherwise, you just need to lubricate.” The team turned toward her all at once. She simply smiled coyly.

After a moment, Runner smacked his lips. “Is this wha-at it’s like to get The Talk from your moth-her?”

“Oh, so when we *first* meet, I’m ‘eye-catching’ and you joke about being ‘deflated’ that I’ve got a wife, but as soon as I know a thing or two about sleeping with aliens, I’m your mother. The problem here lies with *you*, young man.”

## 12. Quintessential Qixing

Dread Naught was lined up on the landing pad, with Bryluen waiting at the door to the entryway corridor. The sleek Qixing shuttle was a pale green shape with subtle decorative fixtures on each corner. The vehicle swung in low, landing casually on the landing pad. The *Atet* and the three shuttles had been parked as far to the side as possible to make a comfortable space for the delegation to land. With a soft hiss, the shuttle ramp lowered.

The Qixing were visually similar to Humans to such an unlikely degree that both species had spent years exploring the implications of their external phenotypical similarities. Regardless, none would otherwise doubt the distance in biological heritage—the initial life stages of the two species varied greatly, not to mention much of their internal workings and the kind of awe-inspiring genetic differentiation expected between species that evolved on entirely different planets.

The skin of the Qixing appeared in any number of green tones, with certain populations featuring blues and grays. The diplomatic party was a particularly cosmopolitan mixture of skin colors among all three sexes—which is to say the fertilizing, incubating, and gestating sexes. The first and third were identified readily enough in Human terminology as male and female, while the incubating sex had no Human equivalent.

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Qixing eyebrows were wire-thin and dense almost to the point of feeling solid, and the outer surface of their lips consisted of thin vertical strips of the same keratin-like compound that composed their fingernails. Traditionally their lips were either filed along the sides of the strips into an almost sharpened series of outward-facing ridges, or etched with various patterns. Since Human contact, however, smoothing them down to a continuous soft curve had become an accepted style. The aliens' eyes—more accustomed to aquatic spaces given the environments of their home world—had large pupils with thin irises in purples, yellows, or oranges that approached red tones. Their eyes were most often consistent in appearance to Humans who featured epicanthic folds that obscured the inner eyelids.

Qixing hair was silken, fragile, quick-growing, and came in widely varied tones anywhere from black to the yellows, oranges, and reds their eyes often attained. Their skin was covered in tiny denticles like those of a shark, and was slightly thicker than that of Humans. Their teeth bore a pearly sheen and the insides of their mouths, tongues, and so on were in various blue-green tones. Otherwise their shapes and proportions were somewhat similarly to Humans, though often stockier and almost always shorter. The other major visual difference was an extra cartilaginous skeletal feature that made their collar-bones appear as one unified arc below their neck.

While the T'hròstag were famously capable of confusing the two species (their own biology being a massive departure from either), to a Human or Qixing observer the numerous subtle differences in facial structure, posture, motion, and expression left no doubt to their alien natures regardless of the more obvious dissimilarities.

The gendered sound 'v' (often spelled *aou*, something like exhaling an open-ended, percussive 'O' sound) was used to voice the character-mark used in Qixing Imperial Writing to gender a word or idea as the incubating sex. This sound was thus borrowed by Humans and rendered as a standardized way to comfortably refer to them, resulting in the linguistically apocryphal but commonly-used terms *aoumale* and *aouman*. In terms of pronouns this was embodied as *Aoue* (pronounced like a breathier rendition of the French *oui*), *Haoum*, *Haous*, and *Haoumsel*.

The head diplomat was a tall *aouman* named Lo'Kanh

## 12. Quintessential Qixing

Rurt'Ya'Ka'Thun. Aoue was an exemplar of haous sex, with hips slightly wider than the narrow pelvis of a Qixing male alongside a number of facial features that rendered haoum androgynous to Human eyes. Spinal curvature—as well as nutrient glands in the upper chest—suggested a more feminine visual persuasion. However details of limb musculature, gait, and shoulder actuation brought to mind something more akin to Humanly masculine visual precepts. To a Qixing, of course, an aouman would be quite distinct from a man or woman for dozens of obvious reasons.

Rur'Thu—the diplomat's shortened, or common name—was a shade of striking slate. Aoue lead the diplomatic procession from the shuttle toward Dread Naught. Every diplomat was clad in traditional robes colored according to their rank, with tastefully minimal embroidery. Subtleties in fit and overall shape varied between sexes and individuals, as did differing profiles of lip paint and colorful painted accents along their upper eyelids. The body guards were clad in the angular aqua armor of an ambassadorial retinue, with their sloping helmets on and rounded firearms in hand. Each had a banner mounted to their back declaring the identity of their assigned diplomat. The two yolnfas, an aouman and woman, were elaborately clad. Their hair was styled in a more artistic fashion, and their faces and nails were painted in complementary patterns. Their robes were cut much closer to the body and trailed numerous tassels, and most of their surface was embroidered in delicate designs.

One by one the members of Dread Naught engaged in the formal greeting of the Qixing with one hand, while shaking firmly in the standard Human tradition with the other. A formal Qixing greeting began with the host extending a hand with their palm facing upward. The guest would then place their palm upon that of the host, at which point the host would introduce themselves by name and the name of the clan or organization they represented. The guest would respond in kind with their own identity, at which point both would simultaneously incline their heads and say in their respective languages: “May the days between our meetings be fruitful” before straightening up and withdrawing their hands. Fortunately, only the three diplomats required formal greetings by the members of Dread Naught—hosts held the burden of introductions more than the guests during smaller meetings, as

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they need only be represented in greetings by the highest-esteemed members of their party.

As Bryluen greeted the third diplomat, she led the trio inside the entry hall. The secretaries followed close behind as she walked them to the meeting room. Nicadzim, as the most unflappable and least excitable member of the group, had been instructed to wait the proper three paces before offering to lead the bodyguards and yolnfas to the lounge for drinks and meals. He offered his arm to the elder yolnfa, indicated by the color of her robe's collar. The bodyguards politely declined the invitation to enter, instead taking up a formation on the landing pad and becoming utterly still. Dread Naught fell in behind Nicadzim and the guests, and by the time they reached the lobby Bryluen and the diplomats were already closed up inside of the meeting room with the lights dimmed and the projector flaring to life.

The female yolnfa was called Fra'Houn. She was a wide-faced woman whose pampered skin was a deep midnight purple. The Qixing were overwhelmingly traditionalist in regard to hair styling, finding it more important as a social signifier than an element of personal expression. As a result, Fra'Houn wore her hair long and neat, bound into a looping shape by jade bands. She walked with an easy sway and kept four fingers of one hand touching the top of Nicadzim's extended forearm. Upon reaching the entrance to the lounge, Nicadzim shifted his stance to make it clear they had arrived. The yolnfa proceeded inside, removing her touch from the man's arm and heading to sit daintily on one couch. The aoumale yolnfa, named Xong'Tcho, was no less poised and elegant, possessing a slender face and pistachio green skin. His hair was short and spiked, a common cut among aoumen. Aoue sat serenely on the opposite couch from haous compatriot. Runner promptly presented dispensary menu tabs to the entertainers, who were of course gracious and charmingly flutter-eyed at every turn.

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Within the meeting room, Bryluen went over a recent after-action report from an encounter with The Dreaded on Gru'Thiall, on the far rim of Qixing space.

## 12. Quintessential Qixing

“They were definitely after something, and I’m glad the Sentinels and Marines stopped them from reaching it. But they don’t always have to strike border systems. Without a way to track them or proper knowledge of their motives, we don’t know if they will eventually decide to skip past the outer gates and strike a more inhabited world. Even if contained, any landing could very reasonably produce panic, not to mention if something *really* goes wrong.”

Rur’Thu smiled thinly. The Qixing’s major languages leaned toward half-tonal patterns to differentiate meaning and attitude. This habit, when applied to any atonal Human tongues, produced a flat-sounding affectation in the Qixing’s speech. The diplomat was well versed, however, and such signs were spare and minimal, mostly exhibited in what occasionally sounded like a subtle lisp. “We are researching methods and analyzing energy fluctuations from the gates. I have read your writings on the Stone, but I have neither seen nor heard of such artifacts. Our Sentinels have kept an eye out, but have produced nothing.”

“I understand, but this threat will continue to escalate. The Dreaded will be back on Gru’Thiall to claim whatever is there. I know it’s dense and difficult to explore, but they set themselves on a specific course.” Bryluen traced her hand in a line across a projected map of Gru’Thiall. “Send a team to follow this line, and they may eventually find what The Dreaded sought. I understand, however, that without any scans it’s impractical to go on a blind jungle trek.”

“We will send drones to begin surveying a tract of land in that direction on your behalf. It will cost us little, and I do not want you to feel I am rejecting your counsel. I simply see a threat that has remained contained for now. We will determine a way to track these Dreaded through the gates and beat back the Sjorthursars with our patrol ships. Our Interior Guard garrisons are more than equipped for such attacks as well.”

“For now. It’s nothing officially verifiable, but Vort, the alien you didn’t recognize at the landing pad? He claims to have been transported from another galaxy where they, too, were encountering The Dreaded. I won’t pretend that’s proof of threat for you to jump on, but it’s a detail to keep in the back of your mind. We *can’t* assume total numbers or deployment strength.”

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Rur'Thu scratched haous chin with haous pinky finger in a circular motion. As with most Qixing, the finger nail was rounded and hemispherical, covering much of the finger tip. "I will do so, but you understand my reticence to advocate large-scale military deployment. I will not raise rumors of danger on our borders without provable cause. The House of Ho'Xal frowns on brash actions."

Bryluen gestured with one hand. "Very well. The gate research will serve us well regardless, and when proof is acquired the CSOE will forward it. What resources *are* you willing to shift with the current information?"

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The Qixing were the first alien species to make formal contact with Humanity some decades ago, and since then the two species rapidly became closely allied. Though anglicized as Qixing, the Q was pronounced as 'kh', and the letter 'X' stood for a sound in the Qixing language that could reasonably be spelled 'hsi', an exhaled sibilant sound. This nomenclature applied to any anglicized Qixing word, and it often took some practice before an English-speaker could reliably produce the sound in the middle of a word without an awkward pause to either side.

The Qixing Commonwealth was a complex array of established cultures under the umbrella of a Constitutional Monarchy. The reigning queen, Tong Ho'Suthya Vraya Ho'Xal was the head of state, and during her reign the Ho'Xal dynasty had reached the fourth consecutive century of its rule. The Qixing people developed on Torva'Ang, a world of numerous, small land masses. Most of these consisted of soft rock through which winding tunnels had been worn by the changing tides as epochs came and went. These hive-like islands, isolated fortresses amid a planet-spanning sea, are where the species sought shelter and grew in much of its early developmental period.

Due to this dramatic natural backdrop, most Qixing myth systems regarded the ocean as the churning waters of chaos out of which order had risen. One of the oldest Qixing myths—found in numerous belief systems on Torva'Ang—was the Qixing's creation by a primordial fish or (what could loosely be termed) a whale—the Ho'Xal, or 'Wave

## 12. Quintessential Qixing

Aouther' (Roughly, as many other connotations to the word exist that are difficult to effectively express in Human languages). In the most common rendition of the myth, the Ho'Xal summoned the islands from the sea and laid aous eggs within their hollows. From these eggs, the Ho'Qixing, or "Wave Children" were born. It was often theorized such tales were inspired by one or more species of the aquatic mega-fauna inhabiting Torva'Ang's oceans, and that the Qixing's evolution took them onto land when so few other species have done so.

The Qixing had seen a number of wars as their species spread across Torva'Ang, vying for the valuable islands and rapidly developing buoyant structures. Millennia later, much of the world was covered in massive, tiered artificial islands—some of which were mobile and migrated with the seasons. The Qixing developed space flight through frenzied national competition, eventually beginning to colonize other worlds in a manner similar to Humanity.

The Qixing had never forgotten their watery home and the deep impact it made on their civilization—in fact the three-sex reproductive system the species developed had served to increase the genetic diversity of smaller populations isolated by the sea. They took many traditional sensibilities and age-old aesthetics with them into space as well as the Monarchy which, through wit and long-running political maneuverings, eventually came to be the presiding authority over all the lesser nations.

The Qixing occupied a larger number of systems than Humanity, and had rapidly established Sentinel stations at every Gate in their possession. Due to a history of maintaining nebulous oceanic borders, the Qixing were quite accustomed to keeping a close eye on travel and required special dispensation for a foreign ship to pass into their space while armed—including defensive weapons on freighters. Relations built quickly with Humanity to the point where either species was not an entirely uncommon sight in the others' territory. Inter-species families and couplings (or trios, as is the traditional Qixing relationship dynamic) now existed in respectable numbers as each species found the other exotic and intriguing, though obviously cross-breeding was as impossible between a Human and a Qixing as between a goat and the average garter snake. This had been scientifically assumed for various reasons, but certainly had not served to dampen anyone's enthusiasm.

Humans and Qixing had embarked on limited cooperative

## The Shadow Among The Stars

military exercises, minor engagements, and cross-training programs over the past years, although the two species had never fought together in war.

Tensions with the T'hròstag continued mainly unabated as with Humanity, though to the surly aliens the occasional skirmish was an expected assessment of the worthiness of its neighbors rather than a form of political aggression. The T'hròstag paid the lack of understanding expressed by their neighbors little, if any, mind—in their opinion it continued to be a source of consternation that the Qixing and Humans failed to occasionally raid *their* border colonies.

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Runner sat next to Fra'Houn, regaling her with a vivid retelling of the most comic hijinks he encountered during his destruction of the Milieu crime network. Regardless of his eventual success, the endeavor had been wrought with numerous near-misses and miscalculated ambushes he survived by the skin of his teeth. His journey to folk hero status was long and treacherous, but he admitted the more lascivious side of his nature quite enjoyed the attention such risks brought his way. He, of course, relayed the nature of several rendezvous to the attentive yolnfa, causing her to giggle coyly.

During this retelling, Fra'Houn ate a Qixing delicacy with the practiced poise of an empress, her eyes never having to leave Runner's. The most common utensil of a Qixing meal was a thin, delicate pair of tongs. One side of the tongs featured a small hook that was used to pry or pull open the various kinds of shelled seafood that often featured in Qixing cuisine. Runner estimated her to be around twenty-five years older than he, and at least forty-five years more deft at handling eating utensils.

The yolnfa effortlessly projected both a feigned, paradoxically-enticing innocence as well as knowing comfort, wisdom, and experience. Despite his knowledge that Fra'Houn was professionally trained to make anyone who spoke to her feel validated and valuable, Runner found himself believing her cooing and gasped expressions of interest and amazement. He supposed it was no harm either way, given how nice it made him feel—every time he inserted a dramatic pause she

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would react in just such a way as to cause a flutter in his chest at her focused adoration of his words. This, he reflected, would be a *fantastic* way to spend money in the future. He never before felt so comfortable simply speaking at length, and was quite taken with the sensation.

Meanwhile Kirby and Nicadzim sat with Xong'Tcho, changing topics as needed. Xong'Tcho was a scholarly conversationalist, haous handsomeness and smooth baritone voice perfect for poetry, oration, and the detailed, compelling recollection of historical events. Nicadzim found quiet satisfaction in relating—in the least-concerning amount of detail possible—some of the things he had seen and adventures he had been on during his not-dreams. Xong'Tcho found the imagery fascinating and poetic, causing haoum to at one point delve deep into the works of Ro'Ro Jin'Tai—one of the foundational Qixing Mid-Imperial Era poets—for appropriate quotations and philosophy. Nicadzim was surprisingly familiar with Qixing poetic conventions, and held his own well enough to cause Kirby to make an awed face at him from behind the yolnfa sitting between them.

Through a series of subtle topic shifts, Kirby had managed to experimentally broach the topic of her appearance and got the aouman waxing poetic about her freckles—apparently such a feature was extremely rare and envied by Qixing. The way Xong'Tcho told it, freckles were a chief feature of the royal family and seen in few others, and in past ages was seen as a mark of the gods' favor. Kirby simply stared, dreamy-eyed and contented as the yolnfa spoke. Kirby soon heard everything she never knew she wanted to hear about being so freckled that makeup made it look like a cosmic artist had taken an eraser to part of her face. She was absolutely, positively certain she would not care if every last thing Xong'Tcho said had been a bold-faced lie.

Vort had since joined Runner and Fra'Houn on their couch. He quietly observed the yolnfa slowly edge closer to Runner, gradually dialing up a look of rapturous attention and appreciation with the subtlety and control of a blind mountain sage embroidering a tapestry. Runner was either oblivious to the progression or attempting to see its furthest extent.

Vort spun two of his eyes around toward Kirby and Nicadzim. The jockey was staring in poorly disguised, rapturous infatuation at

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Xong'Tcho. Aoue was currently orating a classic Qixing drama from memory, haous eyes closed as aoue rumbled forth a hear-trending soliloquy. Nicadzim made a subtle motion with one hand behind the back of the couch, and Kirby started as if she had been lightly smacked on the shoulder. He shot a gently chiding look at Kirby, only for her to stick her tongue out at him.

Vort was settled down with his ten legs tucked beneath him. He bent his trunk to one side and loudly sipped tea from his cup. His feathers and skin rippled with lovely stripes of cyan and robin's egg. The gray swirls of his eyes regarded his companions in turn, and he reflected on just how absolutely strange his new friends were.

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"I know your job is to be as cautious as possible, and I deeply appreciate travel clearance into your space, but a Qixing specialist, just *one* individual on loan to Dread Naught will allow *much* quicker response times when we have to operate in your systems. If The Dreaded escalate or we make a time-sensitive discovery, you do *not* want a military delay on your hands."

"Dame Branok ..." Rur'Thu placed the three middle fingers of haous left hand on his brow. "... we both want what is best. But I am beholden to the Lords and Ladies of the Body Royal to abstain from the slightest whiff of abnormal military prudence. Were we to assign a specialist to accompany Dread Naught as anything more than an occasional liaison, it would require shipments of regular supplies and an extended communication chain between both that individual and the CSOE that no amount of subtlety could long conceal.

"Since the recent tariffs imposed on the T'hrostag, our most profitable trade routes with the Ly Aulth have suffered. We owe it to the citizenry to maintain as low a profile as possible—any extraneous expenditure, justified or otherwise, will not contribute to the appearance of thoughtful economics. I understand if this seems like a small issue to you, but Humans have historically lent more credence than we to military budgeting without mass displeasure. We find particular offense in perceived inefficiency or waste."

Bryluen shook her head. "Well *we* believe that preventing a

## 12. Quintessential Qixing

tragedy with a bit of waste is better than suffering the alternative. You can hold out for the time being: but keep praying that the first time you get the proof you want to justify a military push, it isn't because you have to answer for deaths."

"The Sentinels and Internal Garrisons will hold, Dame Branok. They always have, and we *will* soon determine a method of tracking the Sjorthursars, I am sure. We have no less interest in our safety than you do for your own people, and we are more than aware of your personal interests in Qixing security. We thank you for your thoughtfulness, and as always wish to work alongside Humanity, but we must also attend to the orderliness and peace of our own realm."

## 13. Disappointment and Duty

After deliberating fine details for another hour, Bryluen and the ambassadors left the meeting room. With a motion, Rur'Thu summoned the yolnfas from the lounge. Dread Naught saw them off in a neat manner, with Xong'Tcho kissing Kirby's hand as aoue departed. She was unable to summon words in response. The moment the shuttle retreated from sight, Bryluen's professional stance and smiling expression instantly vanished. Wordlessly she wheeled around and stomped back up the entryway corridor, sounding as if her weight had suddenly tripled. The others looked at each other, confused by her sudden departure. She took a hard right into the meeting room once more.

After a moment of silent thought, the rest of Dread Naught followed cautiously. Once outside the closed meeting room door they heard a ruckus inside—yelling and impacts, mostly muffled by the sound proofing. Some moments of tense staring passed between them all. Vort did his best imitation of a shrug with his wings. Runner kept glancing back at the door, then to the others, while Kirby crossed her arms and stared at the ground. None of them had a clue how to handle the situation. Nicadzim, used to unknowns, simply sighed and handed Runner his jacket. He put his meaty hand on the door button, motioning

### 13. Disappointment and Duty

for the others to stay back.

Bryluen sat sideways on a discarded chair in the far corner of the meeting room. One of her hands was busy mussing its way through her hair. Her legs were stretched out ahead of her and her ankles were crossed. She had kicked her shoes off at some point, each laying in a different end of the chamber. Her jaw was locked in anger, her dark eyes burning.

The withering stare she flashed Nicadzim as he entered and closed the door behind him may well have slain a lesser man. The other chairs were thrown about the room, one of them sideways on top of the meeting room table.

Nicadzim calmly picked up this chair with one hand, placed it on the ground, and sat down. “Not to state what was most obvious, but I was guessing the negotiations did not go so well?”

Bryluen snorted. “They sent out a complementary camera drone and promised not to shoot us out of the sky. It’s absolute horseshit, and people are going to die because of it.”

“So no real cooperation—a token gesture, at best? That will seem ... odd.”

“You’re telling me. You know what the problem is with people that have never had their borders busted and been slaughtered like animals? They tend to think it just *won’t* happen to them. Sure we’ve got invisible space monsters crawling up our asses and lighting shit on fire, but we’ll be fine, surely nothing *unexpected* could happen?”

“What ... what type of things were you hoping will be agreed to?”

“Oh, I don’t know, a Qixing specialist so we can have direct contact with their military, some actual logistical support, maybe increased defense forces and patrols? Literally anything except a pat on the god damn head. There are going to be shit-tons of them, we ... Nico, would you mind getting everyone else in here? I’m going to chew your ears off for a minute.”

Nicadzim nodded, then appeared in the lobby. He summoned everyone into the meeting room, and they all came in and righted chairs for themselves. Bryluen stood up and began to speak, pointing toward the non-Human in their midst. “Alright, we’re just going to get this out there now. Vort is from a different galaxy. A whole other galaxy an

## The Shadow Among The Stars

unknown distance from ours.”

The team glanced at Vort, taking a moment to process the incredible information they had just been given. Vort turned a shade of turquoise.

Bryluen insistently snapped her fingers, dragging everyone’s attention back to her. “Somehow, that’s not even the headline. His people have heard of The Dreaded, remember? If there are enough of them that they’ve been spreading between galaxies, how many are going to end up here? They’ve been ramping things up since their first recorded appearance—how much higher does that slope go? At what point is the entirety of our civilization going to be hopeless against a tide endlessly flowing through our gates? We can’t even see the little shits most of the time right now, so if there are hundreds or thousands of Sjorthursars prowling around ... then what? We have no way to know of their numbers, and the facts leave open the possibility of an endless number of them.”

Dread Naught was deafeningly quiet. “The Qixing aren’t agreeing to direct support. We can go into their space and operate freely, but other than that it’s basically business as usual for them. We’re doing all we can, and the CSOE will get all proof or information possible to them to try and get them to act. But people are going to suffer. Right now, our best option is to keep doing our job, and hope our allies see the big picture before it’s too late to put together a real plan. I’ve forwarded the details to your computers. Anyway, that’s my depressing-ass part of things today. How was it for you folks?”

The team shuffled nervously for a minute. Kirby cleared her throat. “I ... uh, we all managed to *not* get nekkid? I was real strongly thinkin’ about it, but you bein’ angry seemed purty scary to me.”

Bryluen responded in a thoroughly sardonic tone. “Well, that’s one thing that went how it should have, so good job, I guess. Anyway, I’ll probably be in a better mood some minutes from now, but until then: life has no inherent purpose, and we are all doomed to one day be forgotten. Dismissed!”

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Soon afterward Bryluen changed into black athletic wear. She

### 13. Disappointment and Duty

was squared before a punching bag in the exercise room, hammering the bag with repeated patterns of strikes. She huffed through her teeth, and lashed out with a tight left hook that sent a harsh shiver through the bag. The exercise room along the exterior of the structure was open to the rolling mountains and forests beyond. It was now a little past noon, and she had been at the punching bag for over forty five minutes working out her frustrations.

Her footwork was precise and carefully metered and her strikes swift and sharply on-form, leaving no unnecessary openings. She always remained steadfastly dedicated to maintaining her physical state, and little externally had changed about her body as she aged other than the development of lines on her face. She felt no vanity in that respect, the clear visual impression of experience granted by having a lined forehead and eyes helping her self-representation if anything. Runner arrived at the door to the exercise room. Seeing Bryluen attacking the punching bag, he thought twice about disturbing her and instead set course for the workshop.

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Kirby stood before the Marduk in the workshop. She had finished testing and greasing her new finger joints, and was appreciating her work. The gleaming digits of each mighty gauntlet should now have improved sensitivity and wider independent ranges of movement, enough to effectively grip an opponent or weapon. She had concluded such feats, and many other melee or grappling maneuvers, would benefit from greater motion granulation than the walker's gauntlets previously provided.

She nodded and wiped the back of one hand across her forehead, remembering somewhat belatedly that her hands were thoroughly doused in oil. She snorted as she considered the large black streak now dominating the top half of her face. Gazing at her reflection in the hulking, impassive machine, her mind wandered.

She had been through many trials to arrive at this point. When she was younger she dreamed of being many different things, none of which had been to become a Marine. Two failed marriages later—the first due simply to being young and foolish, the second for other reasons

## The Shadow Among The Stars

—she found herself in desperate personal and financial straits. With no local family connections, and having opted out of the ability to have offspring in her youth, she took the first chance she found to escape.

The Astral Marine Corps had been her way out, an escape from the shattered circumstances of her life. Kirby watched herself gently scratch at the large scar on her chest, a constant reminder of just how badly she needed that chance. Looking at where she was now, she felt she had done all right for herself since. A soft smile forced its way onto her face in spite of herself.

Runner entered the workshop, whistling softly. He had failed to replace his shirt despite not entering the exercise room. He marched over to the table holding the project he had been working on, the weapon finally ready for testing. It was a hefty, two-handed firearm with a complex system of valves, electro-magnets, and dials. Kirby turned toward him, her eyes and forehead obscured by a black swath like war paint. He picked up the experimental weapon and nodded to her.

“Want to see what thi-i-is baby does?”

Kirby grinned. “Oh honey, I was beginnin’ to think you’d *never* fuckin’ ask!”

He chuckled, hefting the solid weapon in his hands. “I like to play hard to g-get. Show, don’t tell, as th-h-hey say.”

Kirby laughed briefly, lightly touching one of Runner’s sculptural abdominal muscles with an outstretched finger. “Well the second part of that I can see pretty damn clear.”

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Nicadzim held his metallic fire-block in two hands. He edged along the side of a viscous cliff of fear-gelatin, its surface swimming in countless pastiches and snapshots of divorces, injuries, sickness, unpaid bills, and many other less pleasant things as seen from a million sets of eyes. On the other side of the canyon wall, he saw the long shadow of the coming danger he had been stalking for what he perceived to be a week.

Vort sat next to where Nicadzim had been napping on a couch in the lounge. At the moment, all that accompanied the small alien was a large impression left behind when Nicadzim vanished. Vort fought a

### 13. Disappointment and Duty

slow tide of anxiety. While the large man did tend to disappear when sleeping, it was still unduly nerve-wracking to watch it happen, not knowing when or if he would be back.

The small creature twitched and generated a strangulated yelp as Nicadzim suddenly walked in through the door connecting the lounge to the balcony. Nicadzim yawned and wiped green residue from his hands. “Vort, do you have any idea where Bryluen happens to be at this moment?”

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Dread Naught soon stood around the fountain in the lobby, gathered around Nicadzim. Kirby’s hair was down for once, and she wore an over-sized t-shirt and denim shorts, her spare frame causing the shirt to rustle around her in the gentle breeze permeating the lobby. Runner wore a fitted black shirt and a tight pair of pajama pants. Bryluen was now clad in slacks and a velvety red, sleeveless blouse. A brief flick of her eyes noted Runner’s and Kirby’s states of dress in silent evaluation. Nicadzim wore a blue tank top and khaki pants. His massive arms were nowhere near the highly defined anatomical sketches Runner’s arms were, but were on an altogether larger scale.

He ran a hand across his bare scalp. “During my recent nap, I was able to ... apprehend a small idea, or image, of The Dreaded. I will believe it to be a small fragment of the nearer future.”

Bryl’s brow furrowed. “A specific future, for example one of us, or a general part of some future? Can you tell?”

“I believe it be a coming event for us all. The details have been, as always, sparse, but I was thinking that perhaps such a thing behooves me to tell you all, given our frustrations recently.”

Vort tilted to one side. “SO YOU SAW A SMALL PIECE OF WHAT SEEMS TO BE OUR FUTURE? HAS THIS HAPPENED TO YOU BEFORE? ARE SUCH THINGS ... RELIABLE?”

“I have never, in all my years, experienced something that was not in some way real. Whether I will tread upon the metaphorical constructs of a poem I have not yet read, or swam across glimpses of childhood pets, all I had seen was real in some way. I see the memories of others, and events as they turn out to be the memories of others before

## The Shadow Among The Stars

they happen. I assure you, what I will see is real, and it would be relevant to us ... soon after now. I regretted that it is not more comprehensive, but I believe it is encouraging in some ways to share with you all.

“I see stormy skies, green and beige buildings. Myself, Bryl, and Runner entering to fight Dreaded in the corridors. The larger Rabisus—the En-Rabisus were present. Kirby, Vort, and ... someone else?—they will be outside. We are pursuing a stone—black, mysterious, that same Stone Bryluen has been hoping we can find. The Dreaded are attempting to take it, and among them was a larger one, something more than the En-Rabisus. I will *feel* it more than I will see it in the vision, perhaps Kirby and Vort encountered it?”

Bryluen put one fist under her chin. “We’d have our proof, and if we can get that Stone from them, we will be on much better footing. It figures we’ll be encountering bigger and worse Dreaded. At least we have some warning, rather than getting jumped by something awful. The En-Rabisus are supposed to be bad enough as-is.”

“Hell, I can think of a few places that might be like that facility.” Kirby crossed her arms. “Green and beige? I was posted near a Qual-Ex lab once that looked like that. Chunky, thick walls with overhangs around the edge of each building? They’re not a big company, I don’t think. Can’t have too many facilities out there.”

Bryluen wagged a finger. “Qual-Ex ... Nico, you said it was stormy. Could you describe it?”

“Hmm ... the sky is a dark blue-gray, the clouds thick and solid, though it will be day time. The air holds tension, a feeling of energy and static—”

“—Electrical storm! God, that’s Qual-Ex’s main depot. It’s on Tāwhiri, the Atua system, bordering the Qixing—there are almost always violent electrical storms in the upper atmosphere. I’ll send through a call to them right now.” Bryluen started to walk across the lobby to her office. “Be ready to go, because if they’ve got that Stone we’re leaving *now*.”

Bryluen sat in her office chair, waiting for the display above her desk to dial through. CSOE contact protocols meant that even if you had no reason to expect a call from the CSOE, you would be quite aware of how important the call was.

### 13. Disappointment and Duty

INCOMING CALL FROM:  
*DAME BRYLUEN BRANOK, CSOE OPERATIVE*  
CALL SOURCE: CONFIRMED AND VERIFIED

WARNING:  
VOLUNTARY REFUSAL OF URGENT CSOE CONTACT IS  
PUNISHABLE BY LAW.

SEE:  
SECOND TERRAN GRAND CHARTER,  
SECTION 468 – E.

Soon, the face of the CEO of Qual-Ex Research Solutions appeared on her screen, a professional-looking man in a tailored suit with neatly greased hair. He brushed a hand over his beard quickly, taking stock of the unexpected call. More than likely he was accustomed to any contacts being filtered through a secretary. “Yes, madame, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

Bryluen tapped a pen on her desk. “Raymundo Texeira? Time sensitive, answers first: I need to know if you’re keeping any *odd* black rocks in your depot on Tāwhiri.”

“Um, well, ma’am, let me see what information I can bring up. Black rocks? Anything more I can go off of?” He began to type furiously.

“Odd relationship to most wave forms, unable to be dated, seems to have some sort of lines or patterns on its surface that defy our attempts to explain them.”

“Hm, alright. We do seem to possess a similar item. Is there anything about this I can know about?”

“Nothing helpful. I’m coming to take it. I’ll be on site in a couple hours.”

“Well, ma’am, if the situation deems it, the CSOE can certainly be given *access* to the item. As corporate property—”

“No, sir, this is not a request. I am taking it with me.”

“Ma’am—”

“Shhh ...” Bryluen held a finger up to her mouth. Raymundo was clearly shocked. He clearly had not been in contact with the CSOE

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before, and was unused to being told what to do. “Tell me, Raymundo: how much security does that depot have?”

“Uh, well—”

“How. Much?”

“... around, uh, around fifty guards at any given time. Three light walkers, two anti-aircraft emplacements, and a pair of orbital monitors.”

“Either I take the Stone off your hands, or you will end up having to write letters to all their families. I’m not the only one after that Stone. I want your men on alert until I leave. They are in terrible danger.”

“Alright, madam, I mean—”

“Do *not* give me shit. Weapons up, I take the rock, and maybe your main warehouse *won’t* get torn apart by a wave of horrors. Alright, be there soon. If anyone gives me trouble, I *will* be seeing you in person.”

The next thing Raymundo saw was the CSOE seal and a temporary contact instance should he need to send Bryluen more information. He sat back at his desk, his eyes rolling around as he mentally looked for answers.

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Bryluen sounded the alarm, and Dread Naught scrambled for their armor. Kirby hesitated for an instant before sprinting to her room for a better-fitting top. Within seconds she re-emerged and joined the others in the entry corridor. Nicadzim’s warning influenced the weapons Bryluen and Runner took with them. Bryluen had her pistol under her arm and her whip at her side as always, but additionally slung a large, chunky shotgun over her back. The two vertically oriented barrels had vents close to the main body of the weapon. Each barrel appeared to operate off of a separate magazine, and the weapon was particularly wide from several additional internal components and thermal shielding—this was no normal shotgun. Runner brought along his tri-pistols, but also mounted his bulky experimental firearm to his back and brought along a curved hatchet made of a greenish metal.

The team rushed up the ramp of the *Atet* and into the same positions inside the bay as before. In slightly less than half an hour the

### 13. Disappointment and Duty

*Atet* docked with the Compression Harness and rushed through the gate. Projections stated it would take a half hour to reach the depot. As Dread Naught pushed through into the Atua system, Brylue received a message through the contact instance she left Texeira.

After reading it briefly, she spoke into the teams' helmet mics. "We've got Dreaded! We'll be racing them in toward the central high-security chambers to grab our Stone. I'll keep querying to be sure our landing site stays clear, and I'm sending a response packet to the Marines. Nico: you warned us. You saw the future and warned us, but rather than being early, our timing has instead ended up being *perfect*."

Runner and Vort looked toward the big man in the bay, motionless in his heavy armor. He took a breath. "We will be, I may suppose, fortunate."

"Hm. That said, do you think telling us about it may cause the actual outcome of events to differ? Since we would not have known otherwise?"

"No. I was always going to tell you."

"Of course, Nico, but I mean theoretically. We're basically playing with low-key time travel here."

"I am afraid you are misunderstanding. The timing was perfect due to what I see being predicated on me revealing the vision. Even before I saw anything, I was already going to tell you all once I did see it—there is no course of events that could alter the occurrence of myself revealing the vision to you."

"Do you mean you had seen you were going to reveal something previously?"

"Well, no." He sighed. "I will attempt to explain, but apologize for the incomplete fashion in which I must communicate such a ... grandiose concept. When I ascertain a vision of the future, the contents of such a vision will not be changed. Call it a feeling if you wouldn't believe my personal experience would thoroughly prove that fact. I am always going to tell you about this depot just in time for us to arrive and bring The Dreaded to battle. I will never see the depot in time for our arrival and departure to be completed before The Dreaded attack. The way events are unfolding then are the way they would always unfold."

The team fell still. Brylue paused and asked a final question. "... pre-destination, or some sort of inverse observation paradox?"

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“... neither? Our actions are ours, but certain milestones seem to still occur at a certain time and in a certain fashion which remains logically consistent. The reasons or mechanics behind such a thing I did not begin to fathom—after all, there would be no experimenting with results in the case of those temporal happenings.”

Bryluen let out a breath, suddenly realizing how much of her self-image was tied up in the assumption she wasn't a cosmic chess piece. “Well, that's fascinating as hell and will more than likely keep me up tonight. But more to the point, we've got a fight ahead of us. There are three Shala Light Walkers down below, and they've been diverted to keep the landing pad clear. The rest of the security force is embattled inside the depot itself. The depot is a big structure that includes several warehouses, office spaces, and quarters for the security detail. Those walkers are our only support when we hit the ground, so we relieve them at the landing site and move on in to secure the Stone ASAP.”

Tāwhiri was a world swathed in long, striated land masses of pale greens, grays, and shades of brown amid oceans of bright blue. Like most worlds in the Atua system Tāwhiri was mainly oceanic, and though almost all of it required chemical separation, filtering, and desalination, the system's main export was water taken to arid worlds or planets lacking sufficient usable water sources for drinking or agriculture. A world exemplifying the harsh beauty of the sea, all the land masses and most of the oceans were obscured by dark blue cloud cover that roiled and swirled over the world, unleashing violent electrical storms and repeat lightning strikes at all times. This constant weather pattern is what inspired the world's name—what better home was there for a god of storms?

The *Atet* soon began to burn through the atmosphere, the wonders of aerospace science reducing the catastrophic heat and intensity of such a descent into little more than a subtle vibration and a quiet stream of white noise that could only be heard if you pressed an ear to an exterior bulkhead. As the ship passed into the lower atmosphere, it was immediately targeted by a trio of arcing electric bolts. The meta-material coating of the ship's exterior, as well as the Faraday shielding that was standard construction, diffused the immensely powerful jolts of energy into little more than fireworks. From the ground the *Atet* appeared to be wreathed in lightning, glowing and rushing

### **13. Disappointment and Duty**

downward like the incoming fury of Tāwhirimātea himself.

## 14. Turmoil on Tāwhiri

Runner bounced his feet, the lifts on his boots reacting to the motion of his leg muscles with small hisses. He patted his legs to a silent beat with his gauntleted palms. Nicadzim wiped his mouth, having just finished eating a steaming bacon cheeseburger he had definitely not taken with him onto the *Atet* earlier. Vort, partly suspended like fragile cargo in his custom harness, flexed his wings and rolled his shoulder-equivalents in anticipation. Bryluen bounced a foot as she ordered the nearest Marine patrol to lay in wait for the appearance of the Sjorthursar stalking about somewhere over Tāwhiri.

Kirby was silent as she guided the ship down, coordinating automated attitude adjustments and assessing potential landing zones on the target land mass with rapid eye and hand motions that were second nature. She quietly hummed a popular song and bobbed her head—a harrowing landing always put her at ease, but even so, she was in a particularly good mood today.

The Qual-Ex depot sat on the highest point of a relatively small island jutting from the sea. The ocean, a rich color edging toward a cyan or turquoise tone, impatiently thrashed against the high cliffs. The depot overlooked the sea by more than sixty meters; nonetheless the occasional wave hurled itself far enough to spatter salty water across the

## 14. Turmoil on Tāwhiri

side of the complex.

The depot sat upon a plateau from which the rest of the island sloped downward, though even at its lowest points the island stood from fifteen to thirty meters above the waves. A thick lightning rod stood at the highest point on the depot, powering the structure by harnessing the constant punishing blasts dealt by the rumbling sky above.

As the *Atet* swung in to assess the landing zone, The Dreaded swarmed from the far side of the island. The anti-air batteries had fired upon the black stream when it first descended and began to manifest into a horde of Dreaded, causing great puffs of the dark dust to dissipate into the winds rather than land and create monsters. The orbital monitors had gone to intercept the Sjorthursar at the time it appeared but had not made visual contact before it disgorged a large number of troops and vanished from sight.

Now much of the island was covered in a black mass. The swarm was slowly enveloping the complex as the security guards fell back in the face of the onslaught. The Shala walkers stood back-to-back on the neighboring landing pad. They were doing their best to hold back the swarm, but were attacked up close by several individuals at any given time. The enemy numbers were, in a word, overwhelming. Thousands of Dreaded were attacking the complex such that even the best defensive plan would not withstand the attack.

Bryluen called over the team's mics. "Kirby, sweep us in low and slow. Pop the ramp, and we'll lay down some fire. Vort, can you jump out and get down to those walkers? We need space to land."

"I CERTAINLY CAN!"

Kirby relaxed the throttle and engaged the *Atet*'s air brakes. The vehicle slowed in a harsh deceleration as the ramp swung open. She guided the craft to within twenty meters over the island, the shriek of its engines reverberating loudly off the barren rock below. Runner, Nicadzim, and Vort magnetized their boots and stood from their harnesses. Runner unclipped his new weapon from his back, while Nicadzim held a lumpy mass of what seemed to be a form of glossy rock. A pentagonal aperture at the end of the roughly oblong shape was the only feature that made it appear to be a weapon of some manner. Nicadzim hefted it over one shoulder in the same way as he would aim an old-school rocket launcher. Bryluen appeared between them gripping

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a large sling filled with small metal orbs.

The hordes of Dreaded spread out below them, their swarming mass flowing like an extension of the surrounding waves as they rushed up the island's incline. At least four or five thousand Rabisus alone must have been present, with entire platoons of Gugalannas. The taller En-Rabisus stood out from the swarm in small squads, each armored creature wading through their smaller brethren at waist height. The Dreaded hurled several hundred futile fireballs into the sky after the *Atet*. The enemy numbers comprised the type of army that would easily have crushed Pisistratus. For Dread Naught, this was inarguably a strike operation where speed was of the essence.

Kirby counted down over their mics the time until they would be passing the landing zone. "5 ... 4 ..."

Bryluen begin to whirl the sling over her head, building up to a respectable speed. Nicadzim adjusted the strange, heavy weapon on his shoulder. Runner tweaked the dials on his weapon, and it began to hum to life with a high whine and a procession of status lights along the gun's body.

"Three ... Two ... One ..."

Bryluen smiled.

"NOW!"

An expanse of concrete passed beneath them, the vast landing pad intended to berth large freighters or masses of smaller transports. The Shalas now held only one corner of the pad with furious weapons fire, not quite enough to allow the *Atet* to safely deposit Dread Naught. The *Atet* was currently heading in the direction of the struggling walkers, their supporting fire intended to slow the flow of enemies enough to allow the team to disembark. Bryluen released the sling, its contents flying out the back of the vehicle and descending toward the ground in a wide spread. Among the uniformly sized spheres was a single, larger sphere roughly the size of a golf ball.

Runner's weapon roared and unleashed a chaotic, twitching projectile like barely-cohesing ball lightning. The glowing spheroid struck home amid a Gugalanna herd below. In a fraction of a second it torched its way through one unfortunate creature's body, before the projectile blew apart in a catastrophic flare of furious power. The

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detonation licked outward in every direction, instantly reducing all it touched to wispy vapor. The sound was a terrible cacophony of thunder-cracks and a deafening, hissing whistle of pressurized gas. A ten meter scorch mark immortalized the shape of the microsecond-long detonation across the landing pad's surface, like a massive Rorschach test. Immediately after firing, the weapon furiously vented gases and heat for several seconds out of a front-facing opening.

A moment later, the small orbs Bryluen released struck the ground. Each was an electromagnetic device—the single large sphere emitted a violent jolt of electricity. The electric pulse promptly routed itself to all the nearby spheres in a rolling reaction that formed an electric net, paralyzing and frying everything crossing between any of the spheres. The energetic reaction lasted several seconds and spanned a wide area, sufficient to neutralize several dozen Rabisus.

Following closely on the others, Nicadzim unleashed the power of his latest mind-construct. A series of spinning lumps of matter spat from the weapon in rapid succession, each leaving behind a twirling trail of colorful shards of stone-like glittering confetti. The sound of each lump was a constant, musical howl like an out-of-tune brass band. Each projectile found a target and danced toward it in an arc. Striking home, they burst into dense, razor-sharp flurries of colorful stone like that which trailed behind them. Like a belt of frag grenades exploding, the Dreaded within the blast radius instantly assumed the condition of fruit that had been dropped into a blender.

Bryluen motioned, and Vort tucked in his wings and sprinted off the end of the ramp as the *Atet* pulled up for a second pass. He plunged downward for a moment, before extending his wings and pulling up gracefully. The efficacy of the trio's shots had been notable, the unending wave of Dreaded slackening around the landing site for a moment; This allowed the Shalas a chance to rebound and reclaim some space. Vort came in low, loudly unleashing a storm of blue fire in a wide pass ten meters from the walkers.

Flying as quickly as possible to avoid the storm of fireballs aimed in his direction, he pulled in low for punishing attack runs of lightning and fire around the perimeter of the landing zone. His lethal barrages allowed the damaged and limping Shalas to regain control of the area, their blood-slicked blades and glowing gun mounts finally

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allowed the occasional rest.

After another barrage from above, the *Atet* swung down and planted its feet. Bryluen, Runner, and Nicadzim disembarked, quickly changing their weapons and assuming partial cover behind the formation of walkers. Nicadzim fired his needle-cone while Runner redialed his weapon to fire bursts of small energy blasts fit for direct fire. Bryluen unslung her shotgun and racked the slide. A number of fireballs struck the *Atet*, but other than leaving ashen residue on the paint even such a small starship would scoff at most infantry-portable weaponry. Fortunately for the harried walkers, the majority of the attacking Dreaded were intent on entering the depot, lessening the pressure on the Shalas' task of maintaining the landing zone. Regardless, enough fireballs filled the air in an attempt to destroy them that Dread Naught needed to find cover soon.

Each Shala was four meters tall and crewed by two people. Developed for closer range combat, the walkers toted a pair of flak cannons, a single seeking rocket launcher, auto-cannon, and bladed armatures at the bottom of the cockpit that scissored back and forth as foes approached. Lastly, they had taloned feet that allowed them to lash out like ostriches. They were small enough to navigate streets or alley ways, and could easily out-pace most forms of transport in dense or difficult environments—including the ability to outright sprint, unlike their larger cousins.

Bryluen rapidly assessed the situation as Kirby came stomping down the *Atet*'s ramp, flak cannons clanking and filling the air with rattling shrapnel. The jockey remotely instructed the *Atet* to close its ramp and take off into a holding pattern above as she laid down fire alongside the larger walkers. In such an exposed situation, Kirby's armor and Vort's flight abilities were clearly the most ideal.

Bryluen decided she, Runner, and Nicadzim would move together through the corridors and rooms of the depot to the Stone, equipped as they were for close combat. She queried the depot's central systems for a report on the security personnel.

The remaining guards fought at the third and final set of bulkheads, defending the high-value storage area where the Stone was kept. Twenty-two guards had fallen since the first Dreaded reached the facility twenty-five minutes ago, even though their practical formation

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and use of the facility's layout gave the guards the best chance possible. Even then, Bryluen knew the goal of The Dreaded was not to kill the guards; it was to acquire the Stone. If anything the situation had been as beneficial as it was going to get for the guards.

Bryluen quickly routed an efficient course that would take them on a route to the Stone, with a minimum of open spaces where they could be overrun. She called Runner and Nicadzim to her and ran toward the nearest facility entrance, a cargo hatch about twelve meters away.

“Kirby, Vort, stay with the walkers—we need the landing area held open for extraction. Do all you can. Kirby, you’ve got orbital targeting authorization, so tell those monitors where to hit and do the same when the Marines hit orbit!”

Kirby and Vort affirmed their orders as they kept firing into the swarm around them. The cargo hatchway was relatively undamaged—the majority of The Dreaded had gone to entrances that weren't directly behind the trio of furious walkers. After a brief sprint, Bryluen slapped a gauntlet onto the hand scanner by the hatch. The security bypass transmitted by her armor overrode the hand scanner, and the hatch slid open. The three of them rushed inside, and Bryluen closed the door behind them as fireballs splattered all around. They heard the unmistakable rumble of a starship cannon impact occurring outside, a kilometer or two away. The three of them were inside the perimeter hallway of warehouse 4b. Bryluen intended to have them skirt the outside of the warehouse by following the hallway to their right, away from the main flow of the enemy army. She led the group in a jog down the hall.

A cluster of Rabisu squirmed in through a damaged hatch further up the corridor ahead. Bryluen aimed her shotgun and snapped off a shot. Milliseconds apart, each of the weapon's barrels fired in turn. The first unleashed pellets that maintained and transferred incredibly low temperatures to their target—enough that even gently laying them on a pane of tempered glass would instantly cause it to shatter. Each pellet trailed frosty white vapor behind it in a fluffy column. The payload of the second barrel was the polar opposite, trailing flame and heated to white-hot at the instant of firing through a chemical reaction. The combined effect on a target resulted in violent thermal shock, the rapid

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change in surface temperature causing most materials to burst or tear apart with force much more violent than the kinetic force of a normal shotgun blast. The shotgun was thus able to damage most forms of heavy armor—unfortunate for the Rabisus, who were not armored at all. The three struck in the initial blast were rent apart with the same violence as if a giant had picked them up and pulled them apart. The dark creatures simply fell to pieces and momentarily spouted dark soot across the hall around them, as if Bryluen had shot a small hole in a can of black paint.

A bright pulse of bolts from Runner's adjustable energy weapon laid the others to rest in a rapid trio of precision head shots. The Astral Marines had tested adjustable weaponry similar to Runner's gun in the past, but found both cost-efficiency and the concern of having to vent the weapon safely made it impractical for mass deployment. Additionally it was rare that the ability to adjust a weapon was of particular use, given the variety of weaponry and equipment afforded any unit of Marines. For a task force in the unique situations Dread Naught was fielded in however, such a thing was already proving quite useful.

Bryluen registered an interesting transmission: a unit of Qixing Gate Sentinels had received the Mayday transmission from the Qual-Ex depot and were on their way to provide reinforcements. The Gate Sentinels had long-held jurisdiction to provide relief for civilians in Human systems. Their response times were legendary, and a number of disasters had been averted by their deployment speed. Human relief organizations passed over into Qixing space for similar purposes, but Qixing regulations on armed ships prevented Marines from ever passing through unheralded. Bryluen forwarded the information to Kirby and Vort so they would be aware of the extra help on its way.

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Kirby stood near the walkers outside with one fist continuing to pump flak into the foe while the other wielded an extended blade. She had cut down several Gugalannas and a countless number of Rabisus thus far. It was fortunate the bulk of the foe was focused on the depot, because the only real cover came from the walls of flame Vort created

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around them over the course of multiple attack passes; Even that barely served to deter some of The Dreaded. Currently the small alien clung to the top of Kirby's cockpit, taking a brief rest to conserve his energy as the jockey spun about dealing death. A neat side step and an almost blind blade swipe left yet another Gugalanna headless, its body twitching as it thumped to the ground.

The Shalas had stepped back somewhat, picking off enemies and pouring fire into the wider horde now that Kirby could draw most of the close combat away from them. The walkers didn't have the dexterity required for extended melee and, Though their talons were dangerous, an error could result in leg damage. Subsequent hits could eventually impair the walkers' ability to move, which would quickly prove lethal.

Kirby swatted a group of Rabisus with the back of her hand, stepping on a couple of them as she sliced her blade through the remainder. A cluster of Gugalannas coalesced and came toward her from forty degrees to her right. A pair of rockets from the Shalas brought down six or seven of them, and Kirby shredded a pair in the front row, but several of the horned beasts soldiered on.

The first she slapped aside, causing it to stumble into one of its fellows and throw it off course. As the pair regained their footing, Kirby extended her arm and allowed a third to skewer itself on her blade. The weight of the beast was substantial, but not nearly enough to budge the hefty, hydraulically-muscled Marduk. The creature's tentacled maw thrashed around the metal now transfixing the greater portion of its body, the force of its flailing enough to throw a man aside. Kirby held firm as the monster soon shuddered and collapsed, its boundless aggression seemingly spent. Kirby killed one of the remaining Gugalannas with a shot to the face, then extracted her blade from her latest kill and cleaved the other's head in twain.

"YOU ARE QUITE THE CARNIVAL RIDE, KIRBY," Vort cried from atop her cockpit.

The Jockey grimaced as she continued fighting, then heard an unfamiliar sound to her left: a deeper and throatier rendition of a Rabisu's squawk. Kirby groaned as she realized she and Vort were the first members of Dread Naught to have to battle En-Rabisus.

Every bit as twisted and lithe as their smaller brethren, they each stood two-and-a-half meters tall. The creatures' proportions gave them a

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long reach, and the two claws on each hand measured a sickening fifty centimeters each. The armor plate on their chests and the gnarled, lava-like texture of their skin suggested they could take a far superior amount of abuse. Normal Rabisus stood only slightly above their superiors' waists, and in their presence the smaller creatures seemed substantially less threatening.

Previously, Kirby held the advantage of superior reach. With the En-Rabisus that was not true, and her armored hide would not be so resistant to their claws.

She extended her second gauntlet blade as the three En-Rabisus rushed forward. A pair of auto-cannon shells from a Shala caused the rear En-Rabisu to fall to one knee, but it forced itself up and continued forward despite its notable wounds. Vort braced himself atop Kirby, then gushed forth a column of fire. He struck the center En-Rabisu dead on—to its credit, it held up an arm and continued to exist for a moment before resolving into ash. The already injured En-Rabisu was winged by Vort's assault, and fell as the fire consumed half of its body.

The third, however, managed to leap aside and hurl a large fireball as it came within melee distance of the jockey. Vort dove off the back of Kirby's cockpit and took flight once more, as Kirby leaned to try and dodge the projectile. She felt a hit and registered damage to one of her torso plates—the En-Rabisus clearly packed a far superior punch.

She assumed a tight fighting stance with her blades pointed upward as the creature closed in, then tested the foe with a pre-emptive swipe. The En-Rabisu deflected her blade with a backhand before sweeping its other hand around for a strike of its own. Kirby intercepted with her other blade, leaving a gash on the En-Rabisu's palm.

It recoiled, stepped back and began to circle her. Kirby's flak cannons slid back up her arms—she was unable to fire them without a risk of hitting her own blades. The En-Rabisu took this opportunity to lunge forth for another attack, but while Kirby specialized in vehicles she was as well-trained as any Marine in close combat—she knew the creature had over-committed.

With a neat sidestep she moved outside the En-Rabisu's attack. Turning about with as much grace as she could produce, she brought a blade around and with a growl of machinery cleaved the En-Rabisu's head from its shoulders with an angled chop. The beast collapsed

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without a further breath, and Kirby deployed her auto-cannons.

She sent a set of coordinates to the orbital monitors above as she pounded shells into The Dreaded before her. Twenty-five meters out, Vort obliterated a column of Rabisus and Gugalannas with a flurry of lightning bolts. Seven seconds after Kirby sent the coordinates, a pair of slugs touched down halfway up the island at a natural choke-point in the landscape. The impact shook the ground even at this distance; a thick plume of dirt and rock jetting high into the air in the wake of the furious projectiles.

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Inside the complex, the other three members of Dread Naught made swift progress with few enemy contacts. They now stood at the threshold to a set of living quarters spanning the gap between Warehouse 4B and Storage 3C. Once they passed through 3C they would connect through Isolation Storage 2A, and then finally rendezvous with the remaining guards at the corridor to Secure Storage. However, Bryluen had enough experience with strike operations to know the monster-haunted corridors would pose their greatest challenge once Dread Naught had acquired the stone and had to make a swift exit.

She stood on one side of the door, with Nicadzim at the other. Runner was leaning out of the nearest corner with his weapon aimed toward the entryway. Bryluen slapped the door stud, causing the entry to the workers' quarters to hiss open. Inside was a long row of bunks with small chests and wardrobes of belongings at close intervals. The uniforms of the Qual-Ex workers were scattered about, left behind as the workers fled the facility. Some others had apparently tried to hide and wait out the assault, their rent and twisted bodies bearing witness to their failed endeavor. A scattering of Rabisus were clustered among the bunks as well as a pair of En-Rabisus, their emotionless plant-like visages leering with jagged teeth as they strode among the beds. Bryluen supposed they had entered from the side corridor halfway up the length of the room.

Runner's first shot struck the nearest En-Rabisu directly in the head, the plasma blowing off a chunk of one of its petals. The creatures instantly wheeled on them and charged. Bryluen splattered the two

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nearest Rabisus while Nicadzim sent several glowing orbs into the hurt En-Rabisu as it charged. Runner's next shots removed the two Rabisus at the creatures' flanks with effortless head-shots. The En-Rabisu's long legs carried it at an alarming speed toward the door, even as Bryluen removed a section of its torso with another blast. The monster began to duck and reach through the door to swipe at Nicadzim, but he stood straight and swung his glowing baton upwards, striking the underside of the En-Rabisu's head. With a flash, yet another petal was torn from the creature in a spray of soot. It rocked back as its head was jogged from side to side for a moment in the wake of Nicadzim's assault. He stepped through the door to follow through with a two-handed torso strike that knocked the En-Rabisu to the ground.

Runner smoothly popped off a pair of shots past the blue-armored man to strike Rabisus packed behind their leader as Nicadzim wailed on the prone En-Rabisu. After a trio of head strikes—though for Nicadzim this resulted in many more impacts than at first apparent—The En-Rabisu twitched and died, its body torn and split by the man's strength and the energetic effect of his weapon-construct. A wayward claw left a rent in one of Nicadzim's torso plates, but he was otherwise unharmed. However, the second En-Rabisu was hot on the tail of the first.

Bryluen slid next to Nicadzim as Runner's covering fire downed the last Rabisu atop one of the bunks, causing its body to limply slide and fall to the floor. Bryluen neatly fired her shotgun into the side of the remaining En-Rabisu's head, causing its course to falter and maiming half of its 'face' into a ragged mass seeping black fluid. It crashed into a bunk, making an ugly squeal as it scraped along the concrete floor. The physical endurance of the beasts was impressive: even with most of the head petals removed and much of the body mauled, the En-Rabisu seemed to heed no pain or fear. The Dreaded appeared to only preserve themselves to a degree that allowed them to do as much damage as possible against their target, and would gladly run into enemy fire if it was their best chance.

Bryluen had seen such behavior in T'hròstag "Chemzerkers" or Ly Aulth cartel serfs—the type of mindless, violent impulse contradictory to all forms of reason or advanced intellect. Such things were almost always temporary states due to the lethality of a narcotics

## 14. Turmoil on Tāwhiri

overdose, which begged the question of how The Dreaded functioned. They seemed to lack formal technology, so if these beings were not simply controlled by the orbiting Sjorthursar, they could potentially possess technology advanced enough to make an organic/inorganic designation irrelevant.

Though the creature almost immediately resumed its course, the moment provided by Bryluen's forceful misdirection was enough. Runner, his aim unerring, struck the creature three times past his companions: once in the head, and once on each shoulder. This caused the creature to again stagger as chunks of its shoulders and yet another petal were torn from its body. Bryluen dashed in, swinging her nanowhip at the creature's nearest shoulder. She rolled under a desperate swipe, hearing the creature's claws whistle through the air above her. Rising to her feet, she pulled on the whip. The wire was neatly wrapped around the creature's shoulder, and with a solid tug, produced a brief pop and hiss as it cleanly removed the creature's arm. The appendage fell to the ground, its fingers clenching one final time as whatever nerves the En-Rabisu possessed were severed.

In the moment it turned toward the woman who just deprived it of a limb, Nicadzim stepped forward and struck the back of the En-Rabisu's remaining shoulder with a harsh downward stroke, causing it to fall to its knees. Nicadzim grunted and crushed the remains of the creature's head against the frame of a neighboring bunk. The rest of the beast slumped to the ground, air pressure causing a momentary gurgle of rapidly drying fluid from the stump of its hideous head.

Runner joined his companions, moving his hand as if to run his fingers through his hair. "W-well those are tough, the-en."

The others simply nodded. Bryluen led the group forward, stopping at the side entrance through which The Dreaded had entered. She opened a compartment on her belt and removed a small capsule. She twisted the capsule in the center and slipped it into the manual override notch used to access the door mechanism during a power failure. The hole flashed white and the surrounding metal melted inward, sealing up the mechanism and disallowing the door from being opened. She had done this to every door she could on the way into the facility to help secure their intended escape route. Satisfied, she nodded and waved Nicadzim and Runner forward.

## 15. Struggle for the Stone

Vort swooped down, watching another column of enemies vaporize under his harsh ministrations. He pulled up at a sharp angle, adjusting his wings to pull a tight turn. In the brief moment his body was spun about, he caught a broad view of the enemy army and it was clear that the majority of the enemy was ignoring the Shalas and Kirby. The fact they were continually embattled spoke to the sheer number of the enemies present. He worried what would happen once his teammates acquired the Stone, and knew their extraction would be harrowing even though Bryluen had summoned the Marines.

He considered what similar experiences his people must be facing. His kind were not only unaccustomed, but outright averse to warfare, having suppressed their own destructive capacities ages ago. Vort's current situation—existing outside the civilized presence of the Peacestone—was considered an abomination to be corrected as soon as possible. Individuals might forsake Peacestone and go on journeys in order to fulfill vital oaths, or to redeem themselves for crimes. He wondered how strongly such a taboo held in the face of an enemy such as The Dreaded. His people's technological weapons were nowhere near so sophisticated and powerful as those of Humanity, and were mostly intended for crowd control or other non-lethal applications.

## 15. Struggle for the Stone

His hope is that his people prioritized survival over cultural mores. If any attacks near this scale were occurring, then it would be the largest conflict they had engaged in since the First War of Division. He was chilled by the very thought, a lifetime of stories and warnings making the horrible nature of such a conflict one of his most ingrained history lessons. Deep in his gut he simply felt his people were not prepared for outright war. Their cities were for art, literature, and music, not sieges and street-to-street combat. Even if they survived, how much would be lost?

As he dove to make another attack run against a cluster of Gugalannas approaching the Shalas, he continued to contemplate such heavy matters. He did not yet know how to open his heart to his friends in a way they would understand. His application of Human languages was still fairly shallow and his emotional impulses were different enough to make it difficult for Vort to communicate many nuances to his companions. Additionally he was incapable of many of the visual signals Humans used with one another—he had once seen Bryluen handle an entire conversation with Runner using only her eyebrows. He practiced using wing motions for expression, which his team-mates seemed to pick up on well enough. He felt he could learn enough to eventually communicate the depths of his heart, but it was hard work.

Then again, away from the Peacestone he was bereft of his best form of communication. The “songs” he used in battle were tunes and hymns he learned growing up, epics and poems describing beauty, nature, justice, and a thousand other wonderful ideals. Now the lovely harmonies and melodious expressions were rendered into tools of destruction and death.

Words could be dangerous, his people learned. With the Peacestone to suppress their lethal natural defenses the songs that once endangered his species developed into complex, heartrendingly evocative messages and emotions that could stir entire nations to intense feeling. He was a practical individual prone to improvisation, and held a will to survive as a core virtue. But deep inside it was extremely hard for him to disabuse himself of the notion his every violent issuance was as good as spitting in the eyes of his ancestors. He felt crude, clumsy, and barbaric even as the logical parts of his psyche told him doing so was unavoidable and the best usage of his situation. Such internal

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complexities were lost on the Gugalannas below as a fan of lightning bolts tore them into pieces.

Kirby slapped a Rabisu aside, causing it to limply bounce away across the concrete. A thick alloy-shod foot crushed another, and a sweep of a blade bisected three more. She had fallen into a semi-trance state, her mind and body wholly one with the Marduk. Her motions were clean and brief, each action slaying another enemy with shells, fists, or blades. By this point she was listening to music, growling bass notes and crashing guitars blasting inside her cockpit as she fought.

If the corpses of The Dreaded stuck around instead of dissolving from contact or being carried off with the wind, she imagined an impressive mound of them would have built up all around her. She grabbed an En-Rabisu, shunting a blade through its head before shoving its corpse aside and locking blades with its compatriot. A Shala sent a rocket overhead to detonate a third as she arm-locked her current foe and stabbed through its chest.

Her armor was dented, pitted, and burned in dozens of places from hundreds of claws or horns and dozens of fireballs. Another En-Rabisu had struck the cockpit glass with a fireball a couple minutes ago, the translucent alloy holding but showing damage. She proceeded to corral another group of Gugalannas, each falling in sequence to a shell in the eye or a harsh stab.

Bryluen's voice caused Kirby's music to mute for a moment. "Furcotte, the Marines just hit the gate. Two Corvettes and a Frigate. Their island is going to be a cratered, useless disaster and they will appreciate it. The Marines hit precision strike range in six minutes, so queue them some targets from the topographical data and keep hanging on."

As she powered more shells into the surrounding foe, Kirby identified a number of strike points for the Marine fleet in orbit. To those unaccustomed to starship firepower, the thunderous impact of the Monitor shells assuredly appeared nothing short of apocalyptic. Those who knew better, however, were aware the size and velocity of starship cannons ranged upward rapidly with increasing ship classes. A Corvette alone could bat a Monitor aside with ease. Corvettes mounted six more weapons, each of which was substantially more powerful than those of a Monitor and could include missile clusters or flak.

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A Frigate was notably larger and toted six additional weapons over the armaments of a Corvette, and could easily fight three Corvette-class vessels in a pitched battle with its multi-barreled burst cannon emplacements, combat drone swarms, and even boarding torpedoes.

From there the size of ships increased in ever-greater leaps to Destroyers, Cruisers, Battle Cruisers, Dreadnoughts that could single-handedly bombard multiple armored planetary targets, and finally the rare Battleships, each of which could transport a dozen lesser craft and possessed so much firepower they were not allowed within a certain stellar distance of inhabited Human worlds outside of a direct combat deployment. Over Tāwhiri, two Corvettes and a Frigate were more than enough.

Near the Atua Gate, the Marine Frigate, the H.S.S.F. *Geirhardt*, released its two docked Corvettes, and the trio set course for Tāwhiri. Each Corvette was a chunky craft consisting of two conjoined, roughly rectangular shapes: a thicker, large shape in the front bearing and the smaller in the rear mounting the primary thrusters. Each bore a healthy spread of weaponry, mainly intended to provide point-defense for larger craft and to deter drones, missiles, or boarding attempts. Cannons, laser arrays, missiles, and flak cannons stood out of each. The Frigate loomed over them, a slightly more complex shape still dedicated entirely to function and ease of maintenance. The Frigate's armor was much thicker and its weaponry quite a bit larger. A main three-cannon turret capable of high rates of fire was mounted to the center of the top and bottom of the craft (as far as such things could be considered in space), serving as its main ship-to-ship armament as well as the most likely candidate for bombardment tasks.

The *Geirhardt's* two prow weapons were large laser arrays capable of rapid subsystem destruction, as well as being the smallest Human laser weapons powerful enough to cut out pieces of an enemy ship during battle.

Such a dual array was famously employed by the H.S.S.B.C. *Shenlong* to end the threat of the Rrothikkri Vroth Klla cartel, cause a rapid change in Ly Aulth starship engineering and tactics, and acquire a Human-favored trade and military treaty in a single shot. This was accomplished by surgically extracting the Captaincy Pod of the enemy Capital Ship whilst the craft's drones were committed to an assault on

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the H.S.S.Dr. *Zulu*. Regardless of such theatrics, due to atmospheric refraction and scattering, lasers were frowned upon for use as planetary bombardment weapons.

Kirby, pulling her blade from what must have been the thirtieth Gugalanna she had killed, smiled as she spotted a telltale trail of fire in the sky. A Qixing drop craft was roaring downward. She used an open channel to send coordinates and a brief tactical overview to the Sentinels as they descended.

A Qixing drop vessel was a squat craft with a vertically flattened shape—as was true with most Qixing ships. It was almost better for falling than it was flying, bearing equally spaced deceleration thrusters for stability and embarkation ramps in all four directions. The ship was built to land at speeds inadvisable for anything that wasn't engineered specifically for the task.

The Sentinels acknowledged the coordinates and subtly shifted course as they burst into the lower atmosphere. Exactly what units had been sent was unknown, but Kirby noted the drop craft was a vehicle transport.

Amid the furious fighting on the landing pad, the craft touched down two dozen meters away. The craft crushed and burned everything nearby as its braking thrusters finished their task. Painted in the bright heraldry of the Gate the Sentinels deployed from, four automated weapons unfolded from each corner of the ship and began to fire into the horde to clear the way for the ramp. After a moment of furious energy blasts, the disembarkation ramp pointed in the direction of Kirby and the Shalas shot out of the ship and clanged against the ground. An instant later the hatch burst open, and the Gate Sentinels rushed forth.

The Sentinels arrived prepared: the first Qixing military asset to exit the drop ship was a large, squarish vehicle like a flattened tank that hovered a meter above the ground. The vehicle was a Hover Fortress, a war machine intended for urban and amphibious combat where the ability to fire in any direction at a moment's notice was the most important factor. As such, the low profile of the vehicle and the numerous weapons dotted around its perimeter and on top of its hull allowed it to lay down supporting fire in as many directions as needed.

Energy bolts and piercing bullets fired in vicious arcs from around the Fortress as it slid down the ramp. A pair of coilgun turrets on

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top picked out En-Rabisus and Gugalannas from the horde around them. Vort witnessed the Hover Fortresses' display as a dramatic light show of advanced weaponry that lit the landing pad in whites and blues below him. Behind the heavy vehicle, three dozen infantry advanced wielding close combat blades and the Sentinels' signature slender firearms. They rushed directly into battle in small groups, using small field generators as cover.

Behind them the leader of the group emerged. A Qixing Storm Mother (or Aouter, or Father) was a highly ranked individual capable of a great degree of unilateral decision-making when deployed. Though bound to commands from superiors, they were capable of embarking on independent actions so long as they did not conflict with their stranding orders. Important gates were often commanded by Storm Mothers to allow the Sentinels to operate as the situation dictated.

The Storm Mother was a few inches shorter than Human average and heavysset, with a wide waist and thick, strong limbs. Her lively red armor was artfully crafted, its surface etched with aquatic designs from Qixing myth. She had a long, tapering helmet with a flared neck guard patterned like a fish's dorsal fin in the back, giving her a dramatic, animalistic aspect. The small power pack between her shoulders and her elbow pads bore similar fins. Her wide, squared shoulder pads extended outward beyond the joint, and close-fit, faceted armor plates covered her limbs in a procession of convex angles terminating in a pair of pointed boots. This angular translation of her bodily shape did little to androgynize her.

The Storm Mother's gauntlets bore golden bands around each finger, her right gauntlet mounting a weapon on top of her forearm. The gauntlet weapon was modular and could wield a wide variety of specialized ammunition, much of which was stored and shielded near the back of her thighs. On her left arm was a huge riot shield, whose sides were angled back to embrace her when she held it close to her body. A pair of weapon barrels projected from the center of the shield and could be triggered with a firing stud attached to the hand grip. Other auxiliary devices were attached to mounts on the inside facing of the shield. Lastly, an elegant sword was slung in a handsome sheath decorated in gold leaf along the back of her left shoulder.

With an extended arm she fired blinding spheres of green energy

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into The Dreaded, each shot removing a chunk of flesh in a burst of steam. She brought down a Gugalanna with a trio of blasts, then wheeled and fired upon a lurching En-Rabisu. It took three shots to the chest, stumbling but still advancing. The Storm Mother drew her sword and barreled forward shield first, ramming directly into the creature's pelvis. What she lacked in height, she more than made up for in leverage and strength—the impact knocked the En-Rabisu to the ground in a scatter of wiry limbs.

The Storm Mother's sword was a squat, one-sided blade with an angular, sloped tip, and was intended for slashing motions. The weapon's thick grip was almost as long as the blade jutting from its end, and housed an extra length of sharpened metal that could emerge from the grip to replace any material that snapped off during battle. A neat, surgical motion demonstrated the blade's overwhelming sharpness by cleanly removing the En-Rabisu's left arm at the elbow as it tried to sit up. She then swiftly reversed her sword and sliced the blade through the creature's throat, holding up her shield as the creature's other arm made one last swing.

Gurgling its own black ichor, the creature perished. With almost no pause she leveled her shield at the nearest foe and fired a pair of energetic projectiles with a loud whine, the blast tearing a Rabisu limb from limb. Any creatures that loomed close fell afoul of the swift, darting movements of her blade as the shield's guns punished anything further away. A regular slap of falling limbs sounded around her as she marched forward, whirling her sword in lethally efficient motions. Two kilometers past her, the Monitors struck another target coordinate.

The Gate Sentinels' assault quickly created a broader perimeter on the landing pad, the addition of firepower and soldiery easing the task of Dread Naught and the laboring Shalas a great deal. The fighting remained furious enough, but the jump in manpower spread the effort significantly further.

As the battle line was established with the Hover Fortress as its corner stone, the Storm Mother moved among her troops, issuing commands through their internal comms. As always the Sentinel infantry appeared quiet in battle to outside observers, the constant bangs and cracks of their firearms the sum total of their auditory output.

Kirby took a moment to breathe. The difference in pressure was

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immediate and such a great contrast she felt almost casual as she fired shells over the Sentinels from behind the line. Vort swung low and skidded to a landing just behind the raging Hover Fortress. He slumped slightly, finally able to take a rest. He had been fighting hard to discourage the horde from turning onto their corner of the landing pad, but worried about how much longer he could do so continuously.

Kirby spotted the alien hunched in the shadow of the war machine and spoke to him through their helmet mics. “You’ve been doin’ a hell of a job, honey. You just rest a minute and let the Qixing help us out. Won’t be long before the Marines hit range and then these bastards’ll get theirs!”

Bryluen braced at the door to Isolation Storage 2A, a facility for dangerous chemicals, radioactive materials, or other materials which, while not being overly valuable required special, long-term storage solutions. The warehouse consisted of ceiling-high rows of thick storage tanks and cells. They were entering from a side door two-thirds of the way down the length of the warehouse, leaving one brief sprint to the entryway of a hidden corridor. That corridor provided a path into Secure Storage intended to allow high-ranking Qual-Ex employees discreet access. Bryluen gauged this route would provide their best chance to escape, though with the Stone in tow she knew it would be a harrowing sprint.

She had reviewed the particulars with her companions as they approached Isolation Storage 2A: Runner would take the Stone and sprint back along the path by which they arrived, his talents and gear specialized for moving his feet as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, Bryluen and Nicadzim would follow the main corridor of the facility outside, drawing The Dreaded off the trail, if possible, as they headed back toward the landing zone. She saw a light in Runner’s eye as she described his part in things—he asked if it would be improper to use his helmet recorder for posterity, causing Bryluen to smirk.

The last twelve Qual-Ex guards had set up an admirable deathtrap in the corridor to Secure Storage, dragging every weapon or supply they could find into the reinforced hallway as they retreated. While Qual-Ex held to a strict standard of not partaking in military or weapons research, they did research the refinement and use of various high-value minerals, metals, and crystalline formations which meant the

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facility's net worth was astronomical. The main warehouse complex had an impressive supply of ammunition and a larger than average complement of security forces. The guards on hand had fortunately understood the threat level they faced, and were therefore quick to gather the year's supply of defensive armaments and set them up in the depths of the facility.

Four bulkheads separated Secure Storage from Isolation Storage 2A. Layers of sentry guns and grenade booby traps had been set as each bulkhead gave way before the raw fury of The Dreaded. Three of those bulkheads were now sundered, and the fourth already suffered a hole a half meter across that was becoming gradually larger with every Gugalanna or En-Rabisu that could reach it.

Bryluen turned her head and made eye contact with Nicadzim and Runner. Both were tensed and ready. Runner bore his strange ax and one of his pistols, while Nicadzim gripped a new close combat weapon: a two-handed contraption with a thick haft leading to a flywheel made of ice. The spinning shape at the end of the weapon was translucent and emitted frosty vapors as it rotated. Bryluen tightly gripped her nanowhip and trusty pistol.

The Operative nodded and quickly opened the door. Beyond, the large warehouse was filled with rows of storage units twenty meters long laid out on a grid across the entirety of the warehouse. Each was an alloy and concrete-reinforced unit, most with radiation or thermal shielding. Some had translucent panels showing their contents, revealing large geodes, tanks of unidentified liquids, and even a well-preserved Loth Tùrn solar proxy.

The shortest route was to rush to the third row of units, and then to their right along that row the rest of the thirty meters to the concealed door. Each of them was fit and ready for the run—even aside from that it was incredible what a properly adrenaline-charged Human could accomplish.

The real problem was that the main mass of The Dreaded had rushed in an unceasing tide of darkness through the warehouse to the Secure Storage corridor. They flowed from the far end of the warehouse in an almost solid column, fireballs and claws lashing at the guards and bulkheads in unceasing ferocity. They had begun to pool around the entrance to the corridor as their sheer numbers both overwhelmed the

## 15. Struggle for the Stone

defenders and simply became too much to fit inside the corridor all at once.

The column of Dreaded filled an area twenty meters to each side of the corridor entrance in a density that should have been suffocating for them. The horde generated a hideous racket as hundreds of Rabisu and En-Rabisu cried out, mixed with the choked, grunting noises of charging Gugalannas.

The creatures' single-minded focus meant only the nearest Dreaded would notice the members of Dread Naught, but even a small fraction could easily overwhelm the three Humans as they began their sprint. Runner's boot lifts carried him easily, his trained grace and poise allowing the subtle motions through which he had to control his movement to best benefit from his armor's mobility enhancements.

Nicadzim occasionally appeared ahead of his previous position, keeping pace despite his heavy armor and staying on the inside of the formation to ward off projectiles that might otherwise strike his companions. Bryluen was a capable runner in her own right, her bronze-clad limbs taking great strokes as she carried herself after Runner into the warehouse.

They had not left the door more than four meters behind when fireballs began to fly their way. The burning projectiles whipped past with whooshes and sparks in their dozens, each coming closer and closer to the mark. Bryluen felt a slight rise in temperature as a projectile passed perilously close. Most were the fist-sized emissions of Rabisus, while those from the En-Rabisus were almost three times that size and could certainly end Runner or Bryluen's sprint if they were struck.

As the team passed into the first row of storage cells, Bryluen dislodged a smoke grenade from her belt and rolled it ahead into the second row. Nicadzim grunted as an En-Rabisu fireball splashed around his left calf, leaving the outer plate sagging and sundered. As the trio reached the second row, the smoke grenade popped loudly and dispersed a dense screen to mask their movements. The motion and heat of the incoming fireballs caused swirling eddies to ripple through the opaque smoke, and Nicadzim's gravitic distortions caused crazed designs to play through the gray curtain and curve the paths of many of the fireballs. The aim of The Dreaded in the next row became wider as the runners crossed over, and Bryluen sent a second smoke grenade ahead of them

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into the third row of storage units.

As they reached the halfway point across the second row, a Gugalanna burst through the smoke directly behind Nicadzim. He made a wordless sound as he heard the beast approach, its pace dreadfully fast. Runner responded instantly, somersaulting backwards over his companions and extending his ax-wielding arm. As he flew through the air, the Gugalanna passed beneath him. The ax's greenish alloy met the creature's single eye, and reacted to its flesh with a sharp screech. The strange metal melted the beast's flesh into bubbling, black rivulets as it slid free. Runner landed behind the creature and pushed his boot lifts to catch up with his teammates in long, easy strides. The blinded beast was unable to adjust its course to strike Nicadzim and stumbled away past the trio as they reached the third and final aisle, filled by the newest smoke cloud.

They all put on a final burst of speed as they raced down the aisle toward the nondescript wall panel that would allow them into Secure Storage. More and more Dreaded detached from the main group rushing at the last security guards. Panicked gunfire and the last functioning sentry gun lit the entryway in constant, violent flashes, black ichor splashing in clouds and streams back over the rushing horde. A grenade went off, the pressure wave visible among the dark vapors hanging in the air.

Bryluen saw another fireball rush dangerously close by, singeing the bronze finish of her armor and splashing on the wall ahead. Runner reached the wall first, bracing against it for a moment as his companions caught up. Bryluen slapped her palm on the wall, and a panel quickly slid open.

The three of them rushed inside as the storm of fireballs increased in intensity. The panel shut behind them, the muffled sound of the projectiles rattling against the wall like a hailstorm. They each took a split second to breathe. They stood in a dim corridor that took a ninety degree turn into Secure Storage just past the field of vision of the entryway cameras, their helmets automatically switching to night vision in the unlit passage. They jogged to the end of the corridor and emerged from a second wall panel into the scarred and damaged chamber that constituted Secure Storage.

## 16. Marathons and Monstrosities

Secure storage was comparatively small, simply a vault of items in clear cells. Statuary, rare energetic crystal formations, and a number of esoteric items—including the metallic thigh bone of a Ly Aulth Praetorian Construct—were neatly secured in a grid. Near the center of the fifteen meter square room, a dark stone about thirty by sixteen by twelve centimeters stood on a stand. Nicadzim noted a brief flash of uneasiness as he gazed upon it.

This Stone was more sliver-shaped than the block that had been stored at the UASC outpost, though nothing about its surface suggested it was broken or damaged. The object was deliriously dark, almost like a hole had been punched in reality. Bryluen immediately noticed an important detail of their current situation: every time a Dreaded—or part of one of the Dreaded—emerged through the hole in the final bulkhead, the Stone vibrated in response to their proximity.

Three of the remaining twelve guards were injured but still contributed as many bullets and energy bolts as possible to the continuous firefight. The bloodied and tiring security personnel were arrayed behind boxes and crates pouring fire into the widening hole in the bulkhead—now large enough for an En-Rabisu to potentially squeeze through. Their last tripod-mounted sentry gun fired in swift

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bursts of bullets at any black shape that presented itself, and the guards restricted their fire to the shortest, most ammo-efficient firing patterns they could muster.

One of them held a large energy beam weapon, and with each pricey trigger pull they cleared a column of Dreaded—the weapon was in fact intended for combat demolition or the elimination of light vehicles. The guards timed the use of this weapon and its limited ammunition so that in the brief moment where there was a clear space after firing, one of the other guards would hurl a grenade through the hole in the hatch. A guard twitched as she turned her head and noticed the individuals that appeared at their flank, but was preoccupied enough with the fighting to immediately continue firing into the enemy. Bryluen had radioed their imminent arrival ahead of time to prevent any incidents, but had no expectation the terrified guards were in any shape to meaningfully communicate or coordinate.

The three members of Dread Naught approached the Stone on its narrow pedestal. Bryluen had memorized every facet of the images and information that UASC collected on their Stone, but to see it in person was a wholly different experience.

The Stone was remarkably dark in a way similar to the near light-absorbing rock that constituted Odini II's Mount Ala. The texture of the object was off-putting, as if her eyes could not decide whether or not the Stone was moving. They called it a Stone, but Bryluen knew in her gut that it was not rock or mineral or metal or organic. This was not some mundane shard of matter. The way its edges were defined, the shard-like yet unbroken overall shape, the undefinable minutiae of its textural appearance—all of it was somehow wrong.

She understood more deeply why the UASC scientists concluded almost nothing about the actual nature or provenance of the object. Even in her brief observations she had no idea where to start classifying such a thing, or even why it was so hard to classify. She felt uncomfortable in its presence both because she loathed the idea of being unable to comprehend something, and due to a more primal sensation of unease at the ineffable *wrongness* of the Stone. She felt like an ape observing fire for the first time, desperately wanting to touch the Stone while simultaneously feeling it may not be a good idea.

She huffed a breath and picked up the Stone gingerly in one

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hand. It was strangely light for its size, but other than that she felt and saw nothing from lifting the object despite its enduring strangeness. As an En-Rabisu's arm reached through the gap in the bulkhead she noted that the object not only vibrated but *pulled* slightly toward The Dreaded, becoming lighter as if it were trying to float. She tossed the object to Runner, its course veering slightly toward the bulkhead as it was pulled by the invisible force toward the ravening hordes beyond. Runner nonetheless caught it smoothly and nodded. Bryluen holstered her pistol and whip and unslung her shotgun. Nicadzim had run into cover next to one of the guards, and began to fire his conical spike-lobbing weapon at The Dreaded. Around him, spent casings and blackish ichor began to float and spin.

Bryluen stared into Runner's eyes. "We'll buy you time and keep them from all following you, but from there? Earn your name."

Without a further word she turned and slid on the outside of one thigh into the side of a crate, aiming her shotgun over it and slaying a Gugalanna sandwiched partway through the expanding gap. Runner dashed back through the side passage, building speed as he approached the panel. Bryluen watched as the horde's attention shifted laterally away from the entryway corridor and toward the hidden passage as he traveled with the Stone, the entire mass clearly aware of its location. As Runner burst through the secret panel, the swarm let out a terrible noise and simultaneously moved to pursue heedless of the still-firing guards.

As the creatures rushed back up the corridor to chase their goal, Bryluen waved the exhausted guards to stop firing and signaled for Nicadzim to come with her. Bryluen began firing into the backs of The Dreaded, some turning to oppose them before being blown to bits. Any who approached were swept away by Nicadzim's ice wheel, the weapon chewing its way through anything it touched with a loud whir. He swung the weapon in great strokes, leaving frostbitten chunks of flesh laying about him. Overall the horde was intent on pursuing Runner, and soon Bryluen and Nicadzim emerged from the ruined entry passage. They continued to pick off stragglers from the horde as Runner left Isolation Storage 2A from the door they used to enter.

With a shout, Bryluen hurled a small projectile past the blocks of storage units and to the side door in a great arc. The projectile was small, a twenty-sided shape heavier than the average grenade and suffused with

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a purple light. Upon striking the ground it did not bounce, but instead adhered to the concrete floor two and a half meters away from the door. The Dreaded in pursuit of Runner began to pass it as its timer ticked down. The detonation was violent, an implosive rather than explosive force that wrenched the frame of the side door down toward it, warping it beyond use. The concrete around the device and the nearby Dreaded were turned to compact paste in an instant.

The device itself was destroyed in the effort, an expensive piece of technology used solely for emergencies such as this. Now unable to follow Runner along the most direct route, The Dreaded reversed through their initial entrance to the warehouse. All throughout the facility the dark monsters began to home in on him, greatly slowed by the doors Bryluen had melted shut. She mentally wished him luck, then summoned Nicadzim to follow the Dreaded through and down the complex's main corridor, the most direct route to the landing pad.

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The change in the course of the battle outside, Kirby's and Vort's respective injuries, and Nicadzim and Bryluen's jog down the increasingly abandoned main corridor of the complex were all relayed to the Saint-Runner after the battle. He was not listening to radio chatter or thinking about anything but the Stone in his hand, and the movement of his body. His legs had carried him away from law enforcement and out of the aim of Milieu snipers in the past. Once they had borne him away from an anti-Human mob that spontaneously ruined a particularly good night for him at a club in Liminal Space, the mainly lawless region sandwiched between the Ly Aulth, T'h'ròstag, and Human borders.

Now his urgency exceeded that of raw survival. An enemy of his species wanted what he held, and it was solely his responsibility to keep them from it. He had run from many things in his life, but none so important as this. For years he relentlessly trained his body and mind for endurance and speed, now able to maintain a full sprint for an incredible distance. With the refined lifts on his boots, his efforts culminated in his headlong rush down hallways and through chambers reaching speeds of forty eight kilometers an hour.

He was a whirling blur of precision and grace, untouchable and

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magnificent. *Saint-Runner*. He had begun as an unknown vigilante, a young man with fire in his heart and a belief in righting every wrong he could at whatever cost. He had no name, no identity, until his handiwork attained a life of its own. Stories and rumors abounded, the more amazing ones often the truest. Among the common folk he became revered as a faceless symbol, a near-supernatural force to whom various virtues were ascribed. He did not know who first called him La Saint-Coureur, but soon there was almost no one in France that not did know him by that name. To the criminal underworld he became a silent threat, a vengeful spirit lurking in the dark.

The one undeniable fact known about the Saint-Runner, was that he was *fast*. He had a natural gift for orientation and navigation, and trained his body to obey his every whim and need. This manifested as an almost preternatural ability to be wherever he wanted to be, precisely when he wanted to be there. Then, to the dismay of his targets, he could simply melt away into the shadows and vanish in a moment. Even among criminals that harbored no superstitions he instilled an inherent, paranoid fear. Despite all his violent acts, those who had suffered beneath the gaze of organized crime regarded him as a righteous force of justice—a living Saint.

He put his legs out to absorb and redirect his momentum at corners, and tucked in his arms to spin over bunks and crates as if gravity had given up on him. The Dreaded pooled into his path everywhere they could, trying to burst through melted doors and emerging from less used paths in groups as they felt the Stone move outward. Runner kept his ax at hand, his speed enough to make every strike a sudden deathblow.

The weapon's unusual material was an innovation by the T'hrostag, and caused dissolution in most organic materials it touched, as a result of the compounds woven into its metallic composition. The ax was kept in an armored sheath, and it was a terrible idea to wield it without gloves. The Saint-Runner had claimed the ax since he was a child, and over time obsessively studied the T'hrostag's particularly cunning and unpredictable method of close combat. Their cartilaginous limbs made direct force more difficult to apply, but allowed various maneuvers and tricks other species would be hard-pressed to counter. Adapting these techniques to his own use, the Saint-Runner had

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developed a hybrid combat style that best utilized his speed and agility.

The Dreaded that stepped into his path had no opportunities to appreciate this as he chopped off limbs, melted petaled heads, and sundered bodies with loose, easy motions. He was a deadly blur that left a trail of the dead behind him, his every sense at its sharpest as he rebounded through the facility at speed. He breathed slowly and evenly as he whisked along the halls, sometimes running meters along a wall before vaulting through a doorway or over an obstacle.

Avoiding toppled crates blocking his path he crossed through a warehouse, bounding up stacks of crates and swinging from shelves over the heads of The Dreaded like a gymnast. Sliding down the far wall, he swung under the frame of a door before building his speed back up down the next hallway. He swept his ax through a pair of En-Rabisus around the next corner with fluid, whip-like strikes.

He had not considered the Stone in any real detail as he was focused entirely on transporting it, but found he hated having to carry it. This response was buried in some innate property of the thing, as if it were slimy or smelled bad more than from a developed opinion. He found the object outright loathsome, and had little difficulty believing that it belonged to the nightmarish things that sought it. Passing the rent and mangled remains of a guard, Runner grunted. These were certainly no animals—they intentionally destroyed and maimed people and equipment past the point of practicality when given a chance. They did cruel things, but seemed to take no joy in it, as if destruction were a neutral and reflexive activity. If that were so, Runner would continue to feel no weight on his conscience for killing them.

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The defense of the landing pad had been going well, extraordinarily so, even. The Dreaded that paid attention to the defenders had been pushed back to a decent distance due to the coordinated fire of the Sentinels and the ongoing support of the Hover Fortress. The Storm Mother attained an admirable kill count and stood her ground against every challenger. Vort performed several runs, but was currently taking it easy in case the situation turned for the worse. Kirby focused her efforts on close fire support and the Shalas were

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conserving bullets and shells, instead focusing on pinpoint rocket strikes.

Sadly, this somewhat beneficial state of affairs came to an end. As Bryluen signaled to Kirby and Vort that Runner was taking the Stone, the jockey heaved a momentary sigh of relief before being reminded of the bad news. The Qixing tightened their formation and redoubled their efforts at about the same time, possibly having received the same warning Kirby did: the horde was pursuing the Stone. This meant that as Runner neared, the enemy army would cease running past into the complex, and begin flowing outward toward the landing pad. Kirby signaled the *Atet* to come closer to be ready for immediate evac. As the trajectory of the enemy horde slowly shifted toward them, Kirby was thankful the Marines were mere dozens of seconds outside of effective firing range.

The first shells slammed down in a unified volley, a storm of fire and destruction spelling the beginning of the end for the greater mass of the enemy. The rate of fire from the H.S.S.F. *Geirhardt* was staggering compared to the Monitors, and the difference in slug velocity was astonishing. Large swaths of the exposed enemy were obliterated, the outer reaches of the horde reduced to ash in large steps all across the island. The ships could only fire within about a kilometer and a half of the landing pad safely, but even that reduced the pressure on the defenders as Runner neared.

The Qixing were already hard-pressed, occasionally lashing out with their blades at the foe. The Shalas once more used their cannons and machine guns and Kirby resumed her front-line combat duties, beginning to empty her rocket pods as the remainder of the horde thickened and focused toward them. Vort laid out three attack runs to redefine their perimeter before briefly settling back near Kirby.

At that moment, a scant minute before Runner would emerge from the complex, the unknown threat Nicadzim felt in his vision finally manifested. Crouched low among its subordinates, the beast had gone unobserved until it reared up less than a dozen meters from Kirby. The creature was an En-Rabisu writ large, a third and even more imposing form of the numerous fireball-throwing Dreaded. It was slightly bulkier in build, a number of armor plates dotted its surface, and it had two additional arms. The horrid thing emitted a discordant caterwauling

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squall as it entered the fray, gray spittle flying from its maw as the fibrous layers of its throat vibrated. Instantly a pair of the Hover Fortress' guns turned upon it, but by then one of its arms had lashed a large projectile toward Vort as he tried to take off for an attack run. Vort swung aside but the edge of the raging fireball caught his left wing near the joint, sending him tumbling to the ground in a flutter of armor slivers and burning feathers.

A second projectile swept toward Kirby as she charged. Her attempt at a dodge was more successful, though it left a long scorch mark along her left shoulder. As she barged in she slashed the beast's nearest wrist, which threw aside its aim. As a result, its third fireball glanced off the Shala it intended to hit and sheared off a corner of the chassis. The walker rocked back, but quickly returned fire with a spread of auto cannon rounds that struck the creature's face. The monster was less injured than it should have been, bloodied but no less capable. The weapons of the Hover Fortress stitched rounds across its surface, causing it to twitch, but the guns were forced to be redirected toward a cluster of En-Rabisus threatening the left flank of their formation.

Burned and featuring a dozen new bullet holes, the monster was nonetheless forced to focus on Kirby as she left a deep gash in one of its knees. Even in her exosuit, the beast was at least a meter and a half taller than her. She blocked its first strike, but its claws were so long it nonetheless left scratches on her cockpit and armor plating. Her task became more difficult as the second and third arms descended, then a fourth rocked her chassis with a glancing blow and the shriek of torn metal. Between strikes, blocks, and feints, she would occasionally fire a shell into the beast to try and keep it off balance. She knew maintaining the four-armed terror's full attention may be the only way to ensure the line held long enough to extract—the Sentinels had lost soldiers, and the Hover Fortress wasn't well equipped to oppose the giant in melee should she fail.

Vort lay on the ground, his wing badly hurt and the armor around the joint melted and shattered. The flesh around the wound was burned and mangled, dripping globs of the translucent fluid that served as his blood. While his wings bore a minimum of pain receptors, he was still in an extremely unpleasant state. He painfully folded the injured wing inward in an attempt to tuck it close to his body, making a tinnitus-like

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sound of pain as he did so. A few Rabisu fireballs splashed on the ground around him. He had to get moving again, but with his wing unsecured it was difficult to do so without his vision being blurred with agony. Suddenly, a large shield was planted on the ground next to him.

The Storm Mother loomed overhead and, using the shield to cover them both, wordlessly wrapped a strong webbed material around the injury to hold the wing firm against his body. She paused a moment to watch him. Vort shook himself and rose, the stability making his wound far more bearable.

He did his best imitation of a nod with his trunk. “THANK YOU, STORM MOTHER.”

She nodded in her own way, a diagonal motion similar to an inclination of her head, before lifting her shield once more and darting off toward Kirby and the four-armed monster. Even without the use of flight, Vort’s ten legs could carry him at a surprising pace. He scuttled off, releasing lightning bolts into a cluster of Gugalannas approaching from his right. He darted to and fro to avoid the fireballs flying his way. Vort would need his wing to be treated sooner rather than later, but for the moment it was bearable.

Kirby registered a second full armor breach. Her left leg was damaged slightly—she could hear a rattle in the mechanism when she stepped to her right. Nonetheless, she left her fair share of marks on the beast despite its best efforts. The creature bore a debilitating gash on the left side of its torso, Kirby had sliced off half of one of its petals, and it had lost two fingers on two hands. For the third time she swept aside two of its arms with a vertical blade, then cut at a third arm and sliced the fourth clawed hand. This time, however, the beast did something a creature who could feel pain would likely not do. With its fourth hand it simply grabbed onto the sharp blade, leaking black fluids as it pulled the blade aside. Kirby tried to keep her footing, deflecting two clawed hands with her free arm. However, the advantage of the creature’s higher number of limbs had finally outpaced Kirby’s ability to parry.

With a shaking impact, the beast’s fourth hand thrust its claws at the side of Kirby’s chassis. The armor was breached, a small bit of outside light visible through a several centimeter gap not far from Kirby’s ribs. She tried to pull her blade free of the beast’s increasingly mangled grip, removing all of the fingers left on the creature’s hand, but

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it committed a second hand to restraining her close to her fist. She fired shells into the creature, blowing off three fingers from another hand and leaving it four new gaping wounds on its body as they struggled back and forth over the blade. She swung her free blade, trying to both ward off the next attack and punish the creature attacking her. Another tight cluster of shells detached its upper left arm in a spray of sooty fluid, and a burst of energy bolts struck the creature's head as the Storm Mother closed in.

The thought crossed Kirby's mind that the beast had committed to taking her with it, and its next blow with its remaining left arm was its best attempt by far. The centimeters-long gap expanded with a sound like a car crash, and Kirby cried out as she felt a long, gnarled claw force its way into her side just below her rib cage. Her infantry armor didn't stand a chance, the plate sundered with the ease of a knife stabbing a pillow. The thick claw tore a ragged hole in her, and Kirby collapsed in agony as the beast withdrew the claw.

As the Marduk toppled, the beast turned toward its newest assailant, the red-armored woman firing her shield and arm-weapon at once. The beast turned and stepped toward her, sweeping one of its remaining hands down at her. She stepped back, her shield gaining a trio of long scratches on its surface. Continuing to fire her weapons, an apparatus under her armored chin suddenly emitted a terrible sound directed at the monster's face. The sonic assault caused it to pause and stumble, and this momentary pause allowed Vort to rush forward and strike the hulking thing with a wave of flame. The beast tried to move out of the way, but part of its leg and the flesh on the side of its body began to grotesquely slough off in large chunks. Roaring, it moved toward the winged alien.

As it stepped forward with one fingerless hand held up to try and ward off the Storm Mother's attacks, it suddenly lost its footing and fell forward. Kirby had grabbed its leg below the knee and, using the momentum of its fall, pulled herself to her feet. She stepped over to the beast as it tried to recover, then with a pained roar fell upon it with her blades, both of them sinking into its back and pinning it to the ground. It thrashed as hard as it could but Kirby remained slumped over its stricken form, pressing hundreds of pounds of pressure onto the weapons-grade alloy blades. The Storm Mother ran to the struggling creature, and with

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several heavy chops of her sword finally took its head from its shoulders.

Kirby set the Marduk's legs to stop mirroring her motions and revert to automated guidance. She grabbed a medical emergency spray canister mounted inside her cockpit, using it to fill her wound with a sterile foam to slow the bleeding and numb the pain. Still, she was hardly in the shape to fight. The Storm Mother put a hand in a sort of comforting gesture against Kirby's cockpit glass for moment, uttering something in her native tongue before throwing herself back into the fray.

Vort spoke to Kirby through his mic. "KIRBY? KIRBY. IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY. WE'RE GOING TO LEAVE SOON!"

The Jockey was breathing heavily, and shakily pulled her blades from the ruined corpse. "Yeah. Y-yeah, I—know. I'll make it, just make sure we ... keep this *goddamn* pad clear!"

Vort scuttled off to strike a trio of En-Rabisus threatening the Qixing battle line, and radioed Bryluen. "KIRBY IS BADLY HURT. I AM INJURED. HOW CLOSE ARE YOU? WE NEED TO LEAVE."

About then, Runner burst from the side hatch of the complex, seconds before Bryluen and Nicadzim exited through the main entrance. Their path had been a straight-shot devoid of the enemies that left the main corridor to pursue Runner, though Nicadzim bore a partial shoulder burn from an En-Rabisu ambush. The pair cut through the streaming horde as it passed them trying to home in on Runner, assisted by rockets from the Shalas. Bryluen went straight to Kirby's stricken mechanical form as Nicadzim laid into the surrounding Dreaded with his ice wheel.

The *Atet* came in low as more orbital rounds thundered into the surrounding Dreaded. Bryluen waved Runner up the ramp as he came to Kirby's side. He paused a moment, a look of deep concern visible through his visor before turning and entering the ship with the mission objective in hand. Kirby limped upward covered by Nicadzim, Bryluen, and Vort, while the Qixing retreated into their ship along with the Hover Fortress, the Shalas, and the Storm Mother. The Qixing leader and Bryluen shared a look as the ramps on their respective ships closed. The Dreaded below began to retreat toward the other end of the island as one, knowing they had failed.

Practically falling back into the Marduk's harness, Kirby's

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cockpit swung open as the ship automatically took off into a holding pattern. Runner caught the jockey as she fell trying to climb out of her cockpit. She forced herself to her feet, and began to walk toward the pilot's seat in the next chamber with Runner under her arm. Runner was about to try convincing her to let Bryluen fly, but the Operative slipped under Kirby's other arm and subtly shook her head at the vigilante. He let them go—a glance at Kirby's eyes through her visor made it clear she wasn't going to let her injury prevent her from bringing them home. She had faced death before and now was no different—she had a job to do. Runner then helped Vort into his harness and checked on Nicadzim, unmoved as always despite his wound. Runner glanced down at the object in his fist, hoping its value would equate to its cost.

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The moment the *Atet* set down at Raven's Landing Nicadzim rushed onto the small bridge. He scooped Kirby up in one arm like a child, and dashed inside to the med-bay in long steps. Runner, Vort, and Bryluen followed closely behind. The automated med-bay at Raven's Landing was an advanced suite of medical equipment more than suited for stitching wounds, reattaching limbs, and performing organ transplants. The sterilized bay contained full medical scans, histories, the genetic composition of various organs, and a supply of blood for each member of Dread Naught.

Nicadzim laid Kirby on one of the beds in the stark, white chamber as gently as he could. A metal spheroid was suspended on the ceiling above the bed, and would be performing the operation. Nicadzim found the jockey's damaged breastplate was unwilling to budge, but forced it apart with a brief flex of his gauntleted fingers. Beneath she wore a tattered tank top which Runner gently rolled up above the wound as Kirby groaned.

“*Shit!* Gettin’ holes put in ya never—gets easier!”

Runner quickly removed Kirby's helmet, revealing her face to be a sweaty grimace. She smiled weakly up at him, as if feeling apologetic. Bryluen stood in the door leading to the corridor, confident in the med-

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bay's abilities but watching with concern. A few drones deployed and begun to obsessively clean Runner, Nicadzim, Brylue, and Kirby's armor with wipes, sprays, and sponges as they moved about. Portions of their damaged armor suits soon became gleaming and clean under the attention of the machines. Nico detached one set of his own armor plates and sat on a neighboring table to allow his shoulder burn to be treated. The skin on his massive shoulder was a bloody patch of red flecked in black. Though painful, he paid it little mind. Vort climbed on a small medical table made just for him. Brylue helped him unbind his wing and remove the neighboring armor, allowing it to be treated. Custom medical modules had been generated from the study of the alien's physiology, and the custom table was loaded with an assortment of medical supplies engineered for Vort's use. The wing injury would be no great danger, and the feathers in the afflicted area would grow back quickly once the skin was mended.

Meanwhile, the canvas of vivid artwork that made up the entirety of Kirby's abdomen was marred by a grotesque patch of blood that had run all the way down her left leg, streaking her pale skin in a ghastly red-brown tinge. The mass of foam in the center of the wound—now tinged pink—had done its job, but needed to be replaced. She held her jaw tight, the piercing wound pulsing in pain even through the deadening foam.

Kirby was certain the monster's claws had been covered in micro-serrations since, aside from the large hole in her side that had damaged one kidney and part of her stomach, Kirby felt as if a thousand paper cuts had been inflicted along every edge of the stab wound. This wasn't nearly the first time she had taken a hit in battle, but she was agitated about the damage done to her tattoos. She tried to focus on that aspect of her situation rather than the blaring pain she was experiencing.

It was always disconcerting for a patient to watch the harmless looking hemispheres on an auto-med ceiling unfold into the tools needed for an operation. Cleaning, cutting, and sewing implements among other things emerged from the device and extended on actuated arms downward toward Kirby's wound. Swiftly removing the med-foam, the machine applied a brief anesthetic spray that caused Kirby to instantly relax with a sigh. Simultaneously a number of other devices took diagnostic measurements of blood, heart rate, and other factors to check

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for poisons in her system. An additional arm fed some of Kirby's stored blood back into her body.

What followed was a series of remarkably quick motions designed for maximum efficiency as the machine cleansed the wound, spread specialized stem cell solutions across the damaged portions of her organs, and rapidly stitched together the organ wounds with bio-degrading thread. The machine filled the greater part of the open wound with a sort of sterile clay that would sit within and seal the injury as Kirby healed, reducing pain and slowly dissolving into chemicals that aided and sped tissue growth. The machine finished by sealing over the clay with a shaped piece of gauze, its edges adhered to Kirby's skin so that it would maintain its shape and position as she moved.

All in all, despite the deep wound, she would be able to return to action in about eighteen hours with some discomfort and would be fully healed in about five days. As the arms withdrew to be cleansed inside the machine, it projected an image of flowers and rainbows in the air above Kirby with the message "All Better!"

Kirby snorted in amusement, the anesthetic spray and medical clay meaning she only faintly regretted doing so. The machine then provided a list of warnings and recommendations for the next eighteen hours of critical healing time. Kirby was rather certain Bryluen had specified that the med-bay be as sardonic as possible—Astral Marine auto-meds tended far more toward strident messages of discipline.

### **ACTIVITY WARNINGS DURING YOUR RECOVERY:**

-ANY PARTICIPATION IN SEXUAL ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE TENDER AND/OR PASSIVE.

-DRINKING IS ALLOWED, BUT PLEASE DECLINE ANY AND ALL INCITEMENTS TO PROVIDE BELLY SHOTS, AS WOUNDS REACT POORLY TO ALCOHOL.

-ANY AND ALL SIT-UPS OR OTHER ABDOMINAL EXERCISES WILL BE REMARKABLY UNPLEASANT FOR OBVIOUS REASONS.

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### SUGGESTIONS FOR RECOVERY TIME ACTIVITIES:

-TRY TESTING HOW LONG YOU CAN BEAR TO REMAIN STILL STARING AT THE CEILING!

-ASK A FRIEND TO PROP YOU UP TO WATCH A MOVIE. THEY DON'T NEED TO KNOW YOU CAN DO IT YOURSELF: WIELD PITY AS A SOCIAL EXPERIMENT!

-THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO HAVE FUN *WITHOUT* YOUR ABDOMINAL MUSCLES!

Kirby turned her head toward Brylue, speaking in exasperation. "What the fuck kinda' rant does it do if you need a whole week? And Nico, honey, thanks for the lift, but I coulda just walked in."

The big man shrugged. "Yet, it is far swifter for you to be carried. Thus you will suffer less."

Kirby sat her head back down. "Fair 'nuff. Oh, hey, auto-med, am I due for maintenance?"

The machine projected a message indicating a date six days from then. Kirby shrugged. "We can just get it over with now while I'm here."

Nicadzim looked perplexed. "Maintenance?"

Runner was tossing his helmet from hand to hand. "Yeah, h-h-her hormone reg-gulator." He motioned toward Kirby's abdomen.

The Jockey began to cross her arms behind her head before thinking better of it. "Yeah, still gotta get the rare checkup to make sure it's doin' its job and all. Hell of a lot less work than gettin' a uterus put in woulda' been."

After another small anesthetic spray, a new armature from the machine above—a flexible, thin probe—snaked into Kirby's belly button.

Brylue shrugged. "I always thought about getting a regulator swapped in for mine, but it'd be elective for me—and I'm a penny pincher. Anyway, now I've waited long enough it doesn't do much to bother me anymore."

After several seconds a message appeared confirming Kirby's regulator was in working order, and the probe smoothly withdrew. Kirby slowly sat up. "Alright, good to go!"

"Take two hours, then come to the meeting room, folks."

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Bryluen nodded, and then turned about to put her armor on its stand.

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After the tender ordeal of showering her own blood from her body without bending too much, Kirby sat wearing a towel in her massage chair. She let the vibrating protrusions convince the muscles in her back and neck to relax. With the sweat and blood washed off her skin felt brand new. Her hair was bound up in a second towel, the moisture swiftly leeched from the auburn strands to leave them soft and renewed.

She had replayed her fight with the super-Rabisu a dozen times in her head already, thinking about her mistakes over and over. Imperfection didn't bother her, however. What bothered her was that, for one agonizing moment, she felt *powerless*. That same tableau, the image of the beast stepping past her body as she sprawled on the ground, rankled with a core piece of her being. That second of the ordeal, more than anything, filled her with a bone-deep rage strong enough that she wanted to cry almost as much as she wanted to break something. The wound was incidental in her mind, and having to replace tattoos was bothersome but insignificant considering her new salary. Feeling *helpless*, however, was something she could not abide.

She was perfectly aware that her hatred for the sensation is what brought her to her feet to finish the monster. She raised a hand to her great chest scar. It was an immediately noticeable, pale jag that ran from her collar-bone all the way across her left breast. A “scar to write home about,” as her Marine cohorts referred to it. Kirby looked at that scar every single morning and thought to herself: *Don't you get put on the fuckin' ground, Kirby. Don't you let a god damn thing make you powerless. Don't you fuckin' dare.*

Her moody reverie was suddenly broken by a polite knock at the door, hesitant but also slightly too energetic. Runner, undoubtedly. Kirby stood from the chair and walked to the door, pressing a button on the console to activate the door mic.

She paused in brief consideration. “Uh, lemme put somethin' on, Runner hon.”

Moments later she donned a purple sports bra and a creased pair

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of khaki capris pants she rarely wore. She unlocked the door and allowed Runner to come inside. He smelled of a subtle, earthy cologne, and wore a gray tank top and black shorts. Kirby chuckled inwardly at the difference in effect a tank top had on each of them—she noted that with his oh-so-thoroughly defined musculature and v-shaped torso, tank tops looked like sacks on her body by comparison.

He smiled at her briefly as he walked inside, uncertain how he should greet her. She sat back in her massage chair after closing the door behind him. “What’s goin’ on, Runner?”

He sniffed. “Uh, so ... are y-y-you okay?”

She smiled, then shrugged. Runner stared at her for a moment, processing the motion. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she said.

Bryluen sat at the end of the meeting room table in her bathrobe and her pair of near-sinfully comfortable woolen pajama pants. In one hand she held a tumbler of her favorite whisky, and in the other she held a paperback book before her eyes. Her data tab sat on the table top, and she was still smiling from a message she’d recently received. There were several bruises on her legs and arms, and more were on her back and stomach from various impacts during the battle.

She glanced up as Nicadzim entered the room wearing a navy t-shirt and shorts. Beneath one sleeve, the auto-med had pasted a thin burn treatment pad over his wound that made a gentle fizzing sound. He sat in a chair next to Bryluen, his scalp carrying the soft scent of shaving cream. Bryluen glanced up from her book and chatted with him as the others filed in.

Vort arrived next, complaining about how boring it was to walk everywhere as he clambered up into his scoop-shaped stool. With the tip of his one functioning wing he pushed his chair around to the end of the table, settling across from Nicadzim. The auto-med had bound his wing joint in a web-like cast to hold it still as it healed. The flesh beneath was overlaid in burn treatment materials like Nicadzim’s shoulder.

Kirby and Runner entered next, the Jockey’s bared midriff showing the filmy patch of gauze surrounded by the colorful sea of her swirling tattoos. Runner bore a few bruises, but the darkness of his skin masked them.

As they each sat at the table next to Vort and Nicadzim, respectively, Runner’s eyes passed across Kirby’s tattoos. “I kn-now

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Marines can-n get tattoos, bu-ut are there restric-c-ctions?”

Kirby looked down at the body art that covered a great deal of her body. “Yeah, no bad words, no sexual depictions, nothin’ disrespectful to your superiors, all that good stuff. Didn’t stop me from getting’ a big ole ‘Fuck’ tattooed under my arm, though!”

Kirby raised her left arm and pulled down the side of her sports bra slightly. There, the word was emblazoned in cartoonish orange and yellow letters. “So if I get blown to shit, that’ll still be there to make the coroner smile.”

The group laughed. Kirby then pointed to Bryluen. “You’ve got a pretty tattoo on your leg, by the way. What’s that about? You seem the type to only get meaningful shit.”

The Operative smiled, then turned her chair and placed her foot on the table. Pulling up her pants leg, she revealed the twin designs winding up to her hip. “It’s for me and my wife—one design for each of us, intertwined.”

Runner smiled. “That’s sweet. You’re the ai-i-ir des-sign, sh-he’s the sea?”

“You got it.”

“The hell’d you know that?” Kirby raised her palms.

“O-oh, well, Bryl’s last name m-means Raven—or C-crow. S-so she lives at Raven’s Landing.” Kirby grunted in surprise.

“You have spoken little about your wife to us,” Nicadzim noted. “Will there be a reason for that?”

“Well,” Bryluen said as she pushed her pants leg back down and took her foot from the table. “I don’t like to brag, mostly. Also her job involves a fair degree of secrecy. Not to mention I think the secrecy of her identity grants her a certain mystery she would appreciate.”

“I gues-s-ss it makes sense you wouldn’t end up m-m-married to just anyone. What book are you reading, by the way?”

Bryluen reflexively glanced at the cover. “Oh, ‘Tyo’Han, Mistress of the Liminal Stars’. My wife suggested it, actually.”

Kirby gasped. “Oh, I love that book. Raunchy as *shit!*”

“Yeah, I can see a few parts of this that would explain why the missus has read it six or seven times. This could also have contributed to her love of pirate hats.”

“She must have quite a thing for aliens, then. Have ya got to the

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Ly Aulth robo-brothel shoot out yet?”

“You ... could certainly say she is. I figured that shoot-out was coming, but not quite, no.” Bryluen grinned.

“I’m gonna’ be honest, that book is most of what I know about the Ly Aulth. And most of what I know about Qixing bits and parts, actually.”

Bryl’s grin vanished. “God, that’s horrifying. We ever run afoul of a Cartel Toll Patrol, you keep your damn mouth shut.”

Kirby laughed. Runner sat back and crossed his arms. “G-g-good author, but I thought ‘M-memoirs of My T’hròstag Bondage’ was more creativ-ve.”

Bryluen, Kirby, and Nicadzim all looked at him. Vort wheeled his eyes about at each of his companions, missing the broader implications of the literary genre being discussed. Bryluen shook her head. “Yeah, I can imagine that’s true given that just the blurb was enough to let me know it was *way* out of my wheelhouse.”

“To e-each their own,” the vigilante chuckled.

A tiny, barely visible insect appeared in the air near Nicadzim. Its diminutive size failed to lessen the surprisingly loud, irritating tone it generated. Runner silenced it with a quick clap. Nicadzim nodded his thanks, then turned toward Bryluen. “Bryl, was there something you wanted discuss?”

Bryluen snapped her fingers, signaling a group of drones to enter and place plates and dinnerware on the table. “We just got away from a hell of a fight, I don’t need to tell you that. We’re banged up, but we made it and we’ve finally got a damn Stone. CSOE is gonna be by to pick it up, and from there we can finally get the Qixing to give us a real hand, maybe send out some more feelers to the T’hròstag, even. I know nabbing a rock in return for some injuries doesn’t sound like much, but today was big and I want you all to know that. So I figured we could all sit down to a good meal together and just celebrate.”

Dread Naught nodded, and Vort’s skin pulsed in a rich platinum tone. “THIS IS A GOOD IDEA I AM GRATEFUL TO BE ALIVE AND THAT WE ARE HELPING SO MANY PEOPLE! THANK YOU FOR GIVING ME A PURPOSE. I LOVE TO LEARN, BUT I WAS LOST. I AM UNABLE TO RETURN HOME, BUT HERE I HAVE FOUND COMPANIONS AS WILLING TO LEARN AS I.”

Smiles shone all around the table. Bryluen raised her tumbler as

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the drones returned with each Dread Naught member's favorite drink. "When I was asked to start Dread Naught, two things were true: One, I wasn't wearing pants, and two, I did not want this to just be a Marine unit because I didn't truly know what this mission would take. I went through about...four hundred eleven candidates that could have done a good enough job. But I wasn't looking for marksmanship, or discipline, or even a military history at all. I wanted the absolutely extraordinary. CSOE work is hard—it asks more of you than blood, or sweat, or tears. I have survived things that would claim most anyone, accomplished tasks that combat training could never prepare you for, and seen things both beautiful and terrible that I will never forget.

"Because of that, I wanted individuals who were not driven by training or discipline. I wanted those who were driven by their heart and their ideals—those two things can survive any trial. My superiors trusted me to build a team that could meet the challenge, but they certainly had their concerns. I had every piece of possible information at my fingertips and weighed every option and variable, but at the end of the day, when nothing else was certain, I went with my heart.

"I've put you all through a lot, and we have only just begun our journey together. But I thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for joining me, thank you for the good you've already done, and thank you for the much greater good you will continue to do."

After a moment Nicadzim lifted his glass. Dread Naught toasted, then laughed and smiled the rest of the evening. As the night dragged on, the tired members of the strike team retired one by one to bed, leaving Bryluen awake last. She stood on the landing pad as the CSOE lifter arrived to transport the Stone to a secure facility. The runners piloting the lift came out to meet her, honored to make her acquaintance and talking about how jealous their family members were going to be to know they had spoken with the Valkyrie of Roth's World. She breathed in the cool night air as the lifter flew away, and felt another message from her wife register on the pad in her pocket. Smiling, she went inside to finish her reports and research for the evening.

## 18. Press and Pasts

Bryluen spent the remainder of the evening in her office, poring over additional reports of skirmishes against The Dreaded on two systems, as well as a second and third attack on Gru'Thiall, each taking a course toward an uncertain point in the mountains from different directions. The Qixing had dispatched a number of drones, and a unit of Astral Marine Rangers were searching the area in their own fashion. Though they had found nothing as of yet, the Sentinels had established a number of anti-air emplacements to ward off landings close to whatever goal The Dreaded pursued. The habitually unforthcoming T'hròstag even acknowledged repulsing an attack near a fortified city center.

She also had been sent a number of media stories covering Dread Naught's appearance on Democritus. Reporters of the Pisistratus Herald had remained on the docks during the evacuation, and took some good shots of Dread Naught departing the *Atet*.

Many questions were raised regarding the identities of members of the task force, in particular that of Vort and Kirby. An investigation by the Center-Star Gazette identified Bryluen's armor and correctly surmised a link to the canceled Marduk project, while the paranoid Blue Sun asked more than a few wild questions regarding the *Atet* and Vort. Mainly they questioned whether the *Atet* was the result of technology

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from an unknown alien race.

An amusingly vague article in Thebes Star-Watch focused almost all of its time analyzing a photo of Runner that had been making the rounds. As he ran down the *Atet's* ramp, he had turned partially back toward the crowd in a particularly photogenic way. The article tantalizingly wondered if the musculature of the armor at all reflected the man beneath—it did, to the detail, and Bryluen grinned at how excited Star-Watch would be once they learned who he was.

Lieutenant Lapahie had briefly confirmed with the Herald reporters that the group was a CSOE task force, which settled some questions and raised others. Comments and quotes from civilians who had been on the docks when Dread Naught landed were telling—most of them were simply thankful Dread Naught arrived when it did. The furious battle at the barrier was heard by all the people on the docks, each of them waiting in terror for the enemy to breach the line and chase them down. As quoted in the Pisistratus Herald, “[Dread Naught] prevented [the monsters] from getting to us, so whoever they are, they deserve immense thanks.”

Most followup questions were later addressed by a CSOE spokesperson who identified Bryluen as the leader of Dread Naught, and presented The Dreaded as a burgeoning threat to the border colonies. Qixing press covered the attacks in great detail, spurring increasing pressure for both races' respective military forces to move assets closer to afflicted colonies. The spokesperson smoothly avoided answering questions regarding the nature of the enemy, and simply stated Dread Naught and the CSOE were investigating the matter and formulating plans of action. While true the spokesperson omitted the Stones, the inability to track enemy movements, and the intel that led the CSOE to assume the threat would continue to worsen. No need to cause panic at this stage.

Bryluen had received requests for interviews from reporters who had each been screened and cleared long before their queries reached her. She admitted one Human and one Qixing reporter, both scheduled for the following day. She then left her office and padded to her bedroom, proceeding to her wardrobe to sort out an outfit for the interviews in the morning. Discarding her pants and slipping under her thick blankets, she lifted a picture of her wife from her nightstand and

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kissed it.

She felt a distinct pang in her heart—it felt like forever since she had been able to spend time with her wife. In reality it had been about four months since they last saw each other in person, and longer since they had spent a real amount of time alone. Recent experiences triggered the distinctly bitter feelings of loneliness built in the absence of her spouse. Bryluen was not accustomed to making close friends—in her line of work, she most often would move off to another distant assignment and rarely saw the same individuals many times in the course of her career. So while the members of the task force were good people for whom she held a growing feeling of fondness, the only person who would forever be an emotional constant in her life remained the woman she married.

Both of them had incredibly active jobs that often entailed large amounts of travel, fair measures of security, and plenty of danger. Most of the time their constantly shifting work distracted from each others' absence, but the sustained stability of Dread Naught cast their separation in a stark light.

They conversed as often as possible via messaging and video calls, but Bryluen missed the lovable curve of her wife's stomach, the feel of her skin, the sound of her gait, the strength of her calloused hands, the short exhalation through her nose when she poorly repressed a laugh, the way she snored, how her hair misbehaved to a startling degree in the morning, how much of a giggly lightweight drinker she was, and a thousand other things that made her wife the most wonderful person Bryluen would ever know. Bryluen hesitated to put the picture of her smiling wife back on the nightstand. Instead, she pulled the picture close to her chest and drifted off to sleep holding it, secure for now in the thought her separation from her beloved would not last forever.

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In the morning, the Operative rose and put on a red blouse with a collar embroidered in a tasteful silver floral design. Over it she placed the jacket she wore when the Qixing delegation visited. She noted her hair had grown out slightly longer than she usually permitted, and therefore opted to use a small amount of styling gel to keep it moving in

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roughly the same direction. Heading out of her bedroom to drink her morning coffee, she found Vort and Runner already sitting at the bar. She pulled up next to them and greeted the pair.

Runner stared at her a moment, then glanced down and back up. “Ma’am, y-y-y-you aren’t wearing pants.”

“You are correct.” She sipped from the coffee cup that had been delivered to her hand. “It’s my tradition to go pants-less for waist-up video conference interviews.”

The vigilante’s face was blank. “... why?”

“Why do you lose your shirt every three minutes, mister pull-up?”

The subtle beginning of a smile crossed his face. “Bec-cause sweating is gr-r-ross and I don’t like doing lau-undry.”

Bryluen grunted sarcastically as she sipped her coffee. “Then I’m going without pants because I’m a chronic purveyor of hilarious japes.”

“YOU CHOOSE TO ESCHEW PANTS BECAUSE YOU GAIN CONFIDENCE FROM DEFYING A SOCIAL TABOO.”

She motioned with her mug toward Vort, whose skin was currently a cool lavender. “Point for you, Vort! Time to go defy a social taboo!”

Bryluen stood from her stool and walked back into the lobby, passing the exercise room to reach her office where she was to take the reporter’s questions. Kirby was just stumbling out from the living quarters corridor, and sleepily whistled at Bryluen as she passed. She turned and responded to the sardonic catcall with a haughty parade wave as she closed the door behind her.

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Runner and Vort had moved to the comfortably dim library. Outside a light mist filled the air, casting the miles of trees visible through the outer wall of the library in a slight gray haze. The subtle glow of the data consoles and low lamp-light helped heighten the effect of the moist stillness outside, as if the entirety of Aves Prime was drifting off into a nap. Runner had his arms across the back of one of the couches, and had one leg crossed over his knee. He wore an athletic-wear top with thick cotton pants, and had been intently reading a book

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on T'hròstag Legal depositions.

He looked up from the faded pages and gazed over Vort's bandaged wing. "Have y-you ever had an inj-j-jury like that before?"

Vort's eyes looked backwards at his wing before returning to Runner. "I HAVE HAD A NUMBER OF INJURIES IN THE PAST FOR VARIOUS REASONS DURING MY TRAVELS, BUT THIS IS A FAIRLY NASTY WOUND BY MY RECKONING. WHAT ABOUT YOURSELF?"

Whenever asked a personal question, Runner exhibited a split second hesitation as if he couldn't imagine why someone would be asking about himself. "U-uh ... yeah. Taken a c-c-couple bullets, but, uh, wor-rst was probably when I w-was youn-ng."

Vort turned a shade of yellowish-green. "YOU NEVER TALK ABOUT YOURSELF MUCH. I CAN GUESS THIS HAS TO DO WITH YOU BEING A VIGILANTE. SAME REASON WE DO NOT KNOW YOUR NAME."

Runner nervously scratched a thumbnail on a couch seam. "Y-yeah, I, uh...I guess...I've t-told Kirby a little bit. Bryl knows, but I'm ... I-I-I'm actually dead."

Were Vort's eyes capable of blinking, he would have done so. Instead he simply became still and regarded Runner with the swirling gray hemispheres of his three eyes. Runner shifted in his seat, feeling he owed some small explanation to his various compatriots while also suffering a rising anxious heart rate at the thought of sharing personal information. "Off-f-ificially, I'm dead. I want to k-keep it that way. Until ... until I've got something done that I, uh ... something I've wanted to do a long time."

Vort regarded this information impassively, mulling over the words before speaking. "... YOUR FAMILY."

"W-what? What ab-bout them?" Runner's brow furrowed.

"SOMETHING HAPPENED TO YOUR FAMILY, AND YOU SUPPOSEDLY DIED IN THAT EVENT."

Runner froze, the air pressure in the room seeming to shift as he became tense from head to toe. Vort's skin faded to a mustard yellow tone. "... I WILL PRY NO MORE."

Runner's eyelids fluttered, and he sighed. "Uh, yeah. You? Family?"

"OH, MYSELF? MY BROOD MOTHER AND BIRTH MOTHER LIVE, WHILE MY FATHER PASSED AWAY SOME YEARS AGO. DISEASE."

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“Brood mother-r? What does th-that mean?”

“MY PEOPLE ARE BORN TO A MATING PAIR, THEN RAISED IN CLUTCHES TOGETHER IN HATCHERIES BY BROOD MOTHERS. EARLIER IN OUR EVOLUTION WE LAID HIGHER NUMBERS OF EGGS WITH A LOWER CHANCE OF SURVIVAL. NOW BROOD MOTHERS ARE SIMPLY AN ESTABLISHED PART OF OUR CULTURE. THE CHILDREN OF MULTIPLE MATES ARE RAISED IN GROUPS THROUGH OUR LARVAL STAGE.”

“Hm, okay, that’s different. Humans, we’ve got Day-Care: b-basically while you’r-re at work someone can watch your kids for you. You close t-t-to them?”

“NOT IN PARTICULAR. MY LACK OF FAMILIAL OBLIGATIONS AIDED MY DECISION TO BECOME AN EXPLORER. I HAVE THREE SIBLINGS WITH WHOM I HAD LITTLE CONTACT AS WELL. MORE HAPPENSTANCE THAN CHOICE.”

Runner’s eyes unfocused as he contemplated this. He thought briefly of his past and how it may have gone differently, something he hated to do often. He had been raised by loving parents alongside an older sister on a border colony, not long after initial conflicts with the T’hròstag had died down. Rumors of underhanded dealings and arrangements by the Planetary Arbiter were rampant, but Runner was too young to understand them. That ignorance proved to be of little consequence, as such problems found him regardless as he reached the cusp of becoming a teenager.

The vigilante’s arm muscles involuntarily convulsed as he yanked himself from his reflection. He scratched his nose and spoke again to distract from his moment of soul-searching. “Y-yeah, I get that. Uh, Vort, you’ve n-never said what y-your people are *c-c-called*. It’s a-always just ‘M-my People’.”

Vort shifted slightly and turned toward the opening along the outside of the lounge. “OH, WELL THAT’S BECAUSE WE ARE CALLED—”

The alien generated a sound, something like recording a thousand cicadas playing oboe onto a wax cylinder. The tone was about a second and a half long, during which sparks launched from Vort’s trunk that were dispersed by the energy field keeping out the rain. Runner blinked slowly as Vort turned back toward him.

“I HAVE NOT YET DISCOVERED AN ADEQUATE FASHION IN WHICH TO EXPRESS THIS IN A WAY YOU WOULD UNDERSTAND.”

“Y-y-yeah, I do-on’t th-think I can h-help much with that.”

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The Qixing interview, which occurred directly after her interview with the Human press, went as well as Bryluen expected. She made an eloquent case for Dread Naught's mission statement and gave a factual and brief response to each question posed to her about the team and their foe, providing the exact same information she had given to the Human press. While not the public face of the CSOE, Operatives were certainly its most iconic and were trained extensively in how to participate in interviews and make press statements when necessary.

Operatives were so well-known for this training few news organizations sought a statement on a particular topic once an Operative had already provided one. No matter who asked, the information would be the exact same, even if the phrasing was altered or the format in which the information was provided changed. The more lurid forms of yellow journalism that still existed found this an endless source of consternation, as it meant they were unable to wring a believable controversy out of any mismatched facts or ambiguous phrasing.

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Later in the evening, Kirby stood out on the lounge balcony, mulling over feelings and concerns she was having difficulty sorting. She leaned on the rail with her elbows, her eyes tracing back and forth across the lush environment below. She jumped slightly as she heard the door open behind her. Nicadzim slipped out onto the balcony and walked up next to her, a burrito cradled in paper in one hand.

“Heya, Nico.”

“Good ...”, the big man looked at the sky. “... afternoon, Kirby. I thought I had felt someone would need company out here.”

Kirby turned toward him, a brief flash of concern crossing her face. “You *felt* that? How d’ya mean, you can ... read thoughts?”

“Oh, no, not that, I just ... have a feeling. You will be concerned about something you feel. I would not ask what, if you will not want to tell me. But I could perhaps still have helped.” He drew a carton out of one pocket containing several long, thin paper objects.

“Oh, hey, is that—”

“It will be something pleasantly calming. Not something you

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would have had before, I could assure you.”

“... alright, you wouldn’t kill me, let’s light up.” Kirby reached into the carton and pulled out a neatly rolled paper filled with compacted powder. She stuck one end in her mouth and flicked the other with a finger, causing it to ignite with a tidy flame. Purple-tinged smoke began to trail up and away on a slow breeze.

“So, now that I’m already smokin’ it, the hell did you get this from, Nico?”

“I will find it one night when I am adventuring, nestled among some metaphors.” Nicadzim lit his own cigarette, a second smoke trail joining the first.

“Yeah, I can already tell this conversation is goin’ over my head, but what the *fuck* made you think you should roll and smoke it?”

Nicadzim looked at her. “Nothing, these were already rolled when I found them.”

The cigarette sagged in Kirby’s mouth. “So you don’t ... Nico, I can’t explain how, but this tastes ex-fuckin’-xactly like a boat reaching dock after a long trip.”

The big man grunted. “These are not very creative. Mine seems to be a warm hearth on a cold night. I hope I will find a more interesting pack of similes some time.”

“Well, I can’t say these aren’t relaxing. Never smoked a simile before.” Kirby took the cigarette from her lips, glancing at it a moment before putting it back to her mouth and shrugging. “Nico, every goddamn day you’ve got—and I don’t mean no disrespect by this—the craziest shit to talk about. And now I’m smokin’ a simile with you. How’d you grow up? It always been like this for you?”

“I ... do not remember. I have just been me as far as memory allows. I knew of no childhood, family, anything. My ... earliest memories—images, feelings, sensations I could not place. I know things, I speak and live between and among moments. My best explanation was that I have been wandering for years until I developed an understanding of me. I was trying to have a normal life but such things did not exist for me.”

Kirby thought for a minute, gazing at the smoke drifting off and away from the pair of them. The contents of the cigarette left a residue of long, relieved sighs and the scent of dissipating homesickness on her

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lips. “Did you ever feel lonely, Nico? Do ya now? I mean, we all like you, but I dunno, seems like it might be lonely. I mean I know you do your best, but I sure can’t understand all you’ve gotta tell us all the time. No one else really *gets* it, ya know?”

“At times, I would suppose. Now I just think of the things I have done and seen no one else ever will. I will meet beings that were unimaginable and see places that have been beautiful beyond imagining. You may not have understood, but this will not hurt. My experiences are not what separates me. Time will divide myself from you.”

“That *would* be the real fucked part of things for you, huh? I dunno how you keep track of anything, sounds like you bounce around?”

“I embodied many, though I am only one. I was a raft on a boat of myself, scooping up the closest pieces of me and to try to fit me together as I went along.”

“I can’t even start to imagine, sounds like sci-fi shit to me, but I’ve seen enough of ya to know that what you say must be what it is.” Kirby habitually tapped the end of the cigarette. “To me, you just seem to be a guy that blinks around some and has weird crap happen all around.”

Nicadzim laughed. “I suppose that will be a fine enough description!”

The jockey smiled, then looked out toward the setting sun. “So you don’t go through time all straight and neat like us other folk, huh? Do you see yourself older?”

“Yes and no. All of me will be simultaneous. I experienced past and will experience the future of others at times. I aged but have stopped now. But no, I did not see myself older. All of me will age at once as if younger me has never existed.”

Kirby and Nicadzim fell quiet for a time as their shadows stretched out. Kirby’s rail-thin silhouette soon began to melt into the dark wall of Nicadzim’s shade. The mist slowly cleared as evening approached, a brisk breeze picking up the vapors and moving them down the mountain range. Their smoke traveled with it in puffs and swirls that soon became dispersed in the distance. Nicadzim had been right: ground up simile was a relaxing thing to smoke, though she thought it could potentially depend on the simile. She almost mentally

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chided herself for even considering it—despite the fact it was happening, smoking a simile was clearly impossible. The whole point of a simile was to be a comparative linguistic construct so, once it became an empirical object, how could it still be a simile?

With each puff there was no taste or scent per se, just her brain filling with things it could not otherwise rationalize—she got associations, impressions, the idea of images, and a set of sensations she had no words to describe aside from saying the cigarette was made out of a simile.

Their cigarettes were almost burned through when Nicadzim spoke next. “What ... is your early life like?”

“Well, not too special, I don’t guess. Got a brother out there. Somewhere. Never ended up too close to my folks. Ma worked all the time, pa never knew what to do with kids, I don’t think. None of it clicked for me. Ain’t much wrong with ‘em, their lives just weren’t for me. I was a big dreamer, expected a prince and a castle. Didn’t get that.”

Kirby took a long puff, closing her eyes and letting the simile wash over her. For a moment, she was just coming home after a long journey. She wasn’t sure whether or not that feeling was from the cigarette. “Grew up, got educated, found what I thought was love at the time. Didn’t work out—I was young and dumb. Found somethin’ else after that. Then ended up in the Marines, and here I am. I skipped a couple things, but yeah, that’s pretty much the short version.”

“You make your life sound boring. I will not think that you will live a boring life.” Nicadzim’s smoke stream tied itself into a square knot as it floated away.

“Eh, it ain’t all that much. Runner’s over here bein’ a vigilante, you get looks at the future and warp around, Vort’s unique in this entire galaxy, and Brylue is—literally—who I wanted to be when I grew up, while secretly knowing I couldn’t.” The jockey shrugged. “I learned to jockey walkers.”

“You will be the *only* person to use the Marduk. You are the best jockey in the Marine Corps. Brylue sought you out because you were extraordinary, Kirby. Vort and myself will be born to what will make us special. You earn who you are, just like Runner and Brylue.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She sniffed. “Sorry, I ain’t great at takin’ compliments. Thanks, hon. I’ll think about it, but some days I’m just

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gonna pity the shit out of myself. Force of habit.”

A black line suddenly shot up in front of Kirby, and with a click became taut. Runner propelled up past them and onto the roof of Raven’s Landing at high speed. Kirby and Nicadzim both leaned out and looked upward. Runner’s face peered over the edge of the roof, a glint of mischief in his eyes.

“I-I got it! It works! It’s beaut-iful!”

Kirby took her cigarette from her mouth. “Well hell, ‘d’you make yourself a grapple?”

Runner stretched out a hand so Nicadzim and Kirby could see it. His arm was clad in his armor, and a reel was attached to the back of his shoulder. The pressurized gun projecting the grapple itself was attached to his gauntlet so that when the hook struck something, the force drawing him up the line was on his back plate instead of pulling at his arm. “It’s so much fun! Took-k-k a bit to get it to come back right, but I got it! W-w-wanted to sho-ow you!”

Kirby paused a moment. “You’re gonna use that on my chassis at some point, aren’t ya?”

Runner’s eyes darted to the side for one moment. “It *would* work if I did!”

“Alright, just warn a girl before ya go jumpin’ on her.”

Bryluen’s voice came out of a concealed speaker mounted somewhere on the balcony. “Kirby, your pretty new alloy shipment just arrived for you!”

Kirby looked around, reflexively trying to locate the source of the voice. “You got it? I didn’t know if the Marines would actually wanna let go of more of that shit!”

“Well, I had to flash Supply Manager Nguyen, but after that he agreed.” The group fell quiet for a moment. “... Joke. The missus would obviously be pretty unhappy with me going around showing my assets. Nguyen and I have this running joke—have we not had this conversation? I really expected that to land better than it did. You folks need to pay more attention to your e-mails. Anyway, have fun towing all this inside, Furcotte!”

Kirby smiled and put her cigarette out against the top of the rail. She waved to Runner and Nicadzim before jogging inside, across the lobby, and out to the landing pad. A cart carrying a pile of metal panels

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awaited her as the delivery drone ascending back into the sky. The plates were the same blue-tinted alloy used for her blades. The material was still under final efficiency review—though more enduring than traditional armor plating, it was costly and the financial feasibility of deploying it had not yet been determined. After Tāwhiri, Kirby had asked Bryluen to order it for the Marduk in order to stand against more examples of the beast that had injured her—an Ur-Rabisu, as it had been designated.

According to Bryluen, Rabisus and Gugalannas received their names from Sumerian myth. Outside of self-identification, the CSOE usually named entities according to ancient Terran cultures. The Dreaded were being titled differently depending on their battlefield use—for example Sjorthursar was a term for a Norse Sea-Giant, the difference in myth system denoting it existed for a different purpose than the Sumerian-named ground troops. An En was a Sumerian High-Priest, while Ur was a word for ‘first’, thus explaining the En- and Ur-Rabisus. Kirby found the subject interesting, but mostly had just wanted to know what to call the thing whose relatives she was determined to massacre in their next meeting.

Feeling vastly more relaxed after treating herself to Nicadzim’s drug of questionable provenance, she set about detaching the Marduk’s armor plates in the workshop, swapping in spare parts for damaged mechanisms, and setting the lathe to tool the plates she needed from the new alloy. Meanwhile, Bryluen had gone back to her bedroom. She hung her jacket up and began to unbutton her blouse when a call registered on the screen in front of her bed. She turned to see the caller, then rapidly re-buttoned her top and put her jacket back on. Stepping up to the screen, she accepted the call.

Rur’Thu’s face appeared, and he performed the diagonal head inclination that was effectively the Qixing equivalent of a nod. “Good to speak to you again, Dame Branok. There is something I wished to discuss with you, following up on our last meeting.”

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Bryluen leaned on the short table below the screen. “You’ve received our data on the Stone, I take it?”

The Qixing diplomat took a deep breath. “We have received the readings, and we have teams searching for similar objects in our space now, yes, but it’s not much to go off of yet. Regardless, I am not calling about the Stone in particular. You may have heard of multiple attacks by The Dreaded on Gru’Thiall since we last met. We are still searching the mountains to locate the goal the enemy pursues, and while we have found nothing definite yet, we have encountered a disruption of much of our scanning equipment and some other technology in an area that likely encompasses the point the enemy seek. This is not something accounted for by the Stone you acquired, but we are looking into it as best as we are able, bereft as we are of our best methods of searching the mountainous terrain.”

“Very well. As long as we find whatever it is before they do. You’ve dealt with a number of attacks in other places as well, I hear?”

“We have.” Rur’Thu nodded at a slightly diagonal angle again. “A colony was struck, and while civilian casualties were as minimal as could be hoped, it was ... found to be avoidable, had we redistributed some of our Interior Guard. The Sentinels responded quickly, but ... the

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Colony Post was insufficient to repel the initial attack—the assault was larger than projected. The people are displeased. You ...”

“... I was right, I know. How many?”

“Excuse me, madam?”

“How many *died*, Rur’Thu? How many of your people were killed that didn’t need to be?”

Aoue looked away for a moment. “I, ih ... thirty seven Qixing citizens, and one Ly Aulth traveler.”

“Great.” Bryluen put a hand over her eyes. “How are the Ly Aulth taking it? They’ve taken issue with your border policies for years, I don’t think getting one of them killed is going to make them particularly happy, given all your security.”

The diplomat sat back in his chair. “There is talk of possible travel restrictions, and some of the more extreme cartels are threatening intervention if anything further occurs.”

The Ly Aulth were a loose confederation of organizations that other races would normally consider criminal. Infighting between their drone swarms over territory or trade routes was frequent, but they responded to any aggression or slight by another race as a unified and surprisingly angry whole.

Their chaotic lack of an Over-government had resulted in a number of diplomatic incidents, and at least one occurrence where inadvisable AI research resulted in an automated battle group crippling an entire cartel fleet and then wandering into Human space in search of resources. The Marines had cleaned up the AI craft and threatened to enter Ly Aulth space with a Battleship to prevent another such occurrence from threatening Human worlds. Since then the winged aliens had been quite delicate in their dealings with Humanity, but were still brash toward the Qixing despite the lucrative trade routes passing through T’hròstag space between them.

“I don’t want to belabor the point, so other than letting me say I told you so, I’m guessing there’s more to this call?” Bryluen crossed her arms, more upset about the consequences of the Qixing’s initial non-committal response than she let on.

“You ... have at the least earned that. A terrible choice was made, and I will bear the weight of that. In light of our failures, we have rescinded our previous position on the treatment of The Dreaded threat,

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and I am resigning from my position this evening. We are re-routing Interior Guard units to reinforce threatened colonies, and we have redoubled our attempts to locate the enemy objective on Gru'Thiall. Moreover, we have made a decision regarding cooperation with Dread Naught.”

The Operative’s eyebrows raised as Rur’Thu continued. “You had proposed we deploy an operative as a Qixing liaison for Dread Naught. We are normally loathe to loan out military assets of any kind, but an up-swell in demand for solutions from our people has brought the Sentinel Ministry to authorize an agent be sent to you with a sufficient level of authority to coordinate Qixing military units in our space. Moreover, as a gesture to Humanity, and you in particular, this agent will serve under your command.”

Bryluen’s grip on the table beneath her tightened in expectation. “And who, might I ask, would this Qixing military agent be?”

“Well, Dame ...”, the diplomat smiled, a motion aoue was clearly unused to. “I believe you will be quite pleased with whom we have deployed.”

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Vort glided gently to the ground below Raven’s Landing, which extended out from the mountainside on sleek supports above him. The soft orange grasses tickled his sides as he walked along the steep incline. His wing was healing well. The skin of his wing joint still needed to remain covered but the joint was working well enough for him to carefully extend his wing and glide some. His flesh itched from its rapid healing, but the unpleasantness was well worth the rate at which he was regaining the use of his wing. The CSOE’s research had done a fine job of developing medicinal solutions for Vort, though his own altered Explorer’s physiology certainly didn’t hurt.

Vort’s people tried their best to be kind to strangers but he was still impressed with how quickly Humanity had taken to him, especially after studying its history.

Over the past centuries massive changes spurred by technology and philosophical development had altered the Human race’s outlook on the universe and the way it viewed itself. Gone were past ages where

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exploitation of the poor and mass State violence caused one to thrive. Numerous wars had shaken the Human race, and many mishaps marred their early stellar colonization efforts, but today they were on a fine footing as a stable presence with healthy social and political systems.

Vort felt fortunate he had crashed or appeared on a Human world. The Qixing would not have been unpleasant, but he certainly doubted they would have allowed him part in an endeavor like Dread Naught. The T'hròstag may not have even recognized he was intelligent, and may have shot first before asking questions. He shuddered to imagine having been acquired by the Ly Aulth—he almost certainly would have been forced into some form of labor or combat by one of the many perfidious cartels whose profit and power reigned above any recognizable ethics.

The magnitude of his fortune in being displaced between galaxies was mind-blowing at the least. Even so far away from his people and his society, so removed from the carefully cultured state of peaceful civilization his species had wrenched from its violent past, he still found people he could count on and who cared for him.

He strolled along the forest floor, watching long-legged mammalian creatures hop among the branches of the trees above. Eventually he would make his way back to the lift on the side of the landing pad, but until then he would enjoy his walk and do what he had always done: appreciate the wonders he found wherever he went.

The following morning Nicadzim was strolling through the lobby on his way to the library, where Vort had invited him to watch an episode of a show they had been viewing together. He held a steaming mug of coffee in one hand, and wore flannel pants and a fitted shirt. As he passed the fountain he heard the doorbell: a tone centuries out of date that Bryluen almost certainly chose for its inherently welcoming feel. Nicadzim supposed the Qixing specialist had arrived, and moved to greet them.

His long legs carried him up the entryway hall, and he opened the door to see the newest addition to Dread Naught. Due to their differing biology, Qixing had different age markers than Humans. Their keratinous lips tended to grow slightly softer compared to the hard rigidity of young age, and could stain depending on lifestyle. Their hair

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became more coarse and usually lightened in tone a bit at a time. Though their skin did not wrinkle, it did fade from the extremities inward as the replacement of placoid scales slowed with age. Nicadzim therefore guessed the Qixing woman was older than him by a slight margin, perhaps closer to Brylue's age.

Her skin was a rich emerald green that faded to a lighter shade past her elbows and knees. She had a round face with rounder cheeks scattered in periwinkle constellations of freckles. Her narrow eyes were close together and consisted of vibrant, razor-thin violet irises around large pupils. Above each eye was a wire-like burnt sienna eyebrow, and she had a broad nose whose nostrils sat slightly above where the bridge of her nose ended. Her narrow mouth and lime lips formed a natural pout highlighted by a white strip of paint down the center. The Qixing's long hair contained several shades of sunset oranges and yellows, and was bound by carved coral bands into a tight loop behind her head like a halo.

She was short, with wide hips and a heavysset build that kept her from looking quite as dwarfed as she stared up at Nicadzim. She was clad in a red robe with broad tapered sleeves and a silken skirt embroidered in delicate designs. The robe's wide collar exposed a swath of deep green skin down to just below her singular collarbone. Tiered jewelry hung from her ears and neck, splashing down the broad slope of her upper chest. A pair of octagonal, bronze-colored rings were pierced through her lower lip. Despite the delicate finery in which she was clad, she exuded an undeniable air of politely restrained threat.

She smiled warmly, exposing a row of pearlescent teeth and sea-foam colored gums. Her full cheeks caused her smile to accentuate the softness of her face, though a keen observer familiar with Qixing would note the soul-piercing sharpness of her gaze. This was all the more heightened by the slow motions of her eyelids, less a gentle wave of lashes than the predatory confidence of a jungle cat. Nicadzim extended his palm facing upward, and she placed her own manicured hand on top of it. Her fingernails were short and round, encompassing a hemispherical portion of the top of each finger tip. Nicadzim only faintly noticed the devotional band delicately marked into the Qixing's left ring finger. Due to their constant shedding of scales, Qixing could not permanently tattoo themselves with ink. Instead they had long employed

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scarification techniques, often using a laser. Her hair began to shift to the right of its own accord as Nicadzim looked on.

She spoke in a pristine accent carrying with it the full weight of the half-tonal modalities of her native tongues, bringing a choppy quality to her words. Her voice was otherwise a smooth, pleasant alto that infused her vowels with depth and warmth. “I am Olyuxanag’E Fong’thith’ja Belzxilenth’Wa Ho’Xal, Storm Mother of the House of Ho’Xal.”

Nicadzim replied stoically. “I am Nicadzim Kuzmako, representing the CSOE.”

With introductions established, both inclined their heads and simultaneously spoke. “May the days between our meetings be fruitful.”

The formal greeting completed, they straightened and withdrew their hands. Rather than sending just any Qixing, the Commonwealth had deployed a Storm Mother of the royal lineage. While all children of the House of Ho’Xal served in some aspect of the military, the rank of Storm Mother was illustrious and encompassed a great degree of skill and live combat experience.

The Storm Mother promptly but politely requested to speak with “the Lady of the House.” Nicadzim had no doubt that meant Bryluen, and keyed her over the intercom by the door. Within a surprisingly small amount of time Bryluen appeared at the end of the hall in pajamas, a huge smile plastered across her face. With a lightning-fast acceleration the Qixing sprinted past Nicadzim and collided into the Operative’s arms hard enough to produce a thumping sound, her hands placed on the insides of Bryluen’s shoulders.

The two women spun from the impact and then held close to one another for several seconds, their strict postures and authoritative demeanors softening at each others’ touch. The Storm Mother’s head rested neatly in the curve of Bryluen’s neck. They both took a deep breath, gently kissed, and quietly exchanged some private words.

Nicadzim smiled. “Ah! She was your ‘Missus’! I should be less surprised that you would marry a warrior princess!”

Bryluen kissed the Qixing’s green forehead. “This is indeed my wife, Bel’Wa. And she’s a warrior *queen* to me!”

Bel’Wa convulsively yelped in a high pitch at odds with her bearing, then clamped a hand over her mouth. “By Commonwealth law

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it is actually *illegal* for her to call me a Queen, since I have royal blood.” She punctuated her next sentence with thumps of her palm on Bryluen’s upper chest. “That’s never stopped her—but! It’s! Normally! In! Private!”

Bryluen shrugged and smiled. “I’ve missed you more than you know.”

Bel’Wa smiled broadly. “Well, I think I *might* know, actually. It’s been far too long, tye’tyito.”

“It really, really has. Nico, help me wake the others and let’s all gather in the lounge to meet this wonderful lady.”

Soon after, Dread Naught was assembled with coffee (tea in Vort’s case) and various breakfast food. Kirby wore a loose, white t-shirt and shorts, while Runner was in athletic wear pants with a tank top clutched in one hand as if he couldn’t decide whether to actually put it on or not. The vigilante’s chest tattoo glowed softly in the dim pre-dawn light. Bryluen and Bel’Wa sat close together. The Qixing’s hand stroked the Operative’s leg with mindless fervor, and Bryluen’s arm held tight around her shoulders in turn. The two women had clung to one another like teenagers in the throes of first love ever since Bel’Wa arrived, apparently intent on making up for lost time during the previous months.

Bel’Wa’s bearing was an interesting sight: the way she walked, the way she sat down, and the careful, precise way in which she ate all made it evident she was nobility. Her tone of voice and speaking volume were precisely controlled, and her words chosen carefully when needed. At will she would snap into vastly more casual and even undignified behaviors as if she had been suddenly transformed, the force of her personality enough to break through a life of etiquette training and martial discipline.

“How are you healing, Kirby?” The Storm Mother asked.

Kirby made a quizzical expression over the top of her coffee mug. “Oh, I’m comin’ along well, you know how it is.”

“It looked like a nasty hit, I’m glad you’re alright. That thing was an awful beast.”

The jockey froze. “Oh my god, that was you?!”

Bel’Wa giggled. “Yes, that was me! She didn’t tell you, did she? She does that. *She loves her secrets.*”

## 19. Belated Boons and the Bulwark

Bryluen laughed. “Well, given how much of me my bosses have seen, I like to keep things to myself when possible.”

Vort’s skin glowed in almost the same periwinkle color as Bel’Wa’s freckles. “THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP, STORM MOTHER. IT TOUCHED ME THAT YOU WENT TO HELP ME SO QUICKLY.”

“My honor is yours. I was worried when I saw you get hurt as well. I’m glad you’re alright!”

“Madam Bel’Wa,” Nicadzim rumbled, “You were of the royal lineage, correct?”

She nodded at an angle. “I am. Twenty-second in the line of succession. I will never see the throne myself, but have certain rights and lands afforded me on Torva’Ang—as well as a number of armored undergarments in case someone tries to assassinate me.”

“S-so how did you two meet-t?”, asked Runner.

The wives looked at each other for a moment. Bel’Wa breathed deeply as Bryluen spoke. “Well, some details are still technically classified, but suffice to say I was investigating stories about the possible reappearance of a serpent that had once been worshiped on a certain world out on the rim, while Bel’Wa was responding to a distress beacon from a crashed transport on the same planet. Several encounters with the largest terrestrial fauna I’ve ever seen and one harrowing rescue effort later, and we ... were just struck with one another. She was incredible, skilled, unstoppable, brave.”

Bel’Wa’s smile widened. “Tell them what you thought of me when you first saw my face.”

“Well, post-mission she took her helmet off, and ...” Bryluen laughed and shook her head. “... she was more gorgeous than I could have hoped, I thought I might be hallucinating! And you?”

Bel’Wa shifted in her seat, having been granted Bryluen’s go-ahead to speak about her appearance. “I had seen Humans a number of times, but ... never someone like her in a few ways. When I saw her armor and heard her speak I was already intrigued—I’d never heard an accent like hers, and she has *always* looked fine in her armor. Then at the end of things, when she took *her* helmet off ... I had never felt that way about a Human ... Mmmh.” The assembled group laughed. “We both just smiled and laughed nervously, I think we both realized what the other was thinking. We spoke a bit, and—then she just kissed me. I

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could hear my own heart in my ears like I was still a youth in Seminary School. We exchanged information, and had to go our separate ways then, but we started sending messages to one another and meeting every time we could soon after.”

Runner sniffed. “That’s a g-g-great story. Figures, Bryl ne-ever does things by half-f measures.”

“I try my best!”, the Operative quipped. “We’ve been together fifteen years now, married twelve, and it’s been a hell of a ride.”

“YOU MUST NEVER TIRE OF TELLING EACH OTHER ABOUT WORK.” Vort flicked his eyes back and forth between the married couple.

Bel’Wa sat forward. “We really don’t! Whatever Bryl can tell me is certainly never boring. I have my own tales and problems—you wouldn’t believe what people try to get past us, or what sorts of things happen every day on the star-lanes.”

Nicadzim spoke up again. “Bryluen, I will not identify you as someone who is enjoying being affectionate. I meant no offense by this.”

“Oh, none taken,” the Operative shrugged. “I’m only married to one of you people, so she gets all of it. I’m really not all that outgoing a person, regardless. A lot of us Operatives are pretty reserved, period—not like I have plans to go out for drinks with the girls any time soon.”

The jockey was looking down at the glass table, contemplating something. “How do ya keep it all going? Your relationship, I mean. Ya can’t see each other all that often, can you? And you’re in danger all the time, and it just ... how’d ya do it?”

Bryluen folded a leg and set it on her knee. “We chat constantly, send each other pictures, speak over video as often as possible, and—”

“—Ih ... I think I was about to interrupt with something that wasn’t appropriate, actually, so carry on!”

Bryluen laughed. “Well, even though we work apart and live away from each other, we’ve made wonderful memories and done amazing things.”

Kirby nodded slowly. “You’re strong folk, but I’m guessin’ you already knew that. Now Bel’Wa, I didn’t get to watch ya all too much the first time we met. So, how do you fight? Like what’s your specialty?”

Bel’Wa smiled. “Well, you might have noticed I won’t be doing much in the way of gymnastics any time soon—the shield honestly

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shows what I do best: I hold the line. I've got commendations in hand-to-hand combat, and a unit record for chest presses. The Gate Sentinels emphasize controlling the situation, and as a Storm Mother I am expected to be an island of stillness. I control the flow of the enemy and take control of a situation."

"Think you'd be up for teaching me a trick or two? I need the practice, I think." Kirby shook her head slightly, again thinking about the Ur-Rabisu's claw piercing her side.

The Qixing's eyes lit up. "I would! I'm going to throw you, though. A lot."

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After each member of Dread Naught finished breakfast and spoke some more with Bel'Wa, she proceeded with Bryluen and Kirby to the sparring mat in the exercise room. The golden rays of dawn lashed along the forested horizon like hungry flames. Kirby's long legs were clad in olive leggings, and her numerous tattoos flowed out from around one of her many green sports bras. Bel'Wa released her hair from the coral loops and removed her jewelry, handing the accessories to Bryluen. Her hair fell down to her thigh, the rough strands trying their best to pull themselves into messy waves. Standing together, the pair of women looked like a contrasting illustration of phenotypical variations. Bel'Wa drew her hair back up and secured it in a knot with several swift motions, before beginning to reconfigure her three-layered robe into a more suitable form for sparring.

This action also exposed the complex scarification on the outside of her left thigh. It was a single-color rendition of Bryluen's leg tattoo, the two scenes representing the wives re-imagined in monochromatic detail.

Bel'Wa neatly folded the outer, decorative layer of her robe and tied it over her chest in a broad, even band tightly secured about her with a knot in the back. The Qixing looked down and bounced on her heels a

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couple times, then nodded in the slightly diagonal fashion of her people.

“All right, all secured. You?”

Kirby smirked. “Yeah, I don’t think I’ve got the same issues there that you do.”

Without further ado Bel’Wa placed a hand over each of Kirby’s narrow hips, and easily lifted the jockey into the air.

“You really *are* so thin! Humans get so slim it amazes me sometimes! I could throw you like a spear! The Ly Aulth I can believe, but you Humans have live births like us! *How?*”

She put Kirby back down, a shocked expression on the jockey’s face. “Uh, yeah, we manage. Damn, woman, how much can you bench?”

“Enough that I could throw you like a spear, clearly,” the Storm Mother quipped with a smile.

Bryluen spoke up from behind her. “She gets like this with Humans and weight. I had to lose a couple pounds once to fit in a particular article of clothing for a mission—very long story—and Bel’Wa cried when she saw me because she thought I was extremely ill.”

“I was *so* worried! I didn’t know Human faces could just lose their cheeks like that!” Bel’Wa finished the statement by putting a hand to either side of her face, as if she were afraid parts of it were going to run off.

Soon afterward Kirby was crashing onto the mat, bouncing on her back as Bel’Wa once more tossed the jockey over her shoulder like a discarded fruit peel. Bel’Wa was healthy and fit, but her body was no subtle instrument. She was sturdy as a bomb shelter, built to stand immovable on the front line.

“I’m much shorter than you, so I’ve got a low center of gravity. Don’t loom over me—use your reach, because I have the advantage of leverage. Every time I get under you, I *am* going to flip you over. Again!”

Kirby saw a military woman much like herself in Bel’Wa, with the disciplined combat style that entailed. Bel’Wa was a fine teacher, helping Kirby sharpen her stances and motions as well as renew her knowledge of bodily momentum and defensive maneuvers. The Qixing was innately skilled in close combat, her steps certain, her attacks

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concise and punishing. She was as much an embodiment of her people as Bryluen was of the Human race.

Bel'Wa enjoyed many traditional practices and carried the spirit of Torva'Ang wherever she went, but never sacrificed her forthright way of speaking or the dependable practicality she brought to every task. Her affections were every bit as strong as the blows she delivered in battle, and in both of these things she had no hesitation or remorse. Bryluen watched Bel'Wa coach Kirby through a series of harsh grappling maneuvers before the pair graduated to weighted practice weapons. Bel'Wa's expertise with a blade was evident.

Bryluen smiled. Bel'Wa couldn't conceal her grin—she had always loved fighting. The discipline required to maintain control in a life or death situation appealed to her on a fundamental level. That *need* to control and weaponize her passions, as the world around her resounded with blood and steel, was the axiom on which she thrived in all things. She adored not just the rush of adrenaline but being able to ignore it, to set it aside until the perfect moment of release at her command.

The Qixing still held warfare to be an art, and were therefore less shy about confronting the joys found on the battlefield when compared with Humans. Many Gate Sentinel personnel had fallen afoul of accusations of fetishizing war in interviews with Humans for that reason. Bryluen thought, however, that such a thing was fundamentally more true to the warrior's experience. While on the whole war was a bloody, ugly, and horrid affair, few experiences could make an individual feel as alive and connected to their fellows as a battle.

Kirby was lying on her back, with Bel'Wa's practice sword held upward under her arm in imitation of having been stabbed. The Qixing sighed happily before she strolled over to Bryluen and kissed her—Bryluen realized Bel'Wa's lip paint was vanilla flavored, a taste repellent to Qixing taste buds. Bel'Wa turned back toward the jockey. "You did really well, Kirby! You should be proud. Tomorrow?"

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As she replaced her last piece of jewelry and reformed her hair through its coral loops, Bryluen gave Bel'Wa an official tour of Raven's

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Landing while they held hands. Bel'Wa had never actually been inside Raven's Landing, as it was CSOE property that required clearance to enter. Bryluen had her room outfitted with a Queen bed, two nightstands, and a dresser larger than required for her own needs in the hope her wife would one day be able to stay with her some time. That opportunity had finally arrived, and for the first time the couple would be able to regularly sleep together rather than staying at inns or resorts. The thought of such a simple pleasure was exhilarating.

Upon looking around the bedroom they were to share, Bel'Wa leaped onto the large bed. "Ahhh, this is *nice*. I'm going to snore like a aulrteh, and you will hate it."

Bryluen laid on her back next to Bel'Wa. "I'm sure I'll find a way to survive."

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About an hour later, Bryluen was gazing at her wife reclining at the opposite end of her spacious tub. Both of them were swathed in suds and breathing deeply, two skilled killers peaceably vulnerable in each others' presence. Bryluen half-groaned, half-chuckled as Bel'Wa finished massaging her feet. Qixing hands were naturally hot due to the counter-current blood flow that kept their extremities warm in cool water, and for this reason they were often sought after as masseuses by Humans. The fact the Bel'Wa also had a grip like a hydraulic vise didn't hurt.

After all this time it still occasionally struck Bryluen that, despite their familiarity on every conceivable level, it remained strange just how *alien* Bel'Wa was. It was a surprisingly common phenomenon that when a member of one species first had relations with another, one of the participants would freeze up—ask most any Marine and you may hear this affect defined by any number of creatively crass, generally rhyming terms.

This phenomenon occurred because no foreknowledge ever *really* prepared someone for the full brunt of a person who differed from them on a fundamental biological level. The numerous differences small or large in every aspect of an alien's anatomy could be overwhelming to behold, even between highly similar species like Humans and Qixing.

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As Bryluen watched, Bel'Wa began to lather one shoulder with a small tool somewhat like a squeegee, moving it in short motions down and out in the direction of her placoid scales. Bel'Wa—like all of her species—was entirely covered in hundreds of thousands of tiny denticles that helped make her hydrodynamic. This racial difference in skin texture was obvious, and affected unexpected aspects of life. Instead of stretch marks or scarring, for example, Bel'Wa bore areas where rapid growth caused slightly smaller, denser placoid scales to grow in rough patches.

Bel'Wa could see slightly into the infrared spectrum, but had some trouble with the lower wavelengths of Human-visible light. Her ears were more square and her nostrils further up the length of her nose than they would be on a Human. Her fingers bore subtly differing proportions to Bryluen's, and the proportions of her toes gave her foot a flipper-like outline.

Bel'Wa's hair would disintegrate if exposed to Bryluen's shampoo, and the entirety of her skin required certain lotions unless she rinsed herself in salt water once a week—otherwise she could become ill and would begin to shed scales.

Bel'Wa appeared to have a single clavicle arcing from shoulder to shoulder, a length of cartilaginous material bridging the gap between her collar-bones—this made it easier to maintain the correct form when swimming.

By any metric, Bryluen found her absolutely beautiful. Bel'Wa was a collection of gentle, round shapes. She had enrapturing eyes, a joyful smile, and a low smokey voice paradoxically paired with an infectious laugh in the form of an altogether girlish giggle. When Bryluen kissed her, Bel'Wa's lips were cool, firm, and gently ridged. Bryluen felt a pleasant warmth in her chest staring at the strange, incredible woman she made her wife. Ever since their first meeting she had felt her heart hopelessly swept away by this Qixing, a woman so much like her and yet so unutterably different. Beneath the surface of the water, Bel'Wa affectionately grabbed onto the side of Bryluen's foot with toes substantially more flexible than those of a Human. Translucent nictitating membranes fluttered inward across Bel'Wa's pupils and then back. The gesture was similar in social signaling to a Human batting their eyelashes, though the motion carried additional connotations as

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well—Qixing’s membranes often involuntarily closed over their eyes during times of intense emotion.

“Are you wondering about how alien I am, again?” Bel’Wa purred. Bryluen laughed, causing Bel’Wa to smile. “I thought so!”

The Storm Mother shrugged, then shifted and moved across the tub to place herself under Bryluen’s arm. “I was doing the same thing. I still can’t *really* believe you have eggs. *Had* eggs?”

The Qixing put her fingertips on one of Bryluen’s knee caps and began to slide it around over the joint. “And I’ve always been *so* fascinated by your knees!”

Bryluen pulled Bel’Wa close, drinking in the warmth of her skin. As Bryluen rubbed a hand up and down Bel’Wa’s arm, she felt an alternation between silken smoothness and the comforting roughness of a beloved sweater. Bel’Wa leaned into the affection, sighing wistfully. Bryluen caught a waft of her hair, an unmistakable herbal scent evoking the seaweed-like coastal flora of her home world.

“It would be a hell of a thing if I got a call right now, wouldn’t it?”

Bel’Wa chuckled. “Well, I’m not particularly camera-shy.”

Though inter-species marriages were relatively commonplace, particularly nearer the borders between species, the occasion of Bryluen and Bel’Wa’s marriage had been unique. The occurrence of a royal marrying a single partner rather than two—not to mention that partner being a Human—would have been nothing short of scandalous had Bel’Wa been closer to the throne. Therefore the two women had at first met in private but the time came where, according to the traditions of the royal family, Bel’Wa was compelled to personally acquire approval from Queen Ho’Xal herself to wed Bryluen.

The Queen of the Qixing was one of the most intimidating people in known space. She bore all the poise and imperiousness of an entire species, and could direct every inch of it at any who appeared in her presence with a simple gaze. Bel’Wa nonetheless went before her and declared her love for a Human. The choice to specify the race of her lover before her occupation—as was tradition—was a direct challenge according to court etiquette. After a lengthy debate on this matter and the occupation of the presumptive fiancée, the Queen asked the name of the woman she wished to marry. This was held to be an indication of

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initial assent, a terse acknowledgment by the Queen that the accomplishments and general characteristics of the fiancée as described may be suitable for royal marriage. When Bel'Wa at last stated Bryluen's name, the matriarch of the Ho'Xal lineage simply smiled. Bryluen had participated in the apprehension of an assassin dispatched by a revolutionary group five years previously, at one point personally saving the Queen's life. After clarifying for the Queen one last time their marriage would not, in fact, include a third partner, Bel'Wa and Bryluen's marriage received royal approval.

The following marriage ceremony had been small, and featured a blend of Qixing and Human traditions. Qixing did not marry until they intended to have or adopt children, and thus the marriage certificate itself was closer to a contract for child support, reproductive cooperation, and legal conditions in the event of death. The one true similarity was the inclusion of a celebration that was analogous enough to a wedding reception to be convenient.

Due to these cultural differences, Bel'Wa would not have married Bryluen at all were it not a meaningful gesture of commitment to a Human. The Queen attended the wedding as well as a member of CSOE High Command, an Astral Marine representative, several other CSOE Operatives, a selection of Gate Sentinels, and the closest family members of each bride. The Queen of the Qixing and most of the Gate Sentinels had never seen a Human wedding ceremony and were hopelessly interested in every unfamiliar detail, particularly Bryluen's wedding dress.

The event of their wedding accounted for little more than a brief fascination by Qixing tabloids, whereas Human press leaped on the news of Bryluen getting married. Bel'Wa had long saved a number of articles from those times lamenting that Bryluen was no longer available, as well as some stories portraying herself as some mysterious dark horse in an unspoken race for Bryluen's affections. The cult of celebrity hovering in Bryl's path had long fascinated Bel'Wa, particularly since the Operative did so little in the way of actual press appearances. Her deeds alone were enough to cause a bevy of obsessed fans, and a massive public following that waited on pins and needles for reports on her every action. The CSOE naturally reported such details to raise morale and maintain support for the organization.

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“Bel’Wa, love. Now that we’re alone: what do you think about ... all of this? The Dreaded?”

Bel’Wa took a deep breath and turned toward her. “I think we know nothing. I believe that The Dreaded are escalating their attacks not due to caution, but because that’s what they are able to do for now, that their capabilities are increasing. Perhaps they are arriving from elsewhere and this is just the spear tip of an invasion. Perhaps these Stones are critical for survival, or maybe each gives them more power. The fact is that we know almost nothing. The most meaningfully intriguing information we have is the search on Gru’Thiall.”

“You also think that’s going to be something new?” Brylue asked, absent-mindedly splashing the bath water with the fingers of one hand.

“I do. An unknown, technology-blocking signal that The Dreaded are trying to reach? If that’s not important, I don’t know what is. We found our own Stone very recently, you know. We’ve been throwing scientists at it since it arrived a secure facility. We’ve already started using some T’hròstag methods of wave extrapolation that might point toward a better way to find these things as well. I’m no scientist, but it has something to do with quantum signatures and learning to record the traces of the electro-magnetic activity detected within the Stones themselves.”

“A second recovered Stone? When? Where?”

“Less than a day before I got the call to come here. I was there when it happened, and wanted to tell you in person.”

“You know what to do: switch places, it’s story time!”

Brylue released Bel’Wa, who slid her back against the end of the tub. Brylue then reclined against her, laying her head on the Bel’Wa’s shoulder as the Qixing wrapped her arms tightly about her.

Brylue sighed as she became comfortable. “Alright: regale me.”

The Storm Mother took a deep breath. “Once upon a time, there was a *beautiful* princess that everyone adored—”

“Bel’Wa, I’m cuddling up to you so I can hear you talk about shooting things.”

“Yeah, I hate exposition, too.”

## 21. Sand and Slaughter

Few living things existed on the sand dunes of Yuan’Kiy. Much of the world lacked life-sustaining resources, and thus the majority of Qixing activity on the world was limited to mining operations and scientific pursuits. The Gate Sentinels had detected orbital activity over Yuan’Kiy and, suspecting Dreaded activity, moved to intercept. Bel’Wa accompanied a vehicular force suited for dune battles, and determined the disposition of The Dreaded horde.

Several thousand-strong, the Sentinels extrapolated their course and identified the closest landmark that would make an appropriate location to force The Dreaded to battle. The Gate Sentinels knew the open terrain meant the enemy numbers would be able to bear down on them, and so came in equipped with as much heavy weaponry as possible. The Sentinels always maintained large depots of vehicles and equipment in stellar bases for just such deployments at the quickest speed possible. A Qixing Jia’Lu’Ka class Cruiser, the *Terror of Fanloque* Q.G.S.C., transported the Sentinels in its spacious bays.

The *Terror of Fanloque* was a fine example of a Qixing warship. Though not insular per se, the Qixing were strict about their borders and the design of their ships reflected this more defense-oriented outlook. Each was usually a flattened, semi-circular shape not unlike a clam

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shell. This allowed the majority of the craft's weapons to fire at a single target without more than slight adjustments to a ship's pitch or attitude. Rather than relying on linear speed and facings like Human craft, the Qixing employed a number of lateral thrusters to allow a craft to dodge and engage foes without moving from a reasonably strict area of space, making them eminently suitable for defending a planet or forming a blockade. As with most Qixing technology, their ship hulls were angular with a clean silhouette and neat applications of decorative material employing vibrant paints—starship scanners and weapons operated at distances too far for visible detection, so the Qixing employed their ancient heraldries in full force.

Most often Qixing starships employed particle cannon weapons firing reactive beams that were devastating against enemy craft, combining the continuous output of a laser with the raw kinetic impact of a cannon. Human treaties forbade starship-grade particle weapons from being brought within a certain distance of inhabited worlds (due to the effect their radioactivity could have on the environment or any organic targets within range of the impact). The Qixing had no such restrictions as non-Sentinel armed ships were disallowed in their systems to begin with, but also refrained from using the beams for bombardment for similar environmental reasons. Thus, each craft kept a complement of cannons or missile launchers in order to attack a planet.

Soon the pallid red sands erupted into blinding explosions around The Dreaded, heavy shells and self-propelled explosives wracking the rolling dunes and incinerating Dreaded by the dozens, the heat of the *Terror of Fanloque's* mighty weaponry creating broad plains of glassed sand. The horde began to spread in an attempt to minimize their losses as the bombardment continued. After ten minutes of bombardment, nearly five thousand Dreaded had been slain. The survivors continued to spread until the Frigate's Captain determined the enemy formation had been sufficiently dispersed. The ship then began to fire at the edges of the formation, corralling The Dreaded with disciplined fire. Their numbers vastly reduced, Bel'Wa signaled the Sentinels to descend in their drop craft—starship bombardment was undoubtedly effective, but it might only take a single escapee to secure a Stone. Stopping that occurrence for certain required feet on the ground.

The *Terror of Fanloque* had more than evened the odds, clearing

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the way for a frontal assault. The Sentinels deployed not only two columns of five Hover Fortresses, but also five squadrons of Jet-Lancers, and a single Zin'Thul War Colossus. Bel'Wa would accompany a contingent of ground troops intended to engage the main enemy line. The Hover Fortresses and Zin'Thul would provide fire support for the infantry, while the Lancers would control the enemy flanks and pursue any stragglers. The plan was solid, the scene was set, and the drop craft were readied.

Bel'Wa stood on the bridge next to the ship's captain. She wore her uniform, a set of robes embroidered with her personal heraldry and styled to be worn beneath armor. She extended her arms and barked a command in the dancing tones of Imperial Common Qixing Speech. Immediately, four servants rushed up to her to begin placing her armor on her. Lifting each of her feet, her boots were put on and followed by her leg plates. Next her breastplate was attached, her arms were swiftly clad in armor, and her hands were bound in her gauntlets. Her helmet was then lowered onto her head, clicking into the neck joint of her armor. The visor flared to life, spewing diagnostic information during the brief instant of its start up sequence. Her gauntlet weapon was slid into place, and her shield was mounted on her left arm. At last her sword and banner projector were mounted to her back. The entire arming process took less than twelve seconds, taking Bel'Wa from a friendly-looking poster child for the Gate Sentinels to a death-dealing incarnation of Torva'Ang's furious tempests.

At the instant of completion she turned on one heel and stomped down the corridors toward the launch bays, barking commands and exhortations of honor and duty at every Sentinel she saw headed in the same direction. The waiting drop craft was filled with Sentinels locked into their grav harnesses and prepared for battle. She strode up the loading ramp, her own harness awaiting her among the rows of troops within. Locking herself into place, she signaled the pilot to take them out.

The warning lights drenched the bay of the Cruiser in green light as a loud klaxon sounded, signaling all personnel to evacuate the bay. Seconds later the amber all-clear lights activated, and a second blaring alarm warned of immediate depressurization. The bay pumped its air back into the rest of the ship, rendering the hangar a vacuum equal in air

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pressure to the waiting void of space. The drop ships' engines flared to life as the bay slid open in silence, revealing the great reddish-brown orb of Yuan'Kiy amid a sea of black. The ships accelerated outward, swiftly reaching speeds of thousands of kilometers per hour in the frictionless abyss. The bay closed as the last transport disembarked, and would remain depressurized until a ship returned to it. Within two minutes the formation of craft was arcing downward through the atmosphere, wreathed in the fires of re-entry.

The infantry formation headed by Bel'Wa was first in line, followed by the transports for the Hover Fortresses, then the Lancers, and finally the mighty Zin'Thul. Though technology had advanced so far since the days of sword and cannon, infantry units remained the greatest way to hold a line. Many species flirted with the idea of automated warfare, but the improvisation and innate will to survive of organic beings always proved the best way to resolve the desperately trying scenarios of the battlefield.

Machines complex enough to wage war effectively would always suffer loopholes, over-literal rationalization of the rules of warfare, and a compromising over-dependence on regulation. A machine that could bend and interpret these directives on the fly was a machine that would occasionally fulfill its coded priorities by committing a war crime. Learning machines would not always learn the *right* lessons, and it was remarkably difficult for them to properly understand the emotional and psychological imperatives behind so much of the behavior of organics and the rationale informing wartime law.

The Ly Aulth remained the only species in local space to rely on autonomous robotics in a combat capacity, and they were known for failing to adhere to ethical methods. In situations where Qixing or Human military forces fought mechanized enemies, the superior reaction times and calculations of machines failed to bring victory against the math-independent reasoning, intuition, deceptiveness, adrenal capacity, and survival instinct of organic soldiers. AI engineers had maintained for a long time that one day they could achieve an effective and ethical robotic soldier, but the goal post continued to shift further outward—as it turned out, an intelligent being was little able to entirely recreate itself from whole cloth. The machines would always be just far enough behind in some capacity to make them ill-suited for a central combat role. So, as

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what was to be the future came and went, organic warriors remained the most reliable and effective.

As the drop ships burst into the lower atmosphere and adjusted their course for landing Bel'Wa broke into song, her clear alto tones ringing through the drop craft. The tune was as half-tonal as the rest of the Qixing Imperial tongue, melodic and driving. Partway through the first line, the Sentinels around her joined in. Over radio, the other ships added their voices to the swelling chorus. The Qixing were a refined and advanced people, but they valued their traditions above most other things. The warriors sang an ancient war song, powerfully evocative and heart-felt. They sang together of their warrior spirit, dedication to their people, and the ways in which they swore to bring death to the enemy. Human journalists who previously beheld a Qixing war deployment often walked away teary-eyed and awestruck.

For all their anti-interventionist tendencies, the unleashed fury of the Commonwealth was an enemy few wished to confront. When the Exploratory forces of the Hâssallcõtallã Regency began to threaten the local systems, it was the Qixing who spat in their faces and threw them back into the void from which they came. When the Great Cartel War finally spilled into the Human border systems, it was the shining spear of the Qixing Commonwealth that pierced the heart of the Triad Families—and slew all three Grand Technarchs in a single night. When the T'h'røstag became belligerent, it was the armored fist of the Qixing that held them in check. The delicate finery and well-honed court politics of their people belied the prideful ferocity that earned them the time and wisdom to create a society now so skilled in artistic pursuits. The Qixing did not ever like to be trifled with, and would not permit such a thing now.

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The Drop Craft swept in low, the infantry offloading near the top of a sandy crest five kilometers from The Dreaded. The warriors sprinted from the transports with weapons in hand, and rapidly established their defensive fields and remote mines. Long rifles were aimed, and blades were drawn. Bel'Wa stood behind her shield at the center of the line, her arm weapon leveled at the approaching foe. The

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Hover Fortresses moved up behind them, their weapons taking aim and immediately beginning to rake bullet, bolt, and rocket fire at the enemy horde. The hefty firepower pounded over the heads of the Sentinel infantry in a furious storm, shredding Rabisus and Gugalannas. En-Rabisus fell riddled full of holes, and at least three Ur-Rabisus were downed by focused firepower. The engines of the Lancers shrieked to life as the firing continued.

Lancers were open-topped two occupant vehicles toting a heavy weapon, and could hover comfortably at heights of almost a dozen meters. The sleek Lancers rushed out to ready positions on the flanks of the battle, their speed and weaponry making them ideal for hit and run strafes against the ground soldiery. They were to wait for The Dreaded to come within infantry firing distance before ranging out to harry the enemy flank and help disperse the initial charge.

Last to deploy was the mighty Zin'Thul Colossus. The Zin'Thul (crudely translating to 'great-legged deceiver') was a mythic being from South Jokalan tradition, a great sea-spider whose tales depicted a cunning being of great, hidden power—much like a malignant version of the spider trickster Anansi of Human West-African folklore. The Zin'Thul was a being of great intelligence whose appearance heralded imminent destruction and undoing. The War Colossus that took its name had the precisely same effect. A massive four-legged machine, the Colossus was to a walker what a walker was to an infantry person. The Astral Marines had a number of Colossus-Class walkers, the T'h'ròstag fielded super-heavy fighting vehicles, and the Ly Aulth possessed war constructs of great size and power, but none ever truly met the majesty of a Qixing Colossus.

The Zin'Thul had a crew of twenty-six, and its main chassis was high enough to pass easily over a Ninurta Heavy Human walker. Legs stronger than a bunker carried it aloft, careful weight distribution and anti-gravity generators preventing its mass from causing it to sink into whatever substrate it strode across. A massive turret mounting no less than four main weapons sat atop the thing, with two lesser turrets beside that one. Numerous smaller weapon and defensive systems were mounted across its surface and underside, totaling something like the combined firepower of an artillery group.

The Zin'Thul could stride surprisingly swiftly due to the sheer

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length of its legs, and its height granted it a field of fire nothing short of extravagant. Like all Qixing creations, its design was gracefully precise, covered in angular armor that gave it a neat silhouette. Lights and heraldic markings across its surface announced it clearly, and indeed the mere deployment of a Zin'Thul had been sufficient to force surrenders from the foes of the Qixing in the past.

Though not to be used in this deployment, the feature that truly granted the Zin'Thul its name was its ability to fold its legs up and become a heavily-armed emplacement difficult to discern from a sedentary defensive fortification. This trick had been used to great effect multiple times, sending foes into a route as a supposedly immobile position unfurled and began to pursue.

The immense shadow of the Zin'Thul stretched out over the Hover fortresses and infantry, extending dozens of meters ahead of them in the hot sun. The Zin'Thul's weaponry opened fire in thunderous fashion. Glowing, comet-like trails of large energy weapons flared overhead and reacted with devastating effect among the enemy mass. Missiles, plasma bombs, and a number of micro-bullet coilguns whipped death toward the foe, the combined sound a deafening rush of high noises and deep concussive detonations.

Bel'Wa briefly wondered why the creatures even continued to bother. Any intelligent observer should be able to see—then something occurred to her mid-thought. She switched channels to speak to the Lancers. “Lancer squads three and five, please scout behind our formation. Range as far as twelve curar'nen out, we need coverage to ensure no flanking group was deployed to reach the goal.”

She heard the screech of the jets as the Lancers headed off, then switched channels. “*Terror of Fanloque*, we need scanner coverage north-west of our position—if there's activity, send coordinates to the Lancers and extrapolate an enemy course.”

Several seconds later, she received a confirmation of enemy movement—her supposition had been correct. The Dreaded knew the Gate Sentinels' response time and planned for opposition. “Lancer squad four, I need a pickup, we're rendezvousing at the coordinates just sent from the *Terror*. Squads three and five, assemble and advance on that position!”

She switched channels one final time to address the rest of the

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battle group. “Hold the line here. Lancer squads one and two are remaining, but three, four, and five are being diverted to counter a secondary advance. Colossus, you are at discretion to advance toward the projected enemy goal based on the progress of this front. Go with honor and fury!”

The infantry units responded to her call in a resounding return shout on the internal comms. She jogged back past the infantry line as a member of Lancer Squad three swung low and idled. She leaped up the ladder on the side of the long vehicle and secured herself to the extra seat behind the elevated gunner. With a hand motion she signaled the Lancer to take her up and away. Sweeping up over the dark sands, the Lancer accelerated to breakneck speeds, retaking its place in the squad’s chevron formation. Bel’Wa felt the inner lining of her armor squeeze her limbs as they sped up, countering the effect of the mounting G-forces. The shapes of the other two squads soon became visible through the heat ripples on the horizon.

By comparing the trajectory of the initial group with the secondary Dreaded group, the Destroyer above determined The Dreaded were likely headed for a point roughly six kilometers behind the initial Sentinel landing site, presumably the location of a Stone. No known constructs were there, but a great deal of Yuan’Kiy remained unmapped from the ground which left any number of possibilities for the exact disposition of the Stone. At the moment, however, the objective was to engage the Dreaded and clear the area.

Squad four put on their afterburners for a short period, catching up to the leading squads as they approached weapons-range of The Dreaded. The enemy mass was definitely smaller than the main group, but did include a fair number of En-Rabisus and five or six Ur-Rabisus among its number. Fortunately their foes were ill-equipped for dealing with aerial targets. The Lancers divided into pairs and swept out across the enemy horde, turning aside as they entered range to allow their guns to leave their mark. Most of the Lancers bore coilguns or rapid munition launchers, while a few mounted plasma burst cannons that left large, shining craters in the sand. After each run, the Lancers would pull out, circle back around, and make another run, each cycle moving back slightly to maintain the same distance ahead of the enemy group. Each time they would change direction and bearing, making their course

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difficult to predict.

Bel'Wa fired her arm cannon in concert with the coilgun on the Lancer she rode. Her green shots soared downward, blowing large chunks from Rabisus and Gugalannas. Fireballs whipped up behind them as the Lancers flew along, the large Ur-Rabisu projectiles making a much deeper, whooshing sound than the smaller examples of their kind. Meanwhile the Sentinel infantry line engaged, their fire discipline keeping the horde back as the vehicles continued to punish the enemy. The Lancers at the main front lured elements of the enemy force out of position where they could be easily brought down, chewing at the flanks of the foe as the battle progressed.

Bel'Wa rode her Lancer for almost half an hour more of firing, leaving the secondary group whittled down to little but still approaching their destination. In the distance, she made out what appeared to be a cavern entrance among the shifting sands. A second form loomed into being from the obscured horizon, causing her to smile. The Zin'Thul's weapons flashed, and an instant later the last Dreaded were vaporized in a concerted rush of Colossus fire. She ordered the Sentinels to regroup at the cavern for extraction.

Within, there was little but rock and darkness. She dispatched squads to head down with their lights on and search, and after a half hour, one of her warriors found the object. The Sentinel called to her to confirm he had acquired the correct Stone. She met the soldier thirty meters down one of many winding tunnels, finding them and several compatriots gathered around it. The object was, to every description, that which the CSOE had recovered. Even in the lightless cave, the squared Stone seemed sickeningly dark. She felt a queasiness in her stomach when near the thing, as did the others with her. She ordered it secured in a shielded container, which somehow did nothing to reduce the unpleasant sensation. Whatever it was, the sooner it was somewhere safe and guarded, the better.

In the aftermath of the engagement, Bel'Wa received word from Sentinel Command she was to pack her belongings and take a transport to a set of coordinates in a Human system for reassignment. Even before she received the details she grinned, knowing only one thing would be likely to bring her out of Qixing space. Within half a day she departed, and was on her way to Raven's Landing to join Dread Naught.

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Nicadzim had seen the horizons of worlds beyond imagining, hiked through poems, and strode the lofty neural spires of a hive consciousness. Currently, he sailed across a roiling sea of liquid subconscious impulses and struck some form of invisible barrier. On impact he found himself elsewhere—which was not in and of itself an entirely uncommon occurrence for Nicadzim. While his bindings to what others considered reality were tenuous to begin with, it took little to transfer him from one plane of existence to another while he “slept.” He was accustomed to alternative visual spectrums, impossibly altered laws of physics, and numerous other disorienting or incomprehensible alterations of his perception.

The place he found himself now, however, felt different than all his the other journeys. Firstly there seemed to be nothing else but darkness and a towering, shadowy shape several meters away from him, just barely able to be discerned from the surrounding darkness. He had been in endless nothings before: but those voids were either filled with sounds and sensations, or his every motion and sound were the first things to exist there.

Here all was peaceful and calm, controlled and steady. The blackness was more like gentle sleep than a lack of existence, and

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Nicadzim had a strong inclination that the shape before him was something intelligent.

He took a deep breath, then made a conciliatory gesture to the shape before him. “Greetings. I am Nicadzim Alexievich Kuzmako, a Human being from the Milky Way Galaxy, and native to Glenn’s World. I have come here inadvertently and only with the most peaceful of intents. Might it not be impolite to request your identity?”

The shape shifted slightly in some unspeakable fashion. A voice did not come from it; rather the surrounding darkness itself was impressing the words into his mind. He did not understand the language, but knew the exact meaning of what was being ‘said’ to him.

“You *may* request, but you will see that request unfulfilled. Heed my question carefully, and answer with your fragile mortality firmly in mind: You say you are Human, so how have you come to this place? I do not recall Humans having developed the rather impertinent ability to go where they please without doorways. You are fortunate to have maintained a respectful tone thus far.”

The silent voice gave him the impression of steely hardness, an unforgiving personality whose might was more than capable of enforcing its draconian tone. He perceived that, wherever he was, this darkness existed entirely within the power of the being he addressed.

“I beg your forgiveness for my intrusion. I possess a curse unique among my kind that results in such involuntary excursions. I am a wanderer, my entire life framed by a nightly journey to places unknown.”

The presence paused, then Nicadzim felt a bitter laugh. “I cannot currently discern whether it is fitting or insulting for the first creature with whom I have spake in so long to immediately raise a topic so dear to me. Mortal, touch what you see before you—you will not be harmed.”

He considered asking why the presence requested he do so, but opted to withhold his questions lest the being regard his inquiry as an offense. He stepped forward and extended an arm toward the shadowy something. At the point of contact he felt, for an infinitesimal moment in time, as if he had been exposed to the full brunt of a solar flare. The sensation was not that of pain, but rather a heat so intense and complete it caused his mind to reel. Something slipped into his consciousness, some knowledge he couldn’t place or find a way to apply.

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He felt the great presence think for a moment. "... Nicadzim, you may consider a less humble introduction for future usage. A wanderer you may be, but such a term does obscure the planar wonders you have beheld. You are unique, and possess such a power as I feared I may never again behold."

The voice paused, a subtle wave of emotion passing through the presence. "... Thank you. I have gleaned a great deal of understanding from your mind, and am grateful to see how far Humanity has come since I could last visit. However, I fear for your future—we are in opposition to the same dire threat. Having thus seen your need, I have deposited something that may aid you into your mind. I more than likely will not need it. May we one day meet outside of this dream, Nicadzim, and may you always walk with Throne's blessing."

Nicadzim felt himself gently slide away into consciousness, as if the presence had shown him the door. He sat up, finding himself in his bed. His pillow floated into the air behind him as he stirred to wakefulness. He dressed, then without transition he appeared on a stool in the lounge. It was early morning about three weeks after Bel'Wa's arrival, and the first beams of light were peeking over the mountains.

"Nico! Hi!" the Storm Mother spluttered, stopping her fist mid-flight. "Sorry, so sorry. Might take me a bit to get used to that."

"I will be simply impressed how quickly you moved."

Bel'Wa wore a dark blue robe of a shorter and more casual cut than the traditional garment she had worn on arrival. She was nursing a small cup of a Qixing tea-equivalent, its scent best described as a mix of grilled mushrooms and caramel. The steaming liquid was a dark orange tone, and Nicadzim had little doubt it would prove abhorrent to Human taste buds. Bel'Wa's feet hung from the stool a few inches from the floor.

"Oh, I'm indecent! Checking for dead scales. Sexy, I know." The Storm Mother's skirt was parted to her knee, and she rectified this with a swift flick of one wrist.

Nicadzim glanced down at her leg. "You are wearing less to spar, aren't you?"

"Well yes, but I was *sparring* then. I'm royalty, Nico, I can't have naughty men like you blinking around and spying my knees while I'm drinking *tea!*"

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The big man narrowed his eyes at her. “You will be a strange woman.”

“Aw, Nico, I thought Runner was supposed to be the charmer, look at you!” Bel’Wa said as she kicked her feet.

“Bel’Wa? I let you out of my sight for two minutes and you’re pulling moves on poor Nico?”

Bryluen came striding down the lounge stairs from the lobby, clad in her ever-present woolen pajamas and looking homey and comfortable. When in Raven’s Landing, it was often difficult to believe Bryluen had taken the lives of more people than some members of Dread Naught had ever met. This notion was despoiled the moment someone made eye contact with her—at almost no time did Bryluen’s experienced and cool gaze emanate anything other than relentless competence, and an eye trained to spot weaknesses both social and physical.

“You know I’m just a woman of flesh and blood, tye’tyito!” Bel’Wa mockingly protested. They seemed to neutralize one another when matching eyes, their stares obtaining a unique softness reserved only for one another.

Bryluen chuckled as she strolled up and kissed Bel’Wa. “Good morning, you verdant hellion. Nico? You seem preoccupied this morning.”

The big man queued a cup of coffee for himself, and a thoughtful expression fell across his face. “I was quite fine, thank you. Will you ladies have slept well?”

“Indeed we did”, Bryluen said, her tone uncharacteristically chipper. “Additionally, we decided on a little something for the team to do, at least until we get some helpful results back from the boys and girls studying the Stone. Once everyone’s awake, we’ll let you know!”

Over the next three hours, the remainder of the team became conscious and was summoned to the lounge. Bryluen ordered a full breakfast for the team via the dispensary, allowing them to gain full wakefulness over a warm meal. The trees outside had begun to thin their leaves and launch seed pods into the winds in preparation for their coming growth period. Spring on Aves Prime was looming, and soon an unbelievable spectacle of colorful flowers would spread like moss across

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much of the landscape. For now, however, the panorama surrounding Raven's Landing was temporarily draining of its color.

Bryluen gently tapped her fork on a plate loaded with the remains of her breakfast to attract the group's attention.

The team quieted from their various conversations and turned toward her. Bel'Wa smiled, and put a hand on Bryluen's leg as she spoke. "Dread Naught, you're all damn hard workers, that much can be said. We've had a gap here in battles, but our mission is as yet in an early stage. That said, you've all earned something special. I think we're all aware of what time of year it is, so in about two hours I want all of you to have three days of warm clothes packed, and to be aboard the *Atet*. We're celebrating Brightstar."

Sounds of surprise and excitement sounded around the table. Brightstar was the most popular Human holiday, celebrating hope and bringing goodwill and joy into the coming year. It had long ago developed out of several older holiday traditions, centuries of cultural drift and adaptation rendering it a massive celebration lauded across all Human worlds regardless of creed. Brightstar was celebrated simultaneously according to the Universal Terran Calendar, a time-keeping system adopted across Human space mostly based on Earth's rotation around Sol.

As a result, Brightstar coincided with the end of Winter on Humanity's home world. The standard practice of Brightstar involved erecting a shelved structure most often called a "Light Tree." Each shelf was themed for either those assembled to celebrate the holiday, or an important milestone in the lives of those present. On the shelves, gifts were placed in decorated papers and bags each person bought for one another. One adult among those attending was traditionally drawn at random to be responsible for bringing a Light Tree 'topper' the day of Brightstar, intended to be a symbol or object that best represented the year as a whole.

Often lights and decorations recalling ancient Human beliefs were placed on the outside of houses or through neighborhoods, representing the light of hope and the warmth of charity. The much older holidays from which Brightstar drew its foundation were often wintertime celebrations made to appease or honor deities, or to superstitiously ward off the harshness of winter. Thus, despite the fact

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Brightstar occurred at different seasons across the galaxy, its symbolism still mostly linked to its night and winter-themed origins.

Soon after breakfast Dread Naught was assembled on the *Atet*, unaccustomed to boarding the craft without their armor or weaponry. Bryluen, and Bel'Wa were permitted to bear concealed arms via clearance from their respective governments, but the others were weaponless. The team's luggage of warm clothing and other sundry possessions was secured in a cargo harness next to Vort.

Kirby had held a brief discussion with Bryluen about the possibility of bringing the Marduk—citing its suitability for large-scale snowball fights and lifting gifts—but she ultimately relented when Bryluen explained the living accommodations they were bound for.

The *Atet* soon translated through the gate and into the third system of the Ishal cluster, a series of stars just inside Qixing territory. Instantly, a strident command to cease and submit to scanning was transmitted by the Gate Sentinels on the receiving side of the gate. The flattened, diamond-like shape of a Qixing fire base sat at point-blank range—less than twenty thousand kilometers from the system gate. The massive anti-starship emplacements on the base were already trained on the diminutive *Atet*, joined by a squadron of picket ships. That amount of firepower could make the *Atet* vanish into stellar dust in less than a millisecond, not to mention cripple multiple warships. After only a few seconds, however, the *Atet*'s ident and—most importantly—its armament permissions were cleared. As Kirby proceeded toward the planetary coordinates Bryluen gave her she gasped, realized where they were heading.

The Operative smiled, and spoke to the team over the *Atet*'s intercom. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Ishal lo Tal'Ek, frosted jewel of the Ishal Cluster. Our course takes us to the lovely town of Rroth'Bia's Retreat, a place of stunning vistas, numerous wonderful pursuits, and a shit-ton of snow, because I am a traditionalist. Brightstar works best when it's hopelessly dark and exactly cold enough that you feel the breath of ill-fated explorers on the back of your neck every time you step outside.”

The disembarkation bay fell silent for a moment. Bel'Wa, fastened into her seat next to Nicadzim, hummed for a second before speaking at the ceiling-mounted speaker. “My dearest love ... I don't

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mean to question your understanding of your own culture, but isn't Brightstar about hope?"

"Hope is best seen in contrasts, Bel'Wa! I can go get light anywhere, but if you hand me a frost-blasted wasteland plunged into eternal darkness and *then* show me a pinpoint of light—that is hope."

Kirby looked over at the pontificating Operative. "You're a great lady, Bryl, but every once in a while you scare me a li'l bit."

Bryluen crossed her arms. "I should: I *can* legally kill you."

"Well that's a damn good point!" Kirby nodded to herself.

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Looming before the *Atet*, the darkened surface of Ishal lo Tal'Ek looked cold even from orbit. The world's surface was pale blue and gray, interrupted by seas so dark they were nearly black. Thick clouds ranged across the world's skies in slow, continental masses, all but ensuring much of the planet remained frigid year-round. Roth'Bia's Retreat was an exclusive place to spend Brightstar, with a strict limit on the number of visitors permitted so as not to spoil the small town atmosphere. In the spirit of the holiday, gaining a pass to spend Brightstar in Roth'Bia's Retreat was not dependent on money or status. Bryluen had been required to anonymously write a letter arguing their need for such a vaunted holiday retreat, which was then read and reviewed by a special committee who decided on its worthiness.

The *Atet* burned toward the surface, its sleek hull rippling in flame. The external view-screen reactivated as it broke through into the lower atmosphere, revealing puffy white clouds and thick snowfall. Roth'Bia's Retreat glowed below, a series of concentric circular formations of buildings on a wide plateau overlooking the ocean. Aside from its proximity to water, the chief reason for the town's location glittered in the darkness below. The cliffs upon which Roth'Bia's Retreat sat were one of the largest mineral deposits in known space: a cascading wall of lovingly polished emerald stretched for several kilometers in each direction. Spotlights buoyed on the sea caused the bulwark to refract its haunting hues onto the water and to illuminate the solid cloud cover above. The fantastical glow of the emerald wall served to contrast the simple pleasures of the town built above it, and was

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widely hailed as one of the most beautiful natural sights for light years around.

Kirby relayed the stunning visual to the view screen mounted in the disembarkation bay. Runner raised his eyebrows while Nicadzim and Bel'Wa smiled. Vort generated a sound something like a static-laden purr. The snows of Ishal lo Tal'Ek were a pale blue that showed clearly in the thick snow drifts draped across the landscape. Most of Rroth'Bia's Retreat was constructed of 3D-printed wood, and its streets were built of cobblestone and brick. The intentionally rustic atmosphere was enforced by numerous building codes resulting in many architectural features and requirements unnecessary with modern technology, but which upheld a comfortingly nostalgic vision. Even the landing pad the *Atet* alighted upon was built to look like stone work—in truth, it was an extremely strong material made to handle the weight of cargo ships and the heat of atmospheric engines.

An ever-present team of hefty drones pushed snow off of the landing pad, prioritizing sectors that space traffic control allocated for incoming vehicles. As a result, a rectangular area exactly large enough to accommodate the *Atet*'s landing feet and ramp was cleared of snow just in time for landing. Traffic control drones came out of the wood-clad observation tower to perform complementary maintenance on the ship, but a passive warding transmission from the *Atet* prevented them from prying into even the most marginal systems of the experimental CSOE craft. A group of greeters ran onto the landing pad in thick winter wear with anxiousness in their motions—since the letters of acceptance were anonymous, they were unaware a CSOE crew was inbound until only minutes prior when Kirby confirmed their idents and landing space with the tower.

Bryluen stood from her seat, and zipped her black coat closed. Her face was framed by the neat fringe of white fur that ringed the hood, and her hands and feet were bound in insulated leather. Thick gray pants and hiking boots protected her legs and feet. Kirby wore a woven green toque, a wide scarf, and a thick jacket whose girth threatened to swallow her. The otherwise casual look was finished with a hefty pair of Marine-issue winter boots. The pair entered the disembarkation bay where the rest of the team finished preparing themselves for the blast of cold awaiting them.

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Runner was bound in a tight layer of insulating material above which he wore a glossy black leather jacket, gloves, and boots. He decided against a hat so as not to overly disturb his temperamental hair, instead settling for ear muffs. Suave and darkly handsome, he looked for all the world like the kind of person you would trust to covertly transport sensitive materials between government installations. Nicadzim wore little more than an everyday outfit, a pair of basic gloves his only obvious accommodation. Bryluen recalled he was unaffected by temperature extremes when she first met him, so she simply shrugged when Bel'Wa first expressed concern that he would be cold. Vort was bound in a custom-made garment that could generously be described as an insulated tube with a heavy skirt to cover his legs. His feathers were fairly insulating, allowing his wings to remain free, and his biology allowed his eyes to remain unharmed if bare. Lastly, Bel'Wa wore a thick robe, long stockings, and silken gloves. Her Qixing heritage allowed her comfort in substantially lower temperatures than Humans could manage, so her winter wear need not be so severe.

Any arrival for Brightstar at Roth'Bia's Retreat could expect a guide to give them information on the town and guide them to their accommodations, but the special nature of the Dread Naught landing party drove the committee to deploy a more comprehensive group. The mayor of Roth'Bia's Retreat, Boddu Tenzin Abhishek, stood at the front of a group that included a pair of senior tour guides, the town sheriff, and the heads of the Holiday Committee. All of them were bound tightly in matching coats, hats, gloves, and boots. Several of them less-than-subtly glancing at the handsome Runner, most giving themselves away by faking sniffs or suddenly looking away. For Runner's part, he seemed to pay no mind, either because he was used to the attention, or because he was genuinely oblivious as he looked about at the pleasant surroundings.

The top half of the Mayor's dark face was visible just above his thick scarf. He was beaming, and with excited hand motions signed to Bryluen. "Greetings, and welcome to Roth'Bia's Retreat, Dame. We have not seen you and the lovely Mrs. Belzxilenth'Wa in quite a while! I would be honored to show you around our beautiful town should you like, but otherwise please let me know what I can do to make this visit for you and your companions as pleasant as possible!"

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Bryluen gave the mayor a smile, and signed her response in swift, practiced motions. “Bel’Wa and I managed to burn the layout of this lovely town into our memories on our previous visits. We would be delighted if you would show us to our cabins!”

The mayor nodded, then motioned for Bryluen and the rest of Dread Naught to follow. The Operative extended an elbow toward Bel’Wa. After a moment she understood the signal, and hooked her arm in Bryluen’s. The group followed the mayor and his entourage off the landing pad and into the streets of Roth’Bia’s Retreat. Snow fluttered downward like lost feathers, covering every ceiling and road in a blue blanket. Wooden structures sprawled around them, only two or three stories high at the most. The outer rings of the town were various forms of comfortable lodging that alternated with saunas, massage parlors, and other forms of stress-relieving diversion. Further inward were numerous small restaurants and stores selling a wide variety of merchandise. Shopping in Roth’Bia’s Retreat was intentionally quaint, the more intimate experience of small stores a contrast to ordering remotely from other systems or the extravagance of a star mall.

Spaced along the eaves of every structure were flower-like clusters of colored lights, their various hues filling the streets with a warm glow. The elevated street lamps were dimmed to accommodate the intended visual impression. From any nearby peak, the town looked like a welcoming fire among the endless dark looming for miles around. On most vertical supports as well as the fluted poles of street lamps, ribbons were tied into knots somewhat resembling snowflakes. The silhouettes of local wildlife had been painted in alleyways and on the upper floors of various structures. In the center of town stood a Light Tree twelve meters high. Its various shelves slowly changed elevation to allow them to be viewed by pedestrians at different times of day, each bearing a general theme like ‘Family’ or a more specific importance such as the homecoming of several local Marines from deployment along the T’hròstag border.

The topper of the town tree this year was a large sculpture of a smiling explorer, her snow-torch held aloft on one gauntlet and an auto-pick clenched in her fist. The blizzards of that year had been particularly harsh, but Roth’Bia’s Retreat nonetheless managed some planned expansions as well as a historic number of wildlife population and

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behavioral studies. This triumph in the face of nature had stirred the town's frontier spirit.

After about four minutes of walking from the pad, the mayor led Dread Naught up a twisting path to a collection of buildings standing on the edge of the emerald cliff in groups. Dread Naught was staying in a trio of cabins. The center cabin was larger and possessed not only a bedroom, but a large hearth and a kitchen. The others consisted of only bedrooms and small fireplaces. A fenced area beyond the cabins allowed a perfect vantage point from which to look at the emerald cliffs below. The ethereal glow generated by the spotlights outlined the edge of the cliff in bright greens.

Dread Naught approached the main cabin with their meager belongings in tow. Food and bedding were already provided so Dread Naught needed little other than clothing. The mayor swung open the wooden front door, its hinge built to squeak every time it was operated. A broad chandelier equipped with an array of smokeless candles ignited itself as they entered. The walls of the cabin appeared to be made of logs, and the floor was built of heated stone tile. A large hearth of similar operation to that in Nicadzim's room at Raven's Landing dominated one wall, and a luxurious fur rug—created to look like the pelt of one of the larger local predators—was stretched out before it. Once the team filed in, Bryluen signed her thanks to the mayor. Mayor Boddu returned the gesture, and they wished one another a peaceful Brightstar before the retinue walked off into the night. The rest of the team was gazing around the cabin as Bryluen closed the door behind them. Instantly, the sound of the outside wind ceased—despite its appearance the rustic cabin bore modern insulation, sound proofing, and safety measures.

Bryluen spoke to the assembled group. “Okay, this is the main cabin. Light Tree is going next to the hearth there. Bel’Wa and I will sleep in here, because none of you are going to say otherwise. There are two beds in each of the others, so let’s figure out who’s going where real quick.”

Bel’Wa pointed to Kirby. “You and Runner, Nico and Vort. Already standing together, easy.”

Bryluen smirked at Bel’Wa, then shrugged. “Any problems with that?”

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Soon after, each member of Dread Naught placed their belongings in their respective cabin rooms, and returned to the main lodge to finalize plans for Brightstar.

Bryluen again addressed the group. “Alright, folks, you’ve all got guides to town and can go do whatever it is your heart desires. But before that, we need to draw a Quester and get this tree up!”

The Operative pointed to a bag she brought with her, containing a kit for assembling a silver six-shelved Light Tree. Runner shook his head. “Oh, g-god no, I’m not gonna be the Quester. D-don’t want the press-sure.”

Kirby patted him on the back, her reddened nose peeking out above her scarf. “Aw, come on, hon, it’d be easy. Just glue together a shitload of bullet casings!”

Bel’Wa huffed a breath and stepped forward. “I’ll do it! I’m being adventurous, no one stop me!” She paused and looked down at Vort. “Unless you wanna do it, because you’re my favorite.

Vort’s feathers and the visible portions of his skin blanched to a pale orange tone. “OH! THAT’S NICE! BUT YOU DO SEEM MORE FAMILIAR WITH THIS THAN I.”

“Only barely, but I figure I’ll manage,” the Storm Mother said cheerily.

“Bel’Wa seems to be the big decision-maker tonight. Okay, somebody—” Bryluen turned about as she realized she didn’t see Nico. He was in the corner behind her, setting up the base for the Light Tree. His instantaneous absence made it clear he had not walked there.

“Ah,” he uttered, as if mildly surprised to be where we was. “It seemed I am eager.”

“Points for holiday spirit, Nico.”

Within twelve minutes the team erected their Tree. The edge of each shelf bore images of a certain team member taken during their tenure in Dread Naught, as well as their name in delicate gold-leaf script. The entire structure was carefully weighted and balanced so the central pole could be spun on its axis, rotating each shelf in formation. Even loaded down with gifts, the Light Tree would hold strong and remain mobile. At the top of the pole was an empty mount for a topper ornament, an appropriate example of which Bel’Wa declared she would locate. Bryluen had ordered the custom tree a week prior, dipping into

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her personal funds to acquire it despite a lack of certainty that an emergency wouldn't keep them from being able to use it.

Bel'Wa and Vort fell to discussing possibilities for the tree topper, reasoning two brains would be better than one. They carefully considered the task of finding an item that would best encompass the past year for all of them—meaning it would have to be relevant to the recent Dread Naught initiative itself. In addition, each member of the team was going to buy gifts for each other member of the team. For this purpose Bryluen had already laid out an itinerary to send out Dread Naught in pairs that would help each get gifts for the others, as well as ensuring no groups ran into one another accidentally. Bel'Wa questioned the need for the holiday's secrecy at all, while Vort found it exciting and intriguing that such a social holiday involved deceit to begin with.

Before the members of the team headed off to bed, Bel'Wa raised her voice slightly. "Everyone? Bryl and I need one of you to help us be adorable. Which one of you is best at taking pictures?"

Runner reflexively raised his hand, glancing at it as if it had betrayed him. Kirby momentarily gave him a confused look. "W-w-what? I take pictures upside-down and flyin-ng!"

Bel'Wa and Bryluen led Runner out of the cabin and up to the cliff face. They each inspected the fence, looking for a particular wooden slat. Bryluen found their target—a small divot—and waved Bel'Wa over. The wives assumed a particular position: Bryluen set her hood slightly to one side, leaned her hip against the fence and put one hand in her pocket with the other reaching outward along the fence to stabilize her. Bel'Wa crossed her hands in front of her and leaned against Bryluen. They both smiled, Bryl's eyes purposefully narrowed as if warding off the wind, and Bel'Wa's wide and excited. Both of them were contrasted against the powerful green glow of the emerald wall below them.

Runner took the picture with Bryluen's omnipresent tab. He nodded, at which point the wives walked over to check the image. Bryluen swiped the new photo aside to reveal one some years older. The two of them were dressed and posed precisely the same, at the same point on the same fence in the same lighting. Bryluen's face bore fewer lines than it did now, while Bel'Wa looked fairly identical to Human eyes. Each of them were younger but carried the same fire, intensity, and

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visible fondness for one another as they did now.

Bryluen and Bel'Wa looked at one another, as Runner grinned at the recreation of the old picture.

Bryluen took a breath and held Bel'Wa's gaze. "With all that's looming, we decided now would be a good time to recreate a scene from our very first date. It was secretive, quiet, and memorable to the second. They held a movie night where they projected ancient Human films onto the clouds." Bryluen trailed off, then looked at Runner. "Thank you."

## 23. Beacons and Brightstar

The Ranger squad sat among the thick tree branches, their predatory eyes scanning for contacts. Their copper-painted camouflage armor bore less of the design eccentricities of most Marine armor. Ranger armor instead featured extraneous supply compartments and enhanced communications gear, visible as a heightened helmet crest much like a Mohawk. Each was armed with blocky sharpshooter rifles and a host of survival gear. They had prowled through the jungles of Gru'Thiall for several weeks now, exchanging the occasional words over internal comms but otherwise co-existing in eery silence.

Astral Marine Rangers were some of the most accurate shooters and psychologically enduring soldiers in Human space. Almost always without close family ties, Rangers could disappear into an uncharted wilderness for months at a time on exploratory or reconnaissance missions only to materialize from the shadows the moment they were needed. This particular Ranger squad was eight strong and had been slowly sweeping the sensor dead zone, requiring a great deal of mountaineering.

Gru'Thiall's copper-colored trees became gradually taller with elevation, the trees topping the mountain peaks themselves coming in at well over ninety meters. The existence of such flora made the Ranger's

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cliff-climbing substantially easier, and their suits maintained air oxygenation as they ascended in order to keep them from being slowed down. All of their searching had, as of yet, revealed nothing. Nonetheless, The Dreaded continued their attempts to reach some unknown point in the mountains.

A large non-uniform expanse on the order of two hundred square kilometers had been identified to cause malfunctions in scanner and camera equipment, preventing further drone scouting. The Sentinels theorized this same phenomenon could affect orbital surveillance in some fashion that prevented them from remotely identifying The Dreaded's goal on the planet. The Astral Marine Rangers on Gru'Thiall had thus resolved to do things the old-fashioned way.

The squad leader was Captain Wongsawat, a Ranger veteran who gazed through his matte visor with dark, intense eyes. Their scanning equipment had gone dark ten days ago, and orbital communications had weakened considerably since then. The last transmissions they received regarded successful skirmishes against the Dreaded, mentioning a few Qixing Lancers being brought down by "something new."

Wongsawat lead his squad across branches many meters in the air, the thick tree limbs easily supporting their weight. Each Ranger had the balance and grace of a ballerina, their motions careful, controlled, and always leaving them an opening to snap into a combat posture should they come under attack.

At length, they came to a particularly steep cliff face which they were forced to climb. Each Ranger deployed gauntlet-mounted climbing hooks to assist them, allowing the unit to rush up the forty meter rock wall quickly and easily with no need for a grapple. In a pinch such climbing hooks had their applications against hostile mega fauna or even light vehicles if needed, each being strong enough to suspend the weight of three armored soldiers. At the top of the cliff they found themselves on a plateau sprawling in thick undergrowth and yet more dense groves of towering trees. One of the rangers waved Captain Wongsawat over to her, pointing to something in the distance.

The Captain's brow furrowed, then his face gave way to a vacant expression. "... We need to report this now. No approach, treat this as First Contact. We set up camp, pop an E-Trans out to command, and watch for activity."

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Runner, Kirby, and Vort had gone skiing upon the soft slopes outside of Roth'Bia's Retreat. Bundled up in the thickest clothing they could find, Runner set about teaching Kirby the best techniques to enjoy a controlled descent. Vort had actually skied before, albeit with equipment vastly more familiar to him. He was adamant that a set of ten skis made maintaining balance much easier than the comparatively risky binary state of having to rely on a measly two feet. In addition, rather than using poles, Vort simply had the ends of his wings wrapped in fabric and used them to steer himself downward. Kirby was delighted by the entire series of events, revealing she had a slight fear of heights that she found mildly insulting to her dignity. Regardless, she overcame this and took to skiing quickly—after all, skiing required much less hand-eye coordination and focus than piloting the Marduk.

Meanwhile the other members of Dread Naught had departed into the center of town in pairs, as dictated by Bryluen's gift shopping schedule.

The stores in Roth'Bia's Retreat were fairly comprehensive, stacked two or three stores high among the innermost buildings in town. Numerous varieties of specialized clothing stores, artisanal food shops, furniture stores, electronics centers, and more competed for space and attention. Wooden facades dripped in clusters of lights, and ornate decorative elements drew shoppers to the front windows in the manner of the mundane stores of long ago.

No escort drones or chauffeurs were present, but rather Nicadzim and Bryluen were currently wandering of their own accord and had to discover what was available all on their own. They engaged in a series of furtive discussions regarding appropriate gifts for each teammate. Kirby and Runner then Vort and Bel'Wa were scheduled over the next hours to accomplish their own holiday goals, followed by a second set of pairings to allow the previously paired teammates to shop for one another.

Bryluen was always an organized person, and shopping for gifts was not a time for exceptions. She had determined categories of items and specific gifts that would best suit each teammate, though she kept her intent in regard to Bel'Wa's gifts to herself. She coordinated her gift

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planning in accordance with the layout of shops in town, concocting an optimal path with which to do so.

Upon seeing the map she constructed, Nicadzim simply nodded and went along. His own spatial eccentricities made taking an efficient course less relevant, but by the end of the allotted time-block Bryluen and Nicadzim had acquired a pile of gifts and headed back to the main cabin to place them on the Light Tree.

Each gift had been wrapped at the store in a plethora of colorful paper, and decorated with knotted ribbon in designs similar to that of the street lamps around town. This left their contents a mystery until the morning of Brightstar, at which time the recipient would unwrap them and show them to those assembled at the Light Tree. The practice was centuries old, and such an ingrained exercise that the silent conformity most Humans followed on Brightstar was slightly eerie to other species.

As the pairs of people did their shopping and placed their packages on the Light Tree, the structure transformed from a spindly frame to a vibrant shape that dominated the room. Bel'Wa lastly presented the topper she located: a powerful light capable of illuminating the entire cabin, embraced by an adjustable cowl. The cowl bore a delicate design made apparent when it was drawn over the diode—a detailed star field that swept down the cowl in a spiral like a galactic arm. She reasoned it was a simple but effective representation of Dread Naught as a light against darkness. After admiring their work, Bryluen summoned the team to a nearby restaurant for dinner the evening before Brightstar day itself. In any busier town, they would have been subject to a great deal of attention.

Dread Naught had partaken in few actions thus far, but each had quite an impact. A small cottage industry of news stories about them had already sprung up. Runner avoided nearly all forms of social media for various reasons—this was fortunate, for he would have little peace otherwise.

Bryluen was more than used to the attention, and the entirety of one of Humanity's most powerful organizations filtered and controlled media contact for her. Still, she was almost always stopped on the street when unarmored for thanks, signatures, or photographs. When clad in her bronze plate, the reaction was the exact opposite—no one would be stupid enough to stand between an armed Operative and anything

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whatsoever they may be intent upon.

CISOE Operatives had an excellent reputation for keeping Humankind safe, but seeing an Operative openly on mission in your vicinity was an almost certain sign something terrible was occurring. In addition, Human stellar law openly permitted an Operative to use deadly force in the event of intentional obstruction in a time-sensitive situation. This law had gained overdue notoriety, granting the unintended effect of having most any crowd part at Brylue's approach whether or not she was expressing urgency.

The others were becoming celebrities based on video and stills taken by news drones of the battle on Pisistratus, as well as publicly released images from the Qual-Ex warehouse. Fan mail poured in at a volume that required the CISOE to draw on a special team to vet what should be forwarded to those involved. This process still involved a healthy amount of humor from the mail team, resulting in Runner, Kirby, and Nicadzim receiving various forms of particularly over-the-top love letters. Vort had been forwarded a series of drawings of him by school children from Pisistratus. He now had them displayed in his quarters, the crude renditions of his body shape sloppily filled in with any color the children could find. He was so touched when he first saw them that he had reacted to the images with a sound like wind howling through a punctured timpani, a reaction Brylue understood to roughly equate to crying in Humans or Qixing.

After a thoroughly enjoyable dinner and a few drinks, Dread Naught wandered back to their cabins to rest in preparation for Brightstar morning. Brylue and Bel'Wa were thus left in the main cabin staring into the fire, cuddled close together on the thick rug. The wives' combined silhouettes stretched out behind them as a singular form. Bel'Wa's outline was rounded and brief, and she leaned against Brylue. Brylue's shape was longer, gently swept into softness like a wind-worn rock as she held one of her arms around Bel'Wa's shoulders. The Light Tree loomed over them, its burden of gifts and decoration a weighty summation of the relatively short time Dread Naught spent together.

"It's beautiful out this evening," Brylue said, nearly whispering even though she and her wife were alone. "A soft snowfall, and the kind of cold winds perfect for an excuse to stay inside and keep the prettiest woman I know warm."

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Bel'Wa grinned and giggled at the daring nature of the unprompted compliment, then slowly raised a hand and began to stroke the Bryluen's clavicle with the back of two fingers. Her eyes wandered across the shadows that wreathed Bryluen.

"This has been wonderful, and I can hardly begin to tell you how happy I am to be here with you. Besides, I'm certain my warriors had tired of the stories I'd tell about you!"

Bryluen laughed. The Qixing's leg muscles warmed as Bryluen gently laid a hand on her thigh.

The Storm Mother took a slow, relaxed breath. "I can't wait for you to see the gifts I got you! I'm pretty proud of how things turned out, and ... I think you'll enjoy them."

"I bet I will, you've always had a knack for knowing what I like. I'd wager we'll be able to make everyone else feel inadequate in the morning."

"Oh, I'm not sure, Vort was going all-out when I accompanied him shopping—he's done his research!"

Bryluen pulled Bel'Wa closer. "Well regardless, every moment with you is the best gift I could hope for. I'm not trying to be corny, I mean it. I know that ... a lot of our marriage has been lost to work, even though you've never once made me feel bad for that. I just want you to know I'd garrote the ugliest, nastiest thing in this universe for you, I really would."

Bel'Wa raised her free hand, gingerly placing it on Bryl's hip. "Now *that's* love. You know I'd do the same. I wonder: how long until dawn here?"

Regardless of a universal time system, the way in which the day and night of a particular planet lined up in terms of hours could vary in almost any conceivable fashion. On Rroth'Bia's Retreat, the endless darkness made such things an entirely artificial system signaled by the ebb and flow of the powerful lights illuminating the sleepy town. Bryluen and Bel'Wa sat together for some time by the warm and soothing fire before exchanging words, the absence of a time-keeping device allowing them to while away the hours with ease. Bryluen turned her head toward Bel'Wa, causing her wife to flick her violet eyes up at her, their deep color glinting in the firelight. Bryluen returned the stare, bold flames dancing in the dark wells of her own irises.

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“I’m not sure. But, whenever it is that dawn will come ... I hope it takes its time.”

Bryluen leaned in and kissed Bel’Wa. She enthusiastically returned the gesture, raising her chin slightly with an intake of breath. She slid her hand up from Bryluen’s collar-bone to a soft grip on the back of her neck. As Bryluen slowly laid her back into the thick rug, the Qixing shifted her other hand back around Bryluen’s waist, purring contentedly all the while.

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Bryluen opened her eyes, reflexively blowing Bel’Wa’s wayward hair off of her face. They had apparently never made it away from the rug, which Bryluen’s back didn’t particularly thank her for. She gently stirred Bel’Wa to wakefulness before they set about ordering coffee and food for the others. One by one they arrived. Nicadzim first appeared next to the Light Tree for a single instant like a fading after-image, then reappeared outside the cabin door and knocked politely. Vort followed a few minutes later, and then Runner and Kirby showed up together. Though it was technically dawn, the sky would remain as dark as it had been the entire trip. Once Dread Naught was settled about the Tree, Vort became enamored with the casual yet ritualistic fashion in which the holiday seemed to fall together.

Without discussion, Nicadzim took up the duty of doling out presents, a task made simple by his height. Taking one present from each shelf, he handed each to the teammate marked on the label. “Just so we were clear, my presents are making sense eventually. I wasn’t sure how myself, but ... perhaps keep them close.”

The gifts ran the gamut from group in-jokes, utilitarian items, and examples of genuine sentimentality. Bel’Wa and Bryluen both slyly handed a gift to their spouse bearing their own name, a knowing smile passed between them. Vort had found a highly sincere set of gifts, and as they were doled out explained a holiday of his people that held some ideological similarities to Brightstar.

Vort’s species evolved on a world with a particularly harsh star and thus his civilization mostly developed in vast subterranean locales, their wings able to carry them between cities in speedy sprints over the

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surface when needed. This made early travel and mercantilism a struggle to avoid prolonged exposure to the exceedingly intense heat and radioactivity above. As such, they held a holiday roughly once every two and a half Human years where every city would be lit near-blindingly brightly for an entire week in metaphorical defiance of their home star. The holiday's celebratory aspects were rooted in familial connections and a sense of civilization-wide welfare, the ever-present artificial light also representing the protective elements of their society and the advancements they had made toward a peaceful existence in the face of a hostile universe.

Each team member spent some time contemplating what Nicadzim bought for each of them, with no swift conclusions drawn. For Bryluen he had bought a hefty, military-grade vise of the sort used to help pry apart armored vehicles in rescue operations. Nicadzim's gift to Bel'Wa was an engraved metal rod inscribed with a rhetorical passage in Qixing Imperial characters—such rods were ancient devotional symbols often mounted by the insides of doorways, and hearkened back to ancient beliefs. Each, for similarly traditional reasons, was required to be strong enough to be used as weapon to defend the home where it was mounted. For Vort, Nicadzim bought a commemorative snow globe, showing a tiny model of Rroth'Bia's Retreat. Nicadzim gave Runner a small notepad with a pen chained to it. The pen bore a guide that helped an individual place their fingers in the optimal grip. To Kirby, Nicadzim gifted an action figure—a plastic Marine whose armor could be modified with a variety of more or less fantastic additions.

Later that evening, Dread Naught would pack up and return to Raven's Landing. Though following events would stand prominently in the minds of those assembled, the simple experience of a shared holiday—not to mention the ongoing question of Nicadzim's gifts that even he could not yet answer—would stay with Dread Naught for a long time.

## 24. Descent of the Doomed

The lingering cheer of Brightstar hovered over the team, and likely would have done so for quite a while had pressing events not intervened. Within a couple of days of returning to Raven's Landing, Kirby had completed the installation of the improved plating on the Marduk. Her action figure stood atop a shelf in the workshop, surveying her work like a stern overseer.

The skin over her former wound site had healed excellently, but she had not yet found the time to get the missing and damaged tattoos redone. This left a cloudy area on her side, her pale skin like an island among a sea of vibrant ink. She was calibrating one of the Marduk's less-used weapon systems when Runner entered, again shirtless. Kirby was relatively certain that the last time she saw him, Runner was heading to the library and was definitely wearing a shirt.

“Wh-what is that? You hav-ve a *cannon*?”

The jockey turned, her grin undimmed by the oily streak on her forehead. A long barrel, normally withdrawn and folded down in segments on top of the chassis, was unfurled and extended along the top of the exosuit.

“Yeah, ain't had time to whip it out, but I figure I will eventually. It's no Hadrian cannon, but it'll put a big-ass hole in anything that needs

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one, and it ain't every day you can fit a hi-ex cannon inside a hallway. You seen the fresh beauty I lathed out over there?"

Runner turned about, his eyebrows raising as he caught sight of a shining metal shape. A heavy hammer as long as Runner's entire body laid on a work table: thick, menacing, and clearly built for massive hands. The head of the hammer must have weighed over one hundred fifty kilograms, and terminated in a pneumatic plate with a square hole in the center. The haft bore a large button halfway down its length.

Kirby walked over to the hammer, fondly stroking the edge of the head plate. "I push the button to arm it, then when the head hits hard enough, a shaped charge takes a chunk out of the poor sumbitch I'm after. Got the idea from Bel'Wa the other day. Figure the next time I see an Urbisu it'd make things easier to start by blowing a limb off."

Runner smiled and crossed his arms. "Damn, she kn-nows how to party. Qix-xing royalty ended up a litt-t-tle different than ours, huh?"

"Well," Kirby muttered, "I don't s'pose you end up a civilization-wide constitutional monarchy without the ovas to back it up."

"Actually I g-guess ya do, since Bel'Wa doesn't have those." Runner smirked.

"Oh damn, that's right. You'd think that'd be easier to remember. Still a li'l out there to think about sometimes. I had to look it all up again the other night, 'cuz she made a joke about her bein' a danger to pants a few times a year, and I just did *not* catch what she meant."

The vigilante leaned against the table holding the hammer. "I'm sure sh-he feels the same way about us sometimes. I couldn't tell you how many idioms I've used that m-m-make her look a-at me like I'd just dropped my pants-s."

Kirby paused to think for a moment. "She wouldn't be the target audience for you droppin' your pants, nah."

Runner smirked at the jockey and snorted. Bryluen's voice suddenly emanated from overhead, her tone direly serious. "Dread Naught, hit the meeting room: Gru'Thiall is back in the news."

Within three minutes, Dread Naught was gathered around the meeting table. Bryluen was wearing the new pair of pajama pants Runner got her for Brightstar. Nicadzim was wearing a dark button-up

## 24. Descent of the Doomed

shirt tucked into a pair of khaki pants, and secured by a polished leather belt. Runner and Kirby filed in alongside Vort. Bel'Wa wore yet another colorful robe, this time a blazing yellow. She claimed to only own five articles of outer-wear, but her multi-piece garments were able to be worn in such a variety of configurations that she appeared to rarely dress the same twice.

Kirby motioned toward Nicadzim. "You got a hot date, Nico?"

The big man looked down at his attire, frowning his brow. "... I thought not?"

The instant the last of them settled into a seat, Bryluen triggered the projector. A hologram of Gru'Thiall appeared above the table, and a shining light indicated a location on its western hemisphere.

Bryluen pointed to the light as if she were a court prosecutor. "A Ranger unit searching for the presumed Dreaded goal-point on Gru'Thiall has discovered something. They've followed CSOE contact protocols and have kept their distance until they receive word from me. At one of the higher points in the mountains, deep inside of what we've determined to be the approximate sensor disruption zone, they've discovered some form of monolithic complex.

"At the distance where they've remained they've been unable to identify the material used in the structures observed, but say it has no visual similarity to anything we've found related to The Dreaded. The Ranger Captain used the word 'temple' in describing it, which is an awful loaded term for a Ranger to toss out on first observation. Presumably that means it's damn impressive, and anything about it that relates to The Dreaded could be extremely important.

"We are going to immediately suit up, and take the *Atet* down near the complex at an AA-avoidance vector just in case. No one wants any more surprises. From there, we proceed on foot. Dismissed!"

Dread Naught equipped themselves, the pace feeling almost leisurely in comparison to the emergency deployments they had embarked upon previously. Bel'Wa's armor and gear had been set up next to Bryluen's, her angular red plate a brazen sight next to the more muted colors of the Human armor around it. She secured her robe in short, practiced motions before snapping on her armor plates. Her re-breather gave out a bestial hiss as she ran a final check on her equipment. Bel'Wa glanced at the devotional rod Nicadzim bought her

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—it was now mounted on the inside facing of her shield. The smiling, elegantly robed Qixing had effectively vanished, replaced by the iconic, aggressive image of the Gate Sentinels at war. Her fully opaque visor and the quiet hiss of her suit's environmental systems further reinforced the martial elegance of her panoply.

The design of Qixing infantry armor had taken a different tact from that of the Astral Marines. While the Marines relied on the open demonstration of Human anatomy to purposefully assert their nature on the battlefield, the Qixing designed efficient, cold armor with almost no meaningful organic forms aside from their decorative fins. In contrast to this depersonalization each suit most often bore bright colors and vivid heraldry to an open battle, giving a Qixing army a unified martial appearance less like soldiers and more like the ancient symbols and motifs of their species given life. In early contacts Humans were continuously surprised when a Qixing removed their helmet, as every visual signal of the gear lent an expectation the person would either be a fish person or robot.

Kirby stomped up the entryway hall in the Marduk, it's new, subtly blue armor tinting the reflections of the ceiling lights dancing across its surface. Kirby's new hammer was slung on a custom clamp across her back, where it could be retrieved and swung in one smooth motion. Bryluen armed herself with her two usual weapons, as well as her liquid metal rifle. Runner bore his antiqued sniper rifle, his ax, and his trusty shot-pistols. The fully equipped team marched up the *Atet's* ramp, with everyone taking their usual positions—or in Bel'Wa's case, the same seat next to Nicadzim she had taken when traveling to Rroth'Bia's Retreat. Kirby guided the *Atet* with all the usual haste and smoothness. Within the hour, Dread Naught was descending toward Gru'Thiall.

From space the world looked like a green-blue sphere, whose surface was rusted over in splotches of lengthy continents. The complex lay in one of the world's jungles, dense and treacherous in the extreme. The local atmosphere did not lend itself to unprotected travel, and its soil was of little use to Qixing agriculture. As such, it was a little-traveled world mostly subjected to exploratory expeditions and scientific study. The majority of actual geographical information available was wrought from satellite images, though much of the underlying

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topography was obscured by the towering flora.

A triad of Qixing craft currently maintained orbit over the target site: two frigate-class vessels and a destroyer, each a flattened shape bristling in weapons and the lateral thrusters that typified Qixing ship design. A pair of bulky Marine destroyers moved alongside them, the bright colors of the Qixing craft offset by the dull, metallic shades of the Human ships. Bryluen told the Destroyers she would provide landing coordinates after the initial surveillance of the site was complete.

Several hundred Astral Marines awaited her sign to secure the complex, but for now Bryluen was keeping them in orbit. A small team had a much better chance of avoiding danger should the Gru'Thiall site prove treacherous—after all, Bryluen had experienced trap-laden structures a number of times before, and a lost jungle complex could certainly be a dead ringer for any number of unpleasant surprises.

The *Atet* bolted past the assembled warships to penetrate Gru'Thiall's atmosphere, and took a low-altitude course toward the goal site indicated by the Rangers. Captain Wongsawat had found a suitable clearing for the *Atet* at a safe distance from the complex. Kirby hammered toward the coordinates, hovering just above the increasingly tall trees.

The mist-wreathed mountains reared up ahead of them, sienna soil and broad outcroppings of chalky stone breaking the copper sea of massive leaves. The sky was broiling into a menacing gray mass overhead. The jungle was assailed by heavy rains daily, so the thickening clouds were an unsurprising sight.

As the craft approached the edge of the disruption zone, Kirby slowed the craft and switched the *Atet's* primary navigation over to echolocation, allowing her to see a projection of the *Atet's* surroundings well enough to land. Sure enough the more sophisticated visual displays soon fizzled out, leaving Kirby with only the pulsing vision of the jungle provided by the ship's sonic projectors. A wide plateau, like a carved outcropping among the jagged peaks, loomed ahead.

The squad of Rangers waited at the edge of the clearing arrayed in a neat line, silent as ever. As Kirby gently landed the *Atet*, the ramp hissed open. Bryluen emerged from the craft first, the sight of her blue armor markings causing the Rangers to simultaneously salute as if they were on parade. Bryluen snapped a salute back as Dread Naught

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gathered behind her at the bottom of the opened ramp. The Captain of the Ranger unit then stepped forward.

“Captain Wongsawat, any updates?”

For most with a military history, hearing a Ranger speak aloud was an odd experience. On the battlefield they typically spoke only on their squadron channels, the highest ranking Ranger occasionally curtly reporting to their superiors. They were by nature quiet people, unimpressed with showmanship and rarely emotive. Captain Wongsawat was an exemplary display of just this, his even voice adding almost nothing to the content of his words.

“An honor to meet you, Dame. We have still observed no activity, and all wildlife we’ve observed has kept outside a roughly three kilometer perimeter from the site.”

“The honor is mine, Captain. Lead us to the complex. I’ll signal your team’s entry after our initial assessment.”

Bryluen would normally have explicitly stated that she would be giving specific instructions on who should enter what parts of the complex and when. Rangers, however, were explicitly careful. Most of their time was spent on unmapped or actively hostile worlds, and they therefore weren’t prone to making unnecessary movements or unneeded actions. Captain Wongsawat knew what it meant when an Operative lead a mission, and his Rangers would certainly entertain zero notions of potentially dangerous curiosity.

The Rangers silently guided Dread Naught northwest from the landing zone, advancing through undergrowth so thick Kirby was forced to occasionally use one of her gauntlet blades to allow the group passage. After about two kilometers Captain Wongsawat signaled to Bryluen, then pointed between two particularly large trees. Moving up next to the Captain, she aligned herself just right in order to see what he did: a sliver of yellowish material across a clearing beginning roughly a kilometer from their location. Even at this distance, the sudden color contrast among the copper tones of the surrounding jungle made the structures’ existence evident.

She nodded. “Stop at the trees and be ready for my signal. If fifteen minutes pass without word, assume a combat stance and follow. Dread Naught, let’s see what we’ve got ourselves into.”

Dread Naught advanced through the last stretch of jungle, a

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motley group of shapes and colors in a rough line. Bryluen was on point, with Kirby looming at her side. The Rangers had reported no territorial wildlife, and what animals were encountered were uncharacteristically docile. Bryluen was already formulating theories and ideas as further pieces of the complex became visible a bit at a time.

Bel'Wa grunted gently. Runner looked over toward her. "What is it, Bel-l-l'Wa?"

Through the team's internal comms, Bel'Wa's voice was slightly fuzzy and bore a tinny echo, as the encryption bridge between her communication systems and the Human systems of the rest of Dread Naught had introduced some artifacts to the audio signal. The sensor and communications disrupting effect was present as well, for now causing the occasional dropped syllable or static tone.

"I was just thinking of how remarkably different your way of war is from ours. Effective in its own way, but your doctrines of battle are unfamiliar to me. Usage of fire fields, squad positioning, the application of focused firepower—all of it more or less varied from that of the Sentinels."

"In what manner will you say—in brief?" Nicadzim asked. A descending leaf took a corkscrew path sideways through the air as it neared him.

"When commanding a Sentinel unit, I have dozens of one-word commands I can bark out that determine our positioning relative to one another, where and how much our fields of fire overlap, and how many of us should have melee weapons drawn. Accordingly communications almost never cease between us, not for an instant. If you are reloading, holding behind cover, or otherwise have a moment, you report your disposition and status. In a thick battle, we most often sing to maintain pace."

Kirby hefted a thick log out of the team's path. "Well I guess that makes more sense than all of ya bein' psychic. To anyone outside, you're all dead quiet."

Bel'Wa shrugged. "No reason to yell out what we're doing, after all. With me here, I'm certain it won't be long before you're able to hear our comm chatter for yourselves."

"Well, I defin-nitely learned something today! Always saw you folks as ver-ry uptight and trad-d-ditional." Runner hopped on top of a

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nearby stump with a subtle movement of one ankle, balancing on the stump for a moment before continuing on.

Though his suit systems could relax his boot lifts, Bryluen had instructed the team to remain on a combat footing, and Runner's trained grace and finesse meant springing through the jungle was hardly more taxing than walking.

"We're certainly very traditional, and a lovingly refined form of what we consider uptight, it just happens that our idea of tradition includes talking ... a lot. Honestly, I talk at you every time I spot you walking past a doorway, Runner. We Qixing have a tendency to worry if we hear someone just *stop* talking if they're in a room with someone else. That's why I'm always poking my head in on all of you, if you've noticed."

Dread Naught fell quiet for a moment, before Bryluen, smiling inside her helmet, spoke up. "We balance each other out nicely."

As they neared the clearing in which the complex stood they saw small suggestions of spires and a great, central structure. The undergrowth mostly hid the ground-level view of the site, but it was clearly quite large. As they drew closer the sounds of the surrounding jungle gradually gave way to a reverent silence, the soft crunch of sticks and leaves and the hissing of Kirby's joints forming the entirety of the soundscape surrounding them.

The sickly yellow color of the structures was even and vibrant, and an identical rough texture was shared across every small hint of the complex that Dread Naught could see. The sheer size of the complex all but proved that the signal-dampening effect must have been obscuring orbital scans.

The complex was impossible to miss, a towering and bizarre assemblage of constructs of whose antiquity there was no doubt. It was entirely built of a seamless, yellow material with an appearance like wet, algae-ridden stone. The structures' ghastly surfaces appeared more grown than built, leaving the entire complex to resemble a gnarled mass like a log overgrown with lichens. A cyclopean wall bearing a vast gatehouse bordered the entire area, and within its hunched perimeter smaller structures were huddled together.

The squat buildings were gathered in paranoid clusters, each holding tight to the well of darkness created by their combined shadows.

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Just within the wall at uneven intervals were tall, curved spires jutting skyward like the gristly ribs of a half-buried Titan. In the center of it all loomed a broad central tower, its height surpassing even the jungle canopy in moldering opulence.

A series of hopelessly complex characters were etched in gigantic proportions on the tower's surface: iridescent yet plain, swimming yet still. No material other than the yellow "stone" seemed to be present, but the borders of the characters were evident nonetheless.

No matter how she tried, Bryluen could not shake a gut-wrenching sensation of primal foreboding as she surveyed the dreadful panorama. For all of their searching, what terrible anomaly had the Marines at last exhumed? What benignity could possibly be found where a malodorous air of terror hung so thickly?

Her rapidly darkening thoughts were interrupted by a sound: a trembling, involuntary vocalization of raw fear. She whipped around to see Nicadzim had taken a step backwards, his dilated pupils visible through his thick visor as they beheld the massive inscription. He shook his head back and forth slightly, as if refusing to believe what he saw.

To see the eternally unflappable man so disturbed alarmed Bryluen. "Nico ... what do you know?"

Nicadzim breathed slowly, his eyes refusing to leave the characters on the main tower. "I know what it says. I ... felt ... someone? I was adventuring days ago when I encountered a ... presence. The presence gives or will place something, to allow me to ... *activate* these words. To *channel* them."

Bryluen's voice was low and firm. "Nicadzim ...what have we found?"

He closed his eyes and took a deep, slow breath. After a moment he looked back toward the inscription on the tower, and begin to recite what was written. The voice with which he read the message was somehow not his own, but was instead a shockingly loud rumble. Each syllable was wreathed in the potent suggestion of thunderous power and grandiose majesty, as if the ancient characters could not be so easily contained by a mortal throat.

Whatever manner of artifice or technology could cause such a thing was beyond the understanding of all present.

## **The Shadow Among The Stars**

BEHOLD AND TREMBLE.  
YOU STAND AT THE GRAVESTONE OF ALL CREATION.

ONCE, THE STARS THEMSELVES HEADED OUR COMMANDS.  
WE WERE WORSHIPED BY THE HOSTS OF THE LESSER RACES,  
OUR DOMINION LAUDED BY A TRILLION VOICES. NOW OUR  
WORKS ARE BUT ASH AND DUST, A UNIVERSE OF UNBURIED  
BONES OUR LEGACY AND SHAME.

THE LAST SPARK OF OUR MUNIFICENT LIGHT IS INTERRED  
HERE AMONG FAR-FLUNG STARS. THIS PLACE WILL BEAR  
WITNESS TO YOU AS THE LAST MEMORY OF OUR REIGN OF  
EONS, AND THE LAST SPLINTER OF A ONCE-THRIVING  
UNIVERSE.

WEEP FOR THE TALE OF OUR FINAL DOOM, AND MOURN THE  
COMING DISSOLUTION OF ALL THAT STILL LIVES.

PRAY NO MORE ... FOR THE GODS ARE DEAD.

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Silence once more fell over the group as the first streaks of rain began to lash against the ground. Within seconds, the rain increased in volume until it became a punishing downpour that caused sheets of water to run down their armor. Thin wires began to slide back and forth across their helmet visors—and Kirby’s cockpit window—that kept the rain from obscuring their vision with a combination of physical force and magnetism. They had not found a temple: they had found a tomb.

Even outside of meaningful knowledge or context, the living inscription upon the main tower was stunning in its apocalyptic fervor. The uniqueness of the architecture led to even further questions: who created this place, and how? If this location was considered to be “among far-flung stars” than just how long ago was the complex built, and by people from how far away?

Even though only one among their number could read the dark words upon the massive tombstone, they all wordlessly stared toward it. The Dreaded presumably pursued a Stone here, and therefore the most comforting thought was to believe the Stone was here by happenstance. Sadly, Bryluen knew such coincidences rarely resolved themselves in the desired fashion—the doomsday inscription invariably regarded The Dreaded.

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The Operative opened a comm channel. “Wongsawat, approach the complex and start scouting the small buildings within the wall. No danger yet. Dread Naught and I will scope out the central structure. Branok Out.” She switched to a second channel. “This is Operative Branok—*Passchendaele* and *Huángdì’s Decree*, I want your full compliments deployed to my current coordinates immediately. I expect the main gate and entire outer wall of this complex to be loaded in soldiers and vehicles within half an hour. Branok out.”

Bel’Wa, as well, began to transmit a similar message to the Sentinels. “—liaüt tcha re’ña Ho’Xal. Belzxilenth’Wa, sh’i’syang.”

Vort wheeled his eyes about the scene, his body turning a midnight purple. “... BUT ... WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? WHO WROTE THIS? WHAT HAS HAPPENED?”

Kirby’s shoulders lowered from her usual ready stance with a whisper of actuators. “Well ... message said this place ‘bears witness’, so ... guess we’d have to go in to figure that out. *Fuck ...*”

Her sentence trailed off beneath the weight of the strident inscription. Brylueen loudly snapped her gauntleted fingers, drawing the team from their trance. She was no less concerned than the rest of them, but knew comprehending the revelations garnered here needed to wait.

Without delay she began to walk toward the gatehouse, which presided over a large enough space for most forms of War Colossus to pass through. The gate in question was clearly not intended for defense, but rather appeared decorative. The gate was a complex structure made to resemble a mass of intertwining vines, with gaps large enough for a person to jump through between the broad limbs. Despite the organic curvature of the vine-like shapes, the gate was still made of the same yellow material as the rest of the tomb.

Dread Naught fell in behind Brylueen and began to cross the clearing, still struggling for words. In orbit above them, running soldiers and blaring sirens ushered on the Marines and Sentinels soon to garrison the temple. Brylueen felt a certainty they would not plumb the secrets of the tomb complex without interruption—The Dreaded had been looming ever-closer with every planetary landing, so it was only a matter of time until The Dreaded followed suit with as much force as they could muster.

Dread Naught drew up to the gate, the monolithic construct

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dwarfing them. The advanced capabilities required to create an organic, apparently self-sustaining building clashed with its graceless architecture. The inscription made it clear this structure was envisioned to tell a message and make a certain impression. Bryluen felt it had accomplished its goals. Bryluen took her nanowhip in hand, and used the end of the grip to touch the gate. The material surface was spongy and not entirely rigid, lending even more credence to the structure having been grown rather than constructed in a traditional sense. Satisfied the material seemed to pose no immediate danger, she waved Kirby forward.

“Furcotte, give this gate a push. Anyone that can grow a structure like this can probably also balance a door.”

Kirby rubbed her mechanized hands together before placing her armored palms on one side of where the two halves of the gate met. In absolute silence, the massive gate began to swing open with little effort. Even as Kirby stopped pushing, the gate continued to glide along until it slowed to a gentle stop exactly perpendicular to the gatehouse. Bryluen looked about for a hinge mechanism, but could see none.

Kirby turned back toward Dread Naught. “Shit, yeah they can, huh? Whoever *they* are. Were.”

“Let’s just head to the big tower.” Bryluen pointed to the looming structure in the center of the complex. “Clearly we’re supposed to look around here, so I’m sure the main building will hold an answer or two.”

The immensity of the tombstone became increasingly obvious. The unyielding shape reared from the ground devoid of ornamentation, barren and enigmatic. An ornate door, several times larger than a standard Human equivalent, was the only sign the tower was something other than a massive block. The clusters of surrounding buildings similarly bore no windows, only other up-sized doors and no other visible decoration. Each door was covered in seemingly carved symbols and images that swam before the eyes in twitchy motions, like a damaged video feed. No obvious purpose or organizational intent was visible. The soaring spires were almost three-fourths the height of the main tower, and lacked doors or other indications of function as well. Detailed decoration, like that on the doorways, swarmed across the curved structures like schools of lurid fish.

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That the main building announced such a clear purpose made the surrounding chaos all the more perplexing. Within the ruins of other civilizations, it could often be difficult to discern patterns and meaning the species responsible may have found obvious. But even so, the first thing Bryluen noticed upon entering the gate was the inconsistency: the spires were curved to different degrees in unrelated directions, and the building clusters were dashed about unevenly. Civilization was almost invariably the antithesis to unrestrained chaos, and the beings that created the tomb were clearly civilized enough to generate a complex language and to grow entire buildings. The visual havoc of the necropolis simply made no immediate sense.

Bryluen gingerly placed a gauntlet against the massive door and pushed it open. Silently it swung inward, revealing a sizable central room. The walls emitted a soft, presumably bio-luminescent glow despite appearing to consist of the same material as the outside of the structure. The stark chamber bore a door-less gap leading down into darkness, and a curving ramp ascending from the group's left up the inside of the tower. Gazing upward, it was clear the smooth ramp continued the two hundred meters it took to reach the top of the tower.

Bryluen noted another inscription above the dark exit. "What does that say, Nico?"

The large man strode up next to her, tilting his head slightly. As with the main tower, the alien characters suffused his voice with something beyond the mundane.

HEREIN SLEEP THE NAMES OF THE HIGHEST GODS:  
ARCHITECTS OF A UNIVERSE BEREFT OF A FUTURE.

AMONG THEM LIES THE HARBINGER OF THEIR FATE.  
REMEMBER ITS ASPECT AND FEAR IT.

Vort skittered up to the dark entryway. "THEY'RE CATACOMBS, TUNNELS. LOOKS LIKE A GRID OF PASSAGES, ALL GRADUALLY SLOPING DOWN TOWARD SOMETHING. THEIR *NAMES* SLEEP HERE? PERHAPS ... THERE ARE NO MORE BODIES, SIMPLY MEMORY. WERE THIS THEIR LAST MEMORIAL, IT'S POSSIBLE THEY HAD NO BODIES TO RECOVER DUE TO ... WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM."

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Bryluen placed a hand under her chin. “That would make sense. Harbinger of fate ... well, we certainly need to see that. The emphasis on *remembering* it suggests it’s not going to, or is not able to kill us. If anything else important is here, the top of that ramp is the obvious location. Let’s head down and see what we can find.”

Bryluen led the group into the tunnel, where the roof rapidly tapered outward until it was large enough for two Hadrian heavy battle-tanks to drive side by side. The light mounts on Bryl’s collar cast a cone of white light ahead of the group, a subtle gyroscope turning the brilliant diode to match the direction of her gaze.

As Vort stated, the pathway sloped downward and appeared to be crisscrossed with other pathways stretching into abyssal blackness. Row upon row of large coffin-like shapes occupied the entire length of the visible halls in columns of twelve. Each bore an iridescent character on the visible end that Nicadzim characterized as being a name plate. Cursor scanning seemed to indicate the shapes were solid.

“Dame ...”, Nicadzim muttered softly. “This likely will appear a strange time to ask, but why will your armor have lights when it already has night-vision filters?”

Bryluen’s collar light continued to flick around the corridor, piercing the dark with stabs of brilliance. “For situations exactly like this. All our other filters are unreliable here due to the disruption effect. That said, I usually have my lights on when prowling somewhere dark regardless. I’ve normally got an auto-cycle process on my visual filters which, combined with a solid level of visible light, means if there’s anything unusual that may otherwise not show up in one way or another I won’t be surprised by it. Reasonably standard practice—I’d say that you’d be amazed about what kinds of things you can encounter in abandoned places, but you would know quite a bit about dealing with the unexpected, wouldn’t you Nico?”

The group continued down the gentle incline, Bryluen’s light rigorously illuminating each side path as they passed it. Every passage appeared to be visually identical, hundreds of names sleeping to their every side. Bryluen received a comm burst from Wongsawat, whose squad was investigating the smaller structures outside by now. She relayed the communiqué to the team.

“Operative Br—k, we can confirm that the smaller stru—s

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contain a form of ingress to a subterra— passageway. Inside, each building seems ... mod— after a location. Rit—stic, or otherwise important in a way we ca— be certain of. But all visual —cators seem to imply artistic intent, and no immediately —vious function—ty. Wong— wat, over.”

Bryluen nodded to herself. “We have found a network of passages below the main tower. They are likely connected—it’s a catacomb system. We’re advancing toward what we currently believe may be a central nexus. Our feeds will be relayed upon arrival. Branok out.”

The team followed the smooth incline downward for roughly one hundred twenty meters before they found the nexus point of the catacombs they would later learn spread through a square kilometer area of the plateau. During the last sixty meters, decorative touches began to grace the walls. At first they appeared to be only flourishes, but slowly gathered and materialized down the slope into larger images of flowing color and graceful detail. Surprisingly the images were easily understood, as if the importance of what they represented caused the creator to simplify their art-form to something any being could understand. The images gradually became more complex and detailed, as if clarifying the story of the previous pictures.

Primarily the art was scenes of carnage, depicted in a harrowing fashion which varied between chaotic slaughter and some form of ritual sacrifice. There were clearly layers of symbolism to the representations of events: the seeming protagonists were faceless, luminous beings leading hosts of smaller creatures of various description against their enemy.

With a resigned sigh Bryluen confirmed the enemies depicted were *undeniably* The Dreaded, unaltered from their present appearance. Their familiar forms were depicted in a rainbow-like procession of colors, contrasted with the pure white-and-gold of the glowing ‘Gods’ and their servants.

Kirby whispered in the dark silence. “Vort, you said The Dreaded aren’t dark to you. This anywhere like you meant?”

“IT IS MUCH MORE LIKE THIS, YES. EACH OF THEM FLASHES AND SHINES LIKE THEY ARE STRUGGLING TO CONTAIN A BURST OF COLOR INSIDE OF THEMSELVES.”

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Thousands of ruthlessly detailed figures, enough to occupy archaeological teams for decades, stretched across each battle scene. Various weapons and technologies were pitted against endless masses of vicious monsters, all eventually failing. While all of the familiar forms of Dreaded were depicted, numerous others were present as well. Rolling tentacled things sprayed jets of acid, flying serpentine creatures spat projectiles, and massive brutes turned over alien tanks and walkers.

The entire spectacle was both objectively a work of immense craftsmanship, and a chilling look into the mind of an ancient culture forced to confront its own violent death. Brylueen gazed upon hundreds of beings whose physiology and natures she could scarcely comprehend—but still, how fearful and meticulously detailed were their faces that she swore she could still hear them screaming.

Further down the corridor, the scene transitioned to massive space battles. Bizarre alien craft in their hundreds dueled with Sjorthursars as entire planets burned. The displays of devastation dragged on for what felt like an eternity as increasingly large slaughters were rendered in monolithic detail along the catacomb walls.

For all the restraint and simplicity of the rest of the complex, the scale of the tragedy displayed was so great that even the most simplistic rendition of its occurrence seemed an excessive and prolonged cruelty.

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Minutes dragged on in silence until Bel'Wa began to mutter. Quietly, she began to slowly utter a poem she had once read. Its origin was of a culture whose remains had been found devastated. Bel'Wa had been present for the discovery that their destruction had been self-inflicted in a heinous and hateful fashion possessed of such a degree of organization and coldly efficient methodology that the very thought still sent a chill through her soul.

The words she spoke were found etched into the notebook of a corpse, clutched tightly in its hand among ten thousand like it. She knew she would never forget those words, but had not uttered them aloud in decades. In the funereal silence around them, she could think of no other fitting words:

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“Round and ‘round they fell, by dozens, and dozens, and dozens yet more.

Wails and cries, screams and pleas; downward, downward into pitiless dark.

’Round and ‘round they fell, by hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds yet more.

Gluttonous silence raved and slavered; such bounty sent plummeting into its maw.

’Round and ‘round they fell, by thousands, and thousands, and thousands yet more ...”

As the slope evened out and the tunnel shrunk back down to match the entry door, one final image was depicted: A ruined horizon, lorded over by a massive orb of many-colored flames. The single-minded intensity of the symbol after its many nuanced and detailed predecessors was deeply disturbing, and resonated with dark providence. With this stark image in mind, the corridor gave way to a massive chamber whose height was only made apparent by the rings of bioluminescent material illuminating its cavernous interior.

A ring of two dozen tall pillars ringed the center of the chamber. Each pillar appeared like some kind of totem shaped in the forms of various faces—though detailed, the nature of the beings depicted was unknown to all present. Five other entrances led from other legs of the catacomb tunnels. In the center of the chamber lay the ‘harbinger of fate’ spoken of by the catacomb inscription. As Bryluen suspected was the case, the harbinger was yet another Stone. The newest example of the strange mineral sat on a glowing, circular plinth that cast it in a sickly yellow light.

The presence of a Stone was unsurprising. What struck the team silent, however, was the *size*. The sinister object measured roughly five meters across, and stood over half as high. The sickening feelings of disdain and disgust invoked by the smaller Stones was magnified in proportion to its scale. So strong was the sensation that Bryluen found it difficult to even gaze upon the Stone. The nightmarish black surface seemed to absorb the light around it, leaving the slab a lightless mass haloed in the pallid yellow light generated by the plinth. Bryluen pushed the visceral reaction in her gut to the back of her mind, instead

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immediately beginning to both relay her visual feed to the Rangers and alert the Marine commanders of the Stone's presence.

Bel'Wa, similarly used to a command position, alerted the Sentinels of what Dread Naught had found. The Marines had already begun landing and Sentinel Lancers were securing the complex's perimeter. The rest of Dread Naught stood in silence, gazing at the ominous black object.

"Shit. Shit, shit, shit. That ... yeah, they're gonna want this real fuckin' bad. We've gotta get this to a base with a hell of a lotta guns." Kirby finished her thought by blowing out a long breath.

"I ... you can f-feel that, ri-ight?" Runner put his hands on the sides of his helmet as if he were going to run his hands through his hair. "It's awf-ful, like we shouldn't be he-ere, shouldn't be around-d this thing."

Nicadzim spoke with an aggressive finality Dread Naught had never heard from him. "None of you will touch it. Not even with gloves, for any reason. It ... would be anathema to us."

The group fell quiet again as Bryluen and Bel'Wa finished appraising the gathering military force of the situation. Bryluen took a deep breath before speaking once more.

"Understood, Nico. Well, we've seen why The Dreaded want to come here, and we know someone else seems to have been wiped out by them a long time ago, starting a long ways away. That said, knowing that isn't saying much, and is certainly nothing specific enough yet to be particularly helpful."

She stood with her arms crossed before the team as they continued casting dark looks toward the Stone. Her own thoughts were nowhere near as quiescent as she made it appear, but one of the many reasons she was the CSOE's most lauded Operative was her ability to constantly project confidence and surety regardless of what she felt—as only the foolish and the soon to die believe themselves above doubts.

"I'll have some equipment brought down to secure the Stone without any hands being involved. This hasn't been the type of enlightening experience we may have hoped for, but if there's any useful information here the top of the tower is where it would be. Let's get this place surveyed and over with.

"I know this is easier said than done, but don't let all this get to

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you, apocalyptic or otherwise. We've witnessed the panicked last memories of a dying civilization, and the weight of that *is* going to reach you. But for now put it aside, and compartmentalize it all for a time when we aren't standing near a giant bull's eye. Stay frosty, keep breathing."

Bryluen waited a short moment, and then motioned for the team to go back up the ramp. Bel'Wa reached out and squeezed her hand as they turned about, the her red gauntlet intertwining with Bryluen's bronze-clad digits for a moment. Bryluen squeezed back—though she could not see her wife's face beneath her menacing helm, she knew it bore a concerned expression. The team followed Bryluen's lead back up the long incline, this time at a jog—they had all seen quite enough of the catacombs and the agonized images that decorated them.

## 26. Dissolution and Discovery

The Astral Marine contingents of the Destroyer class vessels *Passchendaele* and *Huángdì's Decree* were deploying to the surface, their drop craft guided in by secondary sensory systems in much the same way Kirby had piloted the *Atet*. Captain Wongsawat reported to Lieutenant Colonel Kitoko, the ranking Marine officer on Gru'Thiall. She was a tall and stern woman, with a spine as straight and unbending as a steel rod.

Upon emerging from her drop craft, she promptly marched off to find the ranking Sentinel in order to coordinate a defense. Though Bel'Wa technically had superiority, due to her obligations to Dread Naught the command of the Sentinels on Gru'Thiall fell to Cyoni'o, whose rank among the Sentinels was Wake-Maker. The Wake-Maker was as strongly built a man as a Sentinel could hope to be. The Qixing averaged broader proportions than Humans, and therefore their men were almost unanimously broad-shouldered and square jawed.

The pair rapidly devised a defensive plan that left the complex well-defended from all directions. The main gate and wall were overlooked by overlapping weapon emplacements among which modular metal barriers, Qixing force projectors, and communication relays were established for the soldiers atop the wall. Secondary gun

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positions were established atop the buildings within the wall, and the Marine walkers present took up patrols within the perimeter. The armored vehicles the Qixing deployed were arrayed in hull-down firing positions, and Lancer units had begun surveillance sweeps of the surrounding jungle to compensate for the lack of remote sensory capability.

Captain Wongsawat's Rangers were deployed to map out the catacombs, with combat engineers following behind to secure the Stone for transport. The Gru'Thiall tomb was as safe as it could reasonably be, given the lack of pre-constructed defensive positions. The orbiting craft remained circling over the relevant planetary hemisphere, ready to strike at any Sjorthursars that may appear.

Dread Naught emerged from the catacombs back into the main tower, and advanced toward the spiraling ramp. The softly glowing incline swept smoothly upward in a dizzying spin to the top of the tower.

Bel'Wa sighed. "This isn't going to be fun, is it?"

Kirby tested the structural integrity of the thin ramp with one foot, and found it entirely unaffected by her weight. She took a step up the ramp and was about to complain about such an advanced species refusing to leave an elevator behind, when she realized she was further up the ramp than she had recalled a moment prior.

She took a step back down, and found herself once more on the floor of the tower despite a distance of several paces having been between her and the base of the ramp a moment earlier. "... You saw that shit, right? Did I just ... teleport?"

"Not *precisely*," Bryluen intoned. "Difficult to describe, but it was just as if, somehow, all of our perspectives were off. That the distance was just vastly shorter than it seemed. No blinking, no sliding, you just went further than you should have. This is *much* better than an elevator, Furcotte: the scenic route, without the trouble."

Nicadzim smiled. "The climb would not be so unpleasant after all?"

Dread Naught soon began to advance up the ramp, finding themselves dozens of meters in the air in an impossibly short amount of time. The light from the open door at the base of the tower quickly receded, leaving them all enshrouded in only a dim yellow glow. After only a minute or so, they spotted a warm aura of light above them—

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undoubtedly whatever was kept at the top of the tower.

Runner broke the silence by clearing his throat. “Well, uh, w-we haven’t found exactly where the whole sign-n-nal dampening thing is coming from? Maybe th-h-hat’s above us?”

Bel’Wa rolled her neck. “Hopefully, Runner. And we’ve yet to find what ‘spark’ is left of these ‘gods’. They seem fans of drama, so presumably the top of a massive tower would be a fine place to put the last piece of yourselves.”

“... whattaya think we’d leave behind? Humans, I mean?” The jockey’s hulking, mechanized aspect contrasted her introspective tone.

“You aren’t nearly the first one to ask that question, Kirby.” Bryluen squeezed the edge of one of Bel’Wa’s broad shoulder pads as she accelerated her pace to walk side-by-side with the exosuit. “Ever heard of the CCP? Cultural Continuity Project. They’ve established vaults filled with historical data, copies of important works of art, videos, and forms of entertainment in dozens of planetary systems in case anything happens. After discovering more than a few dead civilizations, we realized that surviving your home world doesn’t keep you from being wiped off the map later. So, to answer your question: we’d leave behind everything we could. All our lessons, our failings. Every effort to prove that we existed.”

“These people will be so much more advanced than us, yet all we will find is this?” Nicadzim motioned around him. “Then again, we were far away from their home: maybe more had been laid about in their home stars.”

“This is supposedly their *last* spark, so I’m not sure. Even if you go around making vaults, sometimes no preparation is enough. This may be all that’s left; after all, this was no natural disaster.” Bryluen’s last words ended the conversation for the rest of their climb.

As they reached the top of the tower, they entered a rounded, sizable chamber glowing with golden light. The contrast was shocking after the darkness of the catacombs and the dim ascent from the entryway. The back wall of the tall chamber bore a series of complex, abstract images. The ‘pictures’ were imprinted along the rear wall, each shining and swimming in colors that were difficult to name.

Unlike the moving decorations of the doors and spires, these images seemed to possess *depth*. Colors and vague shapes flowed within

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them, though they each stayed within a solid border. On the floor by the top of the ramp, a series of characters were etched in such a way their slanted proportions would appear straight to an observer roughly three times the height of a Human. Though the floor was entirely flat, the edges of the characters were clearly visible and as undisturbed by time as the rest of the complex.

The most notable part of the high chamber was the large object perched in the center, which was responsible for the warmth and light that filled the chamber. A golden spheroid slightly taller than the Marduk dominated the room, its rich color and tangible warmth a startling contrast to the rest of the cold and quiet tower. It was made of an indeterminate material best described as some sort of matte metal. Golden bands ringed the device at even intervals, culminating in a rounded cap atop the object. Otherwise, no meaningful details or indicators of functionality were present on its surface.

Again cursory armor scans revealed nothing, but Bryluen saw a HUD warning indicating her communications equipment was entirely non-functional—they had clearly found the source of the sensor disturbance as Runner had posited might be the case.

She pointed to the characters on the floor without letting her eyes leave the glowing object. "Nico, would you please?"

Nicadzim read the symbols aloud, his voice again transforming.

YOU STAND WITHIN THE HALL OF DISSOLUTION. WITNESS  
THE FAILURE OF THE GODS, AND THE COMING OF THE  
BOUNDLESS TERROR.

BEFORE YOU STANDS THE LAST EMBER, ITS SLUMBER  
UNDISTURBED UNTIL IT FALLS BENEATH THE WORLD-  
ENCIRCLER'S SHADOW.

Bryluen put her hands on her hips. " 'World-encircler'? You're sure? That *exact* wording?"

"Yes ma'am, I was certain. Will that be a concern?"

Runner interjected. "Yeah, it's w-w-weird as hell. The ancient Nor-rse used 'Wo-o-orld Encirc-cler' as an, uh, epithet for Jörmungandr. Big-ass sea serpent that wrap-pped around the whole world."

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Runner saw Kirby raise an inquiring eyebrow at him through her visor. “W-when you’re raised by the public librar-ry system, you learn thin-ngs.”

“The likelihood of that *exact* epithet, given that we gave a Norse designation to the space-faring forms of Dreaded is too specific to be a coincidence.” Bryluen wagged a finger toward Nicadzim, still staring at the spheroid. “Nicadzim, is there any thought in your mind that this language ... well, maybe depends somewhat on whoever reads it? Perhaps it pulls analogues from your memory to help you understand the message? There are theories about that kind of technology, a form of neural prediction that would make live translation ridiculously simple. To have it work on a species you’ve never even met, in a flat carving left to sit around for unknown ages, however ...”

“I ... believe that will be plausible,” Nicadzim confirmed. “Given, I won’t be able to read the words as much as I could interpret them.”

“IF IT RELIES ON NICO’S MEMORIES AND THEREFORE CHOSE TO USE THIS ... ‘NORSE’ TERM, THEN LOGICALLY IT WOULD BE USING ‘WORLD-ENCIRCLER’ TO REFER TO *ANOTHER* FORM OF SPACE-BORNE DREADED. PRESUMABLY SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER.” Voit passed through several orange shades as he unfolded his thought.

Kirby’s actuators shifted her stance. Such motions were not necessary when she operated the Marduk, able as she was to shift various parts of the exosuit from imitative tracking to more traditional control methods. Regardless, she had adopted a number of forms of outward expression due both to the elongated periods she spent within the suit, and her intimate psychological connection to its metallic confines.

“The Big One, maybe? These things have to be comin’ from somewhere, and if they can go chasin’ people ‘cross galaxies, it’d make sense if they came out of somethin’ mobile.”

“Possibilities like this are what makes recovering unknown tech so nerve-wracking.” The Operative stated. “It could be anything from a planet-killing bomb set to trigger based on an unknown form of external stimulus, to a big bundle of cute family photos. There’s no way to tell until we can get some specialized equipment here. That just leaves us with these ‘pictures’ on the back wall.”

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The team looked at the images above them. Bryluen immediately felt her head pulled toward the top-right picture, as if someone had grabbed her chin and turned her gaze. The images were far more than decorations or illustrations. As she looked, they swam and changed. Their colors and motions intensified, and the image somehow grew to occupy her field of vision before engaging the entirety of her other senses. The all-encompassing “image” told, or rather showed her a story. The tale they spun was not a simple retelling of events—rather it was an experiential narrative buoyed upon an overwhelming sensation of bottomless, mournful grief. This sensation of total loss caused tears to begin streaming down her face as she began to witness the fall of the “gods”. What was symbolic and what was literal, she could not say.

She first witnessed a golden city stretching further than the eye could see, utterly alien in aspect and astoundingly beautiful. Plants beyond description flourished among graceful spires and sweeping arches. This “City of the Gods” was splendorous beyond all the dreams of mortals such as she. Even at first glance she knew the city was the lifeblood of the stars, and had stood for ages beyond reckoning. The “gods” themselves—whatever ancient beings created this monument—she witnessed as towering creatures of light in glittering robes of silver, their countenances so bright they were unbearable to her eyes. They strode the city at the head of thousand-strong entourages of mortal beings, both cowering in fear and glowing with honor to be in the presence of the undisputed masters of the cosmos.

But a strange unease began to suffuse the city, paired with a dimming of the distant lights that illuminated the far reaches of this golden paradise. Suddenly a billion eyes turned skyward, and even the attention of the luminescent “gods” strayed from their mighty tasks to gaze toward the subject of such a commotion. With horror, Bryluen realized there was a *texture* to the sky; It was no longer smooth and clear.

The sight was so obscene it took Bryluen a moment to understand what she was actually looking at: it was as if something so unspeakably vast was passing the world that the texture of its surface was visible across the entire horizon. She had little time to dwell on this before the sight went from mind-bending, to outright abhorrent. A vast orb whose color and detail defied description appeared among the

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texture in the sky, recalling the final and chilling image in the catacombs. The scene instantly burst into frigid nothingness. A horrid, wailing shriek made its way to her ears as if from a great distance.

After a moment, she realized the shriek was the accumulation of endless screams from alien throats of every description. The notion arrived in her mind that she was listening to the death rattle of cities, the fearful outcries of entire worlds being wiped out, the gasping desperation of entire civilizations drowning in fear and fire as the creatures Humanity dubbed 'The Dreaded' slew them all without mercy.

So real, and so total was the sensation of suffering and loss that Bryluen immediately doubled over and wretched, the omniscient shriek ending as she did so. Her stomach burned with involuntary contractions as its contents were forcibly ejected from her. Her helmet immediately vented what she coughed forth with a whirring sound, compartmentalizing and ejecting it in a way that maintained the suit's airtight seal. When she stopped, her guts continued to clench painfully as the helmet sprayed an antibacterial solution onto its inner surface.

She realized after a moment that her time in the vision had not ended. Obviously she had looked away from the enrapturing images, but the experience continued around her. She felt herself whisked away to a time some mere millennia before the present moment. She saw the growth of the grave complex she stood in, its form simply summoned into existence from the surrounding plant life and imprinted with the form it was to maintain for eternity. The last of the 'Gods' etched its final message across the surface of the great tower with a thought. At immense cost—the sacrifice of their own realm—they thought they had ceased the Dissolution, but The Dreaded nonetheless pursued them.

The "gods" had fled through the stars in the aftermath of the fall of their empire, each possessing something their enemy desired and bearing it far away. The last "god" had arrived here on Gru'Thiall, realizing its age-long flight was futile. The "god" resolved to end its life by its own accord. By its mere will, the luminous creature ceased to be in a flash of white light at the center of the complex. Plants for miles around instantly bloomed and grew as the light touched them. With this last image, the vision finally broke its hold over Bryluen.

Looking around she saw that Bel'Wa, Kirby, Runner, and Vort fared just as poorly as she, all of them bent and equally betrayed by their

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bodies. Nicadzim however stood straight, a curious expression briefly dancing across his face. The brevity of the motion was such that it was possible even Nicadzim himself hadn't noticed, but Bryluen deciphered the look in the short instant it was present: Nicadzim's face had betrayed a brief flash of *shame*.

Bryluen considered how to broach the subject for an instant, when she noticed their communication equipment was suddenly restored to full functionality. Comm chatter immediately burst forth as the garrison reacted to the restoration of sensors and communications. The color of the light from the spheroid shifted from gold to a white tone as if its mode of operation had changed.

Bryluen took a breath and straightened her back. Nicadzim stepped forward and abruptly put a hand on the spheroid. Bryluen twitched, about to rebuke him before stopping herself. Clearly he had vastly more insight than the rest of them, given his ability to interface with the ancient language and his earlier warning about the massive Stone. The being he had mentioned encountering combined with his reaction to the Fall of the "gods" set Bryluen on edge. She trusted Nicadzim's judgment, but the possibility of his having been tampered with by an unknown presence was concerning.

Gru'Thiall had already aptly demonstrated how much they had to learn of the threat they faced; who knew what other dangers lay in wait? She concluded it best to keep a close eye on him for other incongruous behavior in the future.

"Sh- ... *This* knows we will discover it. I suppose it has only to conceal the tomb from The Dreaded?" Nicadzim kept his hand on the pod for another moment or so.

"That seems somewhat rude, given that it just took away the only reason The Dreaded can't fin—" Bryluen cut herself off, a terrible certainty forming in her head. "—because it no longer matters that they can't see us. God *dammit*, they never left orbit! They just had to watch where we ended up gathering! Bel'Wa and Nicadzim, you're accompanying me to the main gate. Vort, join the Lancers on the perimeter; the Sentinels recently made contact with some sort of Dreaded able to shoot them down, so they'll appreciate the help. Kirby, get onto the rear wall and tell the *Atet* to ascend to low orbit. Runner? There's a sniper post erected out front of the main tower; you'll join the

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Rangers there. Now move!”

She switched channels rapidly as Dread Naught sprinted down the ramp. “This is Operative Branok. Full alert, Dreaded attack *will* be imminent. Combat readiness, *now*. Sjorthursars are already in orbit!”

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Though most starship captains would discuss battles as being “long-term” or “short-term”, in truth space combat was incredibly quick compared to terrestrial battles. Few realities of life for a ground trooper, or even atmospheric combat vehicles, applied to starships. Almost all weapons fire took place far beyond visual range, on the order of hundreds of thousands of kilometers. Famously, the Qixing Dreadnought-class vessel *Qor'thon's Fist* once flashed a smuggling vessel out of existence from the other side of a planetary system; complex gravitic calculations and in-system sensor relays allowed what was previously thought to be a deliriously impractical shot to attempt.

Since space combat took place in a vacuum, the only real limitations on a vessel's movement speed were relativity, its acceleration rate, and its ability to shift momentum in order to change course. This was something Human craft used in great, sweeping maneuvers on the order of tens of thousands of kilometers per hour. This also extended to the speed of projectiles, which in larger vessels could reach such velocities that they were unsafe for use against planets and necessitated automated defense grids on most any world to prevent an instant tragedy. Additionally since all aiming was done via targeting computers, there was almost no delay in firing upon new targets. These two factors

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of stellar ballistics meant weapons fire could almost never be dodged unless a craft was already in motion, and individual fire fights were blisteringly fast. The average duel to the death between individual starships, from engagement to incapacitation, lasted a little under six minutes. Ships engaged, disengaged, and re-engaged in roughly one to four-minute increments to assess damage and attempt to reacquire tactical advantage. The longest recorded continuous starship battle was the Siege of Xurruth Kkel, at an hour and twelve minutes of non-stop weapons fire.

Therefore when the captains of the Human and Qixing vessels would later describe the battle over Gru'Thiall as being grueling and long, they were referring to two combined time periods: the first about three minutes, and the second almost nine. During each of those two separate firefights, the assembled craft fired a combined force of munitions capable of scrubbing a city off the map.

The first vessel to respond to a sensor blip over Gru'Thiall was the Qixing ship *Spear of Li-an'Teyah* Q.G.S.D. The first Sjorthursar had materialized, its dark and sinuous form unfurling from the blackness of space as if squeezing itself through a pinhole in a theater backdrop. Within roughly a quarter second, the *Spear* adjusted course and unleashed three-quarters of its total weapon systems upon the beast. A tenth of a second later, the H.S.S.D. *Huángdì's Decree* lent its forward and starboard batteries to the task. At that same instant, the second and third Sjorthursars appeared, attracting the ire of *Monarch's Eye* Q.G.S.F. And H.S.S.D. *Passchendaele*. The next quarter second a fourth, fifth, and sixth Sjorthursar engaged, resulting in multi-directional fire from every Qixing and Human ship present.

Through the dark clouds and pounding rain on Gru'Thiall, the battle above manifested as rapid arcs and pulses of light like a fireworks show during a lightning storm. As with all void combat the battle was dreadfully silent, each ship experiencing only the faint vibration of their own insulated weapons fire and the dull reverberation and muffled hisses of impacts on the outer hull. The Sjorthursars were carefully coordinated: five of them engaged the defending craft while the sixth offloaded its cargo in a rapid, black stream downward. Then that craft would move back in toward the main battle as another took its turn deploying its own cargo. Rays and dart-like projectiles lashed out from

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The Dreaded in rapid volleys and targeted strikes aimed at sub-systems and weapon mounts. In return, the Human and Qixing craft unleashed bursts of slugs, twirling particle beams, clusters of missiles, and slashing lasers. Drones and point defense mounts filled the space between each ship with needling projectiles and flak bursts, every opposing shot forced through a gauntlet of thousands and thousands of rounds and shrapnel clouds intended to deflect, detonate, or disperse attacks.

After about three minutes of furious weapons fire, the Sjorthursars completed their task and rapidly vanished from sight. All of them had sustained damage—three appeared fairly injured, flowing clouds of black ichor left in their wake. The Marine and Sentinel craft loosed additional shots and rounds toward the last known locations of The Dreaded, but struck nothing.

The brief initial fight left long scars and ragged wounds in the hulls of the Qixing and Human craft, as well as a number of damaged turrets. The Destroyers fared well, though two of the Qixing frigates had experienced notable system damage. Starship armor was complex, consisting of various layers of advanced materials for the purposes of thermal and kinetic diffusion, magnetic dispersion, and various other means of preventing damage from the varied weapons a warship could expect to face. Sub-Systems on Human craft, such as communication and scanner arrays, were cowled in armor as much as possible and placed where they could be easily defended. Within seconds of the all-clear, repair drones and vacuum crews immediately deployed to the surface of the craft, swarming over them like ants as they repaired minor breaches and cleared debris. The craft resumed their watch within a minute or so, ready for a second round of combat during the inevitable return of the Sjorthursars. Unfortunately, the ever-present threat of an invisible enemy would make stopping to deliver an orbital bombardment a potentially lethal mistake.

The black streams of Dreaded powder were already well within the atmosphere, and took a trajectory not dissimilar from that the *Atet* had used to avoid anti-air fire. The black streams kept low, winding among the towering trees before slipping up onto the edge of the plateau and rapidly forming into a screeching horde. From all directions, The Dreaded began to charge toward the tomb. The Qixing Lancers spotted them, and were ordered to pull back to the safety of supporting fire.

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Even from the complex wall, numerous fireballs could be seen bursting through the tree line after the Lancers. Among those fireballs were sharp yellow bolts, each accompanied by a reverberating pop. These projectiles were apparently the doing of the new form of Dreaded the Lancers had fallen afoul of previously. The newest type of creature was a segmented, centipede-like thing about three and a half meters long, a dozen three-toed legs carrying its armored bulk. Feelers were draped around the entire underside of its carapace like shaggy hair. Each of the three body segments held a pair of antennae that quivered and ranged about in search of targets. On top of the front and rear segment was a rotating protrusion, blunt and hollow, from which the creature fired its payload. For all intents and purposes, they were weapons batteries with the aim and firepower to threaten vehicles.

The rest of the horde spotted by the Lancers consisted of all of the previously encountered forms of Dreaded, including a number of Ur-Rabisus. Estimates of their total force numbered upward of twelve thousand, and that was only assuming they had all materialized. Arrayed against them were approximately five hundred Astral Marines and two hundred sixty Gate Sentinels. The Qixing brought not only twenty Lancers, but an entire column of battle tanks, while the Marines had sixteen total walkers: four Ninurta Heavy Walkers, four Hadad Siege Armatures, and eight Shala Light Walkers divided into four squads. Though badly outnumbered, the defenders had the advantage of fortifications, height, and foreknowledge. The complex's main gate was secured by weighty cargo blocks arranged by Combat Engineers to prevent it from opening. Regardless of the advantageous position, the sheer mass of the enemy force would prove a challenge—especially as it meant the soldiers on the wall would undoubtedly be forced into melee combat.

Estimations indicated they only had a few scant minutes before The Dreaded first reached the outer edge of the defenders' firing range. The Rangers and the Hadad armatures possessed the height and range to engage at a substantial distance, but the density of the jungle complicated matters. Dread Naught burst out the front of the main tower, dispersing to obey Bryluen's orders. The sniper tower was a modular framework structure almost eight meters tall, its legs spanning the large door of the tower. Runner almost immediately left the ground as he burst

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through the door, his grapple snatching him up the sniper's perch. He landed inside the shielded sniper nest, getting his bearings and taking his long rifle in hand as the Rangers came up the ladders to either side. Captain Wongsawat nodded wordlessly as he and his soldiers unslung their sharpshooter rifles and began to pan for targets. From their position they could provide fire support for a roughly two hundred ten degree angle centered on the main gate.

The Walker squadrons, designated Vasuki, Padmavati, Karkotaka, and Ulupi, each arrayed themselves behind one of the complex walls. The opening stages of the conflict would only involve the Ninurtas or Shalas in the event of a wall breach. The Hadad Siege Armatures, however, were built for situations such as this. Each was a four-legged, somewhat gangly construct crewed by three soldiers. The turret of the walker could telescope upwards, allowing its weaponry to aim over obstructions and increase its effective range. The fearsome weapons of the Hadad were normally a pair of large-caliber cannons, with a missile launcher or high-yield energy weapon above them. The majority of the armature's bulk was taken up by these large-scale weapons, requiring a four-legged design for stability. While not quite as precise as dedicated weapon platforms, the maneuverability and adjustable height of the Hadad made it a fearsome and adaptable addition to the Marine arsenal.

Each Hadad planted its feet at the center of its respective wall, extended its weaponry to comfortably fire over the heads of the soldiers in front of it, and began to track back and forth across the tree line. Kirby jogged between the legs of squad Ulupi's Hadad, stomping up the stairs the combat engineers had been forced to erect—more evidence if it were needed that the complex wall had not been intended for defensive purposes. Finding a short barrier devoid of soldiery, she stopped and engaged her cannon. The barrel was segmented, and at her command extended from the top of her chassis, sealed itself into one unbroken shape, and rotated to lay flat against the top of the Marduk.

Kirby's stance shifted into a hunch, and a number of her rear armor plates shifted to provide the weight distribution necessary to balance the recoil of the weapon. The thickly armored ammo hoppers on the Jockey's back thumped and clacked loudly as the first round was loaded. The Marduk featured a number of hybrid control schemes, its

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artillery mode being one of them. Rather than more organically following Kirby's own motions, the Marduk locked its rotational axis to joystick control to allow absolute precision. Kirby's display began overlaying various forms of sensory and targeting information in a storm of data.

Vort's wings made a loud pop of displaced air as he projected himself skyward. His people had evolved on a world with higher gravity than that of Humans and Qixing. Gru'Thiall in particular swung toward the low end of comfortable gravity for those species, meaning the colorful alien could easily attain cruising speeds upward of one hundred forty kilometers an hour without tiring. He fell in with one of several howling Lancer formations that swept a perimeter around the clearing and over the complex, watchful for movement and scanning for target signatures.

Bryluen joined the Wake-Maker at the fortifications constructed before the main gate, which included a pair of armored gun emplacements aimed toward the gate itself. Marine combat engineers were gifted and remarkably fast, possessing a number of modular structure designs whose components could be easily sent down in a drop craft, rolled to an optimal position, and rooted to the ground at lightning speed. The Operative took stock of the situation before dispatching Nicadzim to accompany the soldiers dug in just behind the gate, and Bel'Wa to the wall above the gate where a unit of Sentinels was entrenched.

Due to the aesthetic intent of the complex's entryway, even with support it was more than likely going to be breached. As such, the Marines posted there had created a dense kill-zone of staggered firing positions and directional explosives. Other extraneous barriers had been provided to allow a number of Qixing tanks to remain in position hull down to lend their larger-caliber firepower to the defense of the gate and surrounding area. Qixing battle tanks tended to be sleeker than their Human equivalents, and prioritized guided weaponry over more traditional armaments. For the most part, the Qixing left tank or walker-hunting to specialist vehicles, and long-range artillery duties normally fell to heavy mobile emplacements.

Trees and undergrowth began to shake and rustle in the distance. The collective sensory information of the walkers, swirling groups of

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Lancers, and infantry armor was rapidly collated to inform the commanders of the densest enemy concentrations. The main gate would receive the widest and largest mass of enemies, while the complex wall opposite the gate (and closest to the edge of the plateau) would receive the second greatest attack. The Marines and Sentinels made slight adjustments to their dispositions to accommodate the strength of the enemy, and the longest-ranged weapons took up aim toward the enemy army.

The Wake-Maker paced back and forth impatiently, drinking up the constant updates scrolling across his data feed. Lieutenant Colonel Kitoko was engaging in almost precisely the same action at the other end of the complex. They both spotted the piece of information they were looking for: the front line of The Dreaded would reach range in about five seconds. Cyoni'o suddenly stopped his pacing and raised a fist, while Kitoko dropped into cover next to her men. Over internal comms, Cyoni'o shouted a two-word command. Almost three hundred Qixing weapons simultaneously snapped into a complex set of pre-ordained firing angles, and the Gate Sentinels began to sing. At the same instant a great shout rose from the Marines, a wordless battle-cry magnified by their armor that echoed out into the jungle in defiance of the approaching foe. A discordant cacophony of shrieks, squawks, hisses, and howls answered back as the foe closed. At the moment the first Dreaded reached the effective range of their weaponry, Cyoni'o and Kitoko both gave the command to fire.

The clearing about the tomb complex was instantly lit by slugs, bullets, beams of light, ionized gases, rockets, and high-explosive shells. Coilguns wailed into the foliage beside dual-rotary cannon mounts and shrieking plasma flare-cannons. Great plumes of fire lurched and twitched among the towering trees, and a great cloud of steam began to rise across the battlefield as the heat of the energy weapons dissipated the falling rain.

From above the wall, the swirling Lancers loosed their weapons downward into the foliage in blinding stitches of light. Maintaining a rapidly weaving pattern of motion to avoid enemy fire, they began to range out and saturate portions of the jungle in punishing munitions.

Among the flashes of light and fire the dark silhouettes of The Dreaded rushed onward, hundreds of their number incinerated, maimed,

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or shredded in the first volleys of the battle. The various forms of Rabisu had not yet begun returning fire, possibly focusing on rushing forward as quickly as possible to be clear of the obstructing plant life. However, the segmented cannon creatures began firing test shots as they scurried behind the front line. The harsh yellow bolts flew toward the defenders, damaging barriers and taking chunks from the wall. A number of their shots went up toward the Lancers, causing them to accelerate and change their flight paths. A loud clang was heard as a shot glanced off of squad Padmavati's Hadad, leaving a long rent in its turret armor.

Kirby's targeting algorithms highlighted an Ur-Rabisu, hunched and rushing through the undergrowth amid a herd of its subordinates. Her heavy weapon whirred as it aimed. With a gentle tap of the firing stud her cannon slammed backward, hurling an armor-piercing shell toward the beast. The projectile tore through undergrowth and vines, impacting the monster in the upper chest. The explosion sent it flailing onto its back, one of its arms cartwheeling through the air on the back of the shell's bright detonation. It tried to rise again, only to receive a second shell in the center of its chest. This time, the mangled thing stayed down. She moved onto the next promising target, firing a cluster of rockets as she took aim once more.

Vort dove hard, the metal plates along his wings beginning to whistle as his speed blurred his appearance into a colorful streak. Pulling up at the last moment he passed low over one of the centipede creatures. It was allowing the surrounding Dreaded to shield it as its two weapons tracked for targets and fired at a constant rhythm. Vort unleashed a bolt of lightning against the beast, the white burst sundering its shell in several places. It recoiled and twitched as the surrounding Rabisus turned to ash. After a moment the cannon-bearing Dreaded staggered and then finally collapsed, smoke trailing out of the holes in its carapace. By then Vort was long gone, sweeping up to rejoin a Lancer squad that was moving to thin The Dreaded approaching the rear of the complex.

The Rangers coolly stared down the sights of their heavy rifles, red tongues of flame flashing from the barrels to stop distant foes in their tracks. Runner was at home among them, silently pulping head after head as he eyed priority targets. The confident slap and whine of his rifle's accelerator was comforting, its tone piercing through the dull barks of the Ranger's rifles like the lead soprano of a chorale movement.

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En-Rabisus were still similar enough to standard infantry to be downed by a precise head shot, while Ur-Rabisus and the heavy-weapon Dreaded were enduring enough that it was essentially a waste of ammo to try and strike them enough times in the same place to bring them down.

Bel'Wa stood among the Sentinels arrayed over the main gate. Marines were situated behind and below them to defend the gate from the ground level, as well as to the left and right of the Sentinel formation. For now the Sentinels engaged in suppressing fire, intended to send as many bullets toward the horde as possible in order to slow The Dreaded advance. Aim wasn't particularly an issue at the moment, and as such Bel'Wa stood at the barrier firing her arm cannon and shield blindly toward the jungle. The whizzing sound of the Sentinels' bullets was a storm of fire that sounded like a million-strong beehive. Their martial song continued on the Sentinels' internal comms as the foe neared, three hundred voices in unison unheard by the Marines right next to them.

Nicadzim was dug in near the gate, warily watching through the large holes between the vines. The weapon emplacements and scattered fire teams of Marines would fire through the gaps in the gate until it was breached. Given the sheer mass of the enemy, that would undoubtedly occur sooner rather than later. At that time walker squad Vasuki would lend their full presence and firepower to holding the gate in a vise-grip of firepower and mettle. Bryluen overlooked the gate defense alongside the Wake-Maker. She gripped her liquid metal rifle and simply waited for the moment she would need to use it.

Despite the fire from the centipede Dreaded the defenders had a vast advantage—until the front line of The Dreaded finally entered the clearing. The various forms of Rabisu flung fireballs at the defenders in their dozens, the already cacophonous battle gaining an entire new layer of sound as fireballs splattered and flared against the wall, the barriers, and armor plate. At the same moment, Cyoni'o spoke another brief word over the Sentinel comms. The Qixing soldiers immediately assumed a different pattern of fire discipline, beginning to explicitly pick out the front-most individuals of the enemy line. The heavier weapons began to pick off large targets while the Lancers used the open space to prey upon the centipede monsters, who had mostly stopped moving at the edge of the jungle.

## 27. The Trial of the Tomb

A Lancer spun downward, smoking and aflame past Vort. The gunner and pilot plummeted, their armor triggering their chutes to allow a safe descent. The gunner was sagging from their chute, dark maroon blood running down a ragged hole in their side. Marine medical personnel denoted by white armor plates, moved to catch the falling Sentinels. Any that were shot down outside the wall's perimeter would hardly be so fortunate. Vort tucked in his wings and dove for another blisteringly fast pass, leaving a torrent of flame in a wide wall aligned with the gate. The front row of Dreaded survived barely an instant as the flames overtook them. The others were forced to go around the wall, slowing their charge. An Ur-Rabisu simply leaped through the fire and continued onward, throwing a sequence of fireballs from each arm at the gun emplacements next to the gate.

Kirby holed a centipede beast with a long distance shot, and a second shell sent it staggering off to one side and falling over dead. She retracted her cannon and returned the Marduk to its standard control scheme. Sliding her rotary cannons up to her fists, she spun up the guns and targeted a Gugalanna formation spearing for the center of the wall. Despite having not seen evidence of this previously, she had a sickening feeling the powerful claws on each of the horned beasts' feet would allow them to climb. A storm of bullets shredded the first Gugalanna, before Kirby braced herself and panned each rotary cannon mount outward across the formation. The front Gugalannas stumbled or fell as the stream of bullets passed over them, causing the entire formation to slow and falter. At that moment, one of the Qixing tanks behind her section of wall loosed a cluster of missiles into the air. They left the launcher, curved tightly some three or four meters over the defenders, then dove and caused the Gugalannas to vanish in a tight series of explosions. Regardless, it would be less than a dozen seconds until the first Dreaded reached the wall.

Nearer the edge of the plateau and away from the battle, a group of the centipede creatures—later to be designated 'Omukade'—were held in reserve. Their powerful sensory organs scanned the ground all around, identifying hollow spaces beneath them that Omukades closer to the front had confirmed continued onward beneath the complex in the direction of the Stone. A group of Gugalannas and Ur-Rabisus began to frantically dig a pit downward.

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The Dreaded reached the defenses in clusters, each hurtling upward on sharp claws to try and reach the soldiers atop the wall. Every third Sentinel had taken a blade and sidearm in hand to fend off the creatures trying to attack their compatriots. The Marines activated their gauntlet ripsaws, shredding any heads and limbs that came within range. The thickest portion of the assault was at the main gate, as veritable waves of Dreaded tried to flow through and over the defenders there. Nicadzim and the Marines around him fired through the gaps in the gate, the glowing metallic balls of Nicadzim's hand-held weapon standing out against the surrounding storm of bullets. The walkers of squad Vasuki each picked a hole in the gate to fire auto-cannon shells or plasma streams through, leaving spatters of black dust and chunky fluids splashed all across the yellow structure.

Atop the wall, Bel'Wa stood with her blade in hand, decapitating an En-Rabisu that reared up next to one of the gun emplacements. She felt a pair of fireballs flash against her shield from below, but ignored them as she pulped the head of a climbing Rabisu with her arm cannon. She shouted a command word to the Sentinels at the gate. As one, they each pulled a grenade from their belts and dropped them down along the edge of the wall. A series of choked explosions sounded out, hurling

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Dreaded limbs and great arcs of dark ichor high into the air.

One of the plasma flare emplacements fired downward, a blueish-white arc of ionized gas causing the top half of an Ur-Rabisu to disappear with a violent hiss of steam. The thing's legs took another step before falling across several Rabisus that had stood in front of the four-armed beast. Further up the wall, a Marine plasma cannon flashed and burst to pieces as a yellow bolt struck it head-on. The gunner manning the weapon was hurled backward off the wall, flailing as he fell hard on the ground below. The Dreaded began to clamber up that section of the wall. Bel'Wa moved toward the gap in the defense with her shield held up, sprinting headlong toward the front-most Dreaded. With a hard thrust she shunted the creature backwards off the wall, the force of the impact causing it to take several of its fellows with it.

With swift, graceful sword motions she dismembered a series of Rabisus attempting to climb up in the same spot. Another En-Rabisu hurled itself up onto the wall a couple of meters to her side. She shot it once in the chest with both her arm cannon and shield mount, then rushed forward. She swung the shield and struck the bottom of the En-Rabisu's head so hard its feet left the ground. It tried to regain its balance and bearings, but Bel'Wa denied it an arm before it had the chance to do so. With another shield bash Bel'Wa knocked the En-Rabisu to the ground and executed it with a pair of arm-cannon shots to the chest. A moment later several Sentinels relocated from further up the wall to re-secure the battle line. She nodded to them and returned to her previous position. Two of the Shalas from squad Vasuki departed the gate on Lieutenant Colonel Kitoko's orders to reinforce a portion of the western wall.

Runner raised his eyebrows as the unmistakably long arm of an Ur-Rabisu shot up and over the edge of the west wall. He calmly took a shot exactly between two of the creature's fingers. The energetic projectile removed the digits with a swift flash, causing the monsters' grip to falter momentarily before it swung two more arms up onto the ledge. This gave Runner precisely enough time to drop his rifle and arm his adjustable energy cannon. Without looking down he moved three dials on the body of the weapon and aimed it at the creature's face. Just as it pulled itself up onto the wall and planted one foot, a long bolt powered out from the cannon and struck the center of the Ur-Rabisu's

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petaled head. Though not nearly enough to kill or even badly wound the thing, the force of the impact—and the explosion accompanying it—forced the Ur-Rabisu to lose its balance and fall off the wall. A pair of Lancers unleashed cannon fire of their own upon the prone beast before pulling back as a trio of yellow bolts flew from the jungle toward them.

Kirby had now taken her massive hammer in hand, occasionally firing rockets downward from her missile rack as she swung the heavy weapon in a wide arc that slung limp corpses to either side of her. Sadly, her earlier thesis was confirmed as a Gugalanna came up the side of the wall. Before it could properly mount the top of the wall, she held the arming stud of the hammer with one thumb and brought the weapon down on the creature's face. A powerful explosive force bolted from the square aperture on the hammer's head. The explosion obliterated the Gugalanna's front half, sending it crashing down on a Rabisu. Bryluen curtly informed her some spare Marines from the South and East walls were coming to cover the losses she was currently compensating for.

Bryluen was resting her liquid metal rifle against the front barrier of the command structure. She fired precise shots of accelerated fluid through the gate, melting eyes, faces, and torsos. The Dreaded attacking the gate were rushing through a dark cloud of corpse dust, so great were the casualties inflicted by the defenders. At about that time Lieutenant Colonel Kitoko received a ping from one of the combat engineers down in the Stone chamber: a mapping drone in the catacombs had just gone dark; its last image was a black claw. She immediately relayed this information to Bryluen and Cyoni'o.

"I can't spare much more than the engineers already down there. We're already having to spread the Walkers out to clear wall sections. We've got Dreaded corpses falling *inside* the complex now; the pressure is mounting quickly."

Bryluen grunted. "Wake-Maker, can you spare a small unit under Storm Mother Belzxilenth'Wa's command? Lieutenant Colonel, have the engineers rig charges to collapse the tunnels leading from the catacombs into the Stone chamber. I'll give them the signal to blow the tunnels. It's an ancient structure, but it *should* grow back—unlike us if we fail."

Cyoni'o, crouching to Bryluen's right, gave a diagonal nod. "Yes, Operative, I can spare units Iuth'Qo and Ki'Yun'Sia off the east

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wall. I'll have them proceed to the Stone chamber immediately."

The Operative nodded before switching over to Dread Naught's private channel. "We've got word The Dreaded have entered the catacomb system—presumably by digging. Bel'Wa, Nico: I want you to get to the main tower ASAP and join the Sentinels there. Judge the situation and hold those tunnels until the Marine Engineers can rig explosives. Keep me updated; the line soldiers can hardly be spared, but if you need more of *us* down there, give the signal."

She spotted an Omukade on the edge of the jungle, its dual cannons firing upward at the Lancers as it scuttled along the edge of the clearing. She adjusted her sight, breathed, noted her armor's calculations for wind speed and bearing, and fired. One of the creature's antennae was struck as intended, the sensory structure sagging and damaged by the jet of molten metal. Instantly, she saw the creature's aim go wide as it was forced to compensate for the partial loss of one of its major senses. She pinged the Omukade and sent the coordinates to one of the Qixing tanks by the gate. The vehicle's lean missile launcher swung about, taking new aim and dispatching a pair of anti-armor missiles up and over the wall. Only a moment later the Omukade was wreathed in flame, one of its shell sections somersaulting a dozen meters into the air.

Nicadzim slid back from the barrier he was crouched behind, manifesting his spike-ball gun and jogging at a crouch back toward the main tower. The shells and rockets of the vehicles flew overhead, ceaseless in their bombardment of the enemy. He wound back out of the field of fire until he passed beneath the sniper's roost and headed inside the tower. Bel'Wa had descended down the nearest ramp, jogging with her shield held close to her body. The upper left corner of the shield bore a new scar from a deflected Omukade bolt, but she was otherwise unmarred by the battle so far.

Just inside the tower, the twenty-four-strong Sentinel squads Iuth'Qo and Ki'Yun'Sia waited. Bel'Wa made a hand gesture, at which point the soldiers fell in behind her. Nicadzim and Bel'Wa ran down the long ramp toward the Stone. During the descent they received a report of a second mapping drone being destroyed, this time not by a claw. The cause was uncertain, but the last frames seemed to show a jet of some sort of liquid incapacitating the machine. The great Stone had been secured with stakes, cables, and weights to try and keep the Dreaded

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from taking it.

The Marine Engineers had set clusters of offensive charges some distance inside each tunnel in order to buy them time to set the larger explosives that would isolate the central chamber. Bel'Wa told the Sentinels to disperse among the tunnel entries, resulting in ten Sentinels at three of the tunnels, and nine Sentinels at each of the other two. Nicadzim and Bel'Wa each took position so that an equal number of soldiers defended each tunnel. The assembled soldiery was arrayed in cover at the sides of the tunnel itself, or behind the totem pillars. The oppressive aura of the massive Stone felt like the breath of a nocturnal predator on the backs of their necks.

A wet, sussurant noise oozed from the cthonic darkness of the catacombs. The choking coughs of Gugalannas and the squawking cries of Rabisus became clearer and clearer as they drew near. The Sentinels' helmet filters cast the tunnels in dark blue and purple tones, and The Dreaded would appear in light gray. The enemy arrived near-simultaneously at each vast corridor, leaping and sprinting toward the Stone. The Sentinels poured fire down the corridor in neat bursts, conserving ammunition to prevent ill-timed reloads. Bel'Wa fired her shield cannon at a steady rate. She loaded bursting rounds into her arm cannon, each shot releasing a bright flare of ionized gas that consumed four or five Rabisus at a time. Nicadzim wielded his spike-ball cone, the hissing darts glowing brightly in the dark catacombs as they burned their way through the mass of monsters in the hall.

The engineers were behind them in cover, directing drones to plant and wire the demolition charges two tunnels at a time. They had prepared two corridors for collapse already, but to avoid unwanted structural failures all of the corridors were required to be collapsed at once. The presence of the defending Sentinels fortunately drew the enemies' attention away from the small bomb drones hovering overhead in the high tunnels. The mass of The Dreaded meant that, despite the organized defending fire, they were drawing closer to the Stone chamber.

Bel'Wa waited until the enemy came within about twenty meters, then signaled the Marine engineers. The first of the four sets of mines exploded, shredding Dreaded along the length of each hall in a storm of shrapnel. The few survivors were rapidly dispatched by the whizzing,

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corkscrew bullets of the Sentinels. A moment later, more Dreaded came from the depths of the catacombs in a swarm just as solid as the first. Several fireballs splattered against Bel'Wa's shield as she resumed firing.

She connected her comms to Brylue's private channel and spoke in a tone of wistful calm. "Storm Mother Belzxilenth'Wa speaking. Unless the engineers can accelerate their work, and assuming The Dreaded maintain their current numbers, we will require reinforcement in about two and a half minutes. If at all possible, I would suggest Kirby or Vort as our first addition; vehicle-scale firepower would extend our time-table significantly. After all: from what he has told me between salvos, Nicadzim can only be present in so many places at once."

"Operative Branok speaking. Recommendation noted, Storm Mother." Brylue's voice faintly betrayed a slight strain.

At that particular moment, Brylue was on foot near the gate. A trio of Ur-Rabisu had managed to force enough of the gate open to allow a stream of Dreaded to enter. Focused Omukade firepower had eliminated one of the weapon emplacements over the gate and badly damaged the other. One Ur-Rabisu was already eliminated, struck down in a harrowing fight with a Ninurta. The second was being pieced apart by several walkers at once, and Brylue was sprinting toward the third from behind. She stepped between the Ur-Rabisu's legs while the large beast dodged and weaved shots from a nearby Ninurta. The Dreaded hurled fireballs from three of its arms as it side-stepped, two of them striking the Ninurta's armor. The thick plates of the chassis held, but were scorched and cracked by the impacts.

Brylue slid her whip's dial to extend its length. "Repeat, vis a vis Nicadzim?"

Brylue lashed her whip upwards, catching it around one the beast's upper arms. She pulled herself up onto the Ur-Rabisu's lower back. The wire cut into even this monster's thick flesh, but she would need to plant her feet to pull hard enough to draw it through.

"He's ... blinking between corridors to shore up problem areas," Bel'Wa stated matter-of-factly.

The Ur-Rabisu staggered as a spray of plasma caught one of its petals, pausing just long enough for Brylue to brace herself and pull

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with a shout. With a gout of black fluid and a loud tearing sound, the whip removed the Ur-Rabisu's arm. Bryluen spun and landed on her feet as she fell off the monster. The loss of an arm caused the thing to pause for one fatal moment of comprehension before a Ninurta rocket decapitated it. She held up the handle of her whip as the wire stiffened and reeled back inside.

Bryluen moved the dial back down to a more normal length. "Nicadzim *is* a very useful man, is he not? I've set a timer, and Vort will be sent down to you when needed. Alert me should conditions change."

The second set of charges was soon used to prevent The Dreaded from reaching the defenders in the Stone chamber. Bel'Wa and Nicadzim both had slain several Rabisus in melee, and for the most part the only real problem was the finite sets of explosives. Vort arrived as the second and third corridors were readied for demolition, his elemental bursts easing the defense of the tunnels in great gouts of flame and lightning.

Soon afterward as the flying alien lent his firepower to the battle, and the fourth and fifth corridors were being prepared for collapse, one of the creatures from the catacomb inscriptions became all too real and present. The first sign was a tight jet of acid instantly incapacitating one of the Sentinels with a loud hiss. The creature responsible would later be dubbed an Ogumo.

They were roughly radial creatures that propelled themselves in rolling motions using a number of thin, flexible limbs spread out across their surface. An Ogumo's uneven central mass was roughly as high as a man, and a series of orifices between its limbs were responsible for the jets of acid it could produce. The first Ogumo was rolling alongside the wall meters above its compatriots, the adhesive ends of its limbs allowing it to easily scale vertical surfaces.

Bel'Wa immediately alerted Bryluen, knowing the increase in enemy firepower would endanger the defense. Two more Ogumos rapidly appeared at other corridors, forcing the Sentinels back into cover more tightly than before. The creatures were fairly tough, though their true strength did seem to lie in maneuverability and firepower. Bel'Wa loaded anti-armor rounds into her arm cannon and sent one of the flailing, tentacled creatures crashing downward with a trio of shots. The third set of anti-infantry explosives had to be used earlier than

## 28. Chaos in the Catacombs

anticipated as the acid jets from the Ogumos wounded several more Sentinels.

Bel'Wa received a brief notification from a third mapping drone. It was a short video of one of the many dark corridors in the network of tunnels. A shape, far larger than any Dreaded yet seen, passed beneath the drone. The video was accompanied by a size estimate that caused her eyebrows to raise.

“Operative Branok, I’ve confirmed a post-Heavy Walker contact approaching the Stone at speed. Recommendation?”

“Storm Mother, I’m dispatching the remainder of Dread Naught and myself. A contact capable of traveling through the catacombs will be able to exit the main tower into our midst, and a contact that size could likely dig through a collapsed tunnel to take the Stone. We need to single it out and kill it down there. We’re on our way; use grenades and the remaining charges to make time, and send the Sentinels back up to cover for our absence.”

Kirby was next to come stomping down from the main tower. Her large quantity of explosives allowed her to stand back near the Stone and pivot toward each corridor, powering rockets down each in turn. Runner followed shortly after, and as the team was entirely assembled Bryluen came striding downward, firing her liquid rifle. The Sentinels had unleashed their grenades in thirty second intervals, eight departing up the ramp with each round. By the time the last eight Sentinels left, a member of Dread Naught stood at each corridor. The ground soon began to shake, and the advance of The Dreaded slackened and ceased for just a few moments as if making room for the new arrival.

Nicadzim pulled his icy fly-wheel from the chest cavity of an En-Rabisu, then sighed as he looked up and saw a huge monstrosity coming down his corridor. “Central corridor, and very, very large.”

The engineers had wired the last demolition charge and withdrew toward the tower to await Bryluen’s signal. Bryluen had considered trying to collapse the tunnel *on* the beast, but the slightest error in timing would leave it alive and able to dig through with an army behind it. The best option was to take advantage of the momentary pause its approach had caused and isolate it. Bryluen called the team to gather back in cover by the Stone. Though the following wait lasted mere moments, the air

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was tense with expectation.

Kirby whirled her heavy hammer with one gauntlet, the huge weapon making a whooshing sound as it spun. “All right, folks: let’s kill us a biggun.”

## 29. Almighty Aeshma

In the aftermath of the battle at Gru’Thiall, the towering beast would be dubbed an “Aeshma.” At the moment, however, all Dread Naught knew was that the gigantic abomination looming from the shadows was vastly larger than anything they had yet fought. The Aeshma was a hulking, hunched shape more than three times Kirby’s height. As it crouched and sidestepped through the entry into the stone chamber, Dread Naught immediately recognized the gargantuan thing from the catacomb inscriptions—and its artistic rendition was every bit as terrible as the reality.

It was a centauroid behemoth, tripod claws the length of a person anchoring each of its massive legs. A short torso as broad as a battle tank supported two clusters of rope-like tendrils that wrapped tightly about each other, conglomerating into two flexible appendages large enough to grapple a heavy walker. The monstrosity’s flattened head was seemingly eyeless, and dominated by a huge distended jaw ringed in twisted tusks. Within its maw were irregular rows of bony ridges that appeared far better for maiming than chewing. The entirety of its body was thickly coated in a dark coral-like material, uneven and bulging as if the monstrosity had been sprayed with expanding foam.

Bryluen raised a fist, and the ground shook. The engineers

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simultaneously triggered the remaining anti-infantry explosives as well as the demolition charges. All five tunnels simultaneously collapsed just behind the Aeshma with a great roar, cutting it off from the wave of Dreaded following just behind it. With utter finality, the monster was sealed in the chamber with Dread Naught. Either the abominable creature would be slain, or the battle would be lost. The huge Stone—which had been unmoved by the previous Dreaded attacking the chamber—twitched and jerked beneath the cables binding it. Each motion produced a loud grinding sound as the multi-tonne object thrashed against its restraints. The massive monster looked back for an instant as the tunnels collapsed, then let loose an atonal shriek as loud as an artillery cannon as it charged forward.

No words were exchanged and no time was wasted on reactions beyond brief, wordless exclamations. Dread Naught opened fire on the beast at once: Bryl's liquid metal rifle sought weak points, Runner's energy cannon directed blasts against the Aeshma's head, and Bel'Wa unleashed screaming anti-armor rounds from her wrist. Nicadzim let loose his cluster launcher against the oncoming thing, while Kirby fired a spread of small remote charges from her missile rack. Vort sang forth a harsh lightning storm, causing the ungodly Dreaded to flinch as the bolts wracked it's body. Though this barrage left long rents across its outer surface, the Aeshma continued unhindered.

The room was now brightly lit, energy and projectiles of various colors illuminating the dire Stone chamber. The storm of fire left numerous small wounds on the Aeshma, but failed to meaningfully slow its advance.

The moment before it became a direct danger to Dread Naught, Kirby detonated the charges she had planted across the creature's surface. The force of the detonation rocked the behemoth and managed to halt it for a moment, allowing the team to disperse. Runner used his grappling hook to launch to the top of one of the pillars, and Vort took flight with a loud beat of his wings. Nicadzim and Kirby rushed toward another pillar further to one side of the monster, while Bryluen and Bel'Wa sprinted into better cover on the other side. As hard chunks of the beast's flesh began to rain down it shrieked again, lunging toward Kirby and Nicadzim in pursuit of the largest and most obviously threatening targets.

## 29. Almighty Aeshma

The Aeshma pursued Nicadzim and Kirby along the outside of the ring of pillars, its superior length of stride propelling it at a surprising speed. The Aeshma swung one arm downward toward Kirby, forcing her to pivot aside. The creature's wide swing destroyed a neighboring pillar, sending chunks of totem flying. Kirby almost immediately counterattacked with a sideways hammer strike against the tendril-limb. With a bang, one of the tendrils was almost completely severed. Kirby stepped backwards past the nearest pillar, firing rockets at the creature's chest as she did so. It loomed forward, only to feel a cold impact against one of its rear legs. Nicadzim's flywheel passed through the monster's flesh at a shallow angle despite the strength of his two-armed strike. The being lifted its foot in an attempt to kick him, but Nicadzim blinked out of the way and gave the same treatment to the foot opposite the one he just struck.

Runner immediately shot the first wound Nicadzim had created with a focused bolt from his energy cannon. The wound was widened slightly in a flash of energy, but no blood was drawn. The creature began to turn leftward to confront Nicadzim, when an anti-armor round from Bel'Wa's arm cannon struck the creature in the right side of its face. Its chin jerked aside from the impact as if it had been punched. The monster shook its head, then swept both limbs along its flanks in an attempt to swat Nicadzim. Nicadzim managed to blink outside of the creature's reach before he was struck, and resumed firing his cluster launcher into the creature's back. The Aeshma turned to regard Bel'Wa and Bryluen across the chamber, and received a gout of liquid metal against the roof of its mouth in return. Vort swung low behind the monstrosity, pummeling it with another jagged lightning cluster.

The creature roared and raised one arm, tracing Vort's flight path. The tendrils tightened into a long tube—Kirby swung back around the pillar, recognizing a weapon barrel when she saw one. With a heavy swing, she struck the nearest knee with her hammer. A great bang sounded from her weapon, and the force was great enough to cause the Aeshma's aim to wander. A luminous bolt of orange energy flew from its limb, leaving a pit in the roof just behind Vort. Various exclamations burst from the mouths of the task force members. The Dreaded brought its other limb down to strike at Kirby, but she met it with her hammer. Again, the concussive force of the explosive forced its limb away and

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damaged more of its tendrils. Kirby braced for another attack, but the beast side-stepped her reach and swung an arm toward her again.

An explosive pulse from Runner's energy cannon and a steaming shot from Bryluen altered its swing and allowed Kirby just enough time to spin out of the Dreaded's reach and counter attack with a rocket burst. Bryluen shouted a command over comms, and the team began to focus exclusively on the tendrils. Kirby continued to spar and swing at the monster, her large armored form best suited to attempting to occupy the thing. Another close strike from Nicadzim caused the thing to try and backhand him, at which point he blinked to its other side. Taking a less predictable course of action, the monster lunged toward Kirby and attempted to clap its limbs around her. She hopped backwards and made a defensive swing. The explosion forced most of the tendrils away, but she received a glancing blow which left large dents on both sides of her cockpit. She momentarily mused how fortunate it was that she had upgraded her armor, before again firing her missile rack into the thing's lowered face and stepping backwards.

Nicadzim continued his pattern of striking at the thing and disappearing, though the icy fly-wheel little able to do more than scratch and lightly gouge the creature's hide. Accordingly the monster began to take no notice, instead stepping back from Kirby and raising an arm to fire. Nicadzim blinked in front of it and swung the flywheel over his head, finally severing one tendril. The shot from the weapon partly redirected out of the gap in its "barrel" and fell short of striking the exosuit. However, reprisal was swift. Nicadzim dropped to the ground in anticipation of a return swing, but his reaction time was just short of what it needed to be. The side of a tendril caught one of his exterior armor plates and sent him twirling through the air toward a pillar. A moment before contact, he blinked to the other side of the pillar. With a clatter of heavy armor, he landed on the ground and rolled for a distance as his momentum expended itself. The plate that had been struck was warped and ruined from a blow no more than the equivalent of fly-swatting.

Bel'Wa crossed the distance to Nicadzim at a sprint, planting her shield in the direction of the Aeshma. "Nico, are you alright?"

"Yes, fortunately." He extended a hand upward, and Bel'Wa hauled him onto his feet with a quick tug.

## 29. Almighty Aeshma

Nicadzim wheeled back toward the Aeshma with his glass-launcher on his shoulder once more, jogging off to take cover behind a pillar as Bel'Wa split in the other direction. Bryluen sprinted from pillar to pillar, assessing the damage they had done to the Aeshma so far. Its wounds were small, the only real damage having been dealt to the tendrils. She kept her rifle braced, occasionally snapping off a shot against one of the beast's arms. She noted many of its bodily injuries seemed to be sealing over and filling in as the fight raged onward.

Runner was leaping and grappling between pillars to give himself the best angles for his shots, and had altered the settings on his weapon numerous times. So far, he had yet to find a combination of settings that would do more than distract or uselessly dent the Aeshma. Vort had struck it several times and dealt broad surface wounds, but Kirby remained the only one of them capable of dealing what seemed to be real and immediate damage. Bryluen reflected that having a second individual able to meaningfully stand toe-to-toe with the behemoth would have allowed Kirby to use her cannon and make this fight far easier. She had initially been surprised that Vort could not deal more damage; she now surmised that whatever material coated the Aeshma may have some functional relation to the energy-dispersing foams used in starship armor. At any rate, it was better than the armor on most heavy vehicles.

The monster toppled another pillar as it lunged toward Kirby, the pieces of the totem rolling and bouncing aside. One larger piece tumbled directly into the Stone. On impact, the totem piece broke apart violently. Not only was no visible damage dealt to the Stone—later investigation would confirm not even dust had been parted from it—but somehow no particulates or pieces of the totem fragment came to rest on the black surface. Bryluen rolled her eyes at this latest addition to the material's long list of unexplainable properties.

A flash and a bang sounded out as Kirby's hammer found its mark once more. An entire section of tendril flew from the end of the Aeshma's arm, spinning through the air just under Vort as he made another attack run. The monster stood back and raised both of its arms. They each formed into cannons and the beast began to fire. It knew the damage it had suffered would effect its accuracy, and it apparently decided to compensate by firing as many shots as possible. Kirby jogged

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as quickly as she could from its field of fire, large bolts of energy hurtling across the room and striking the far wall. Three more pillars were destroyed as the howling blasts crashed around her. Kirby was swung about by the force of a glancing impact, red lights flashing in her cockpit as a portion of her rear torso warped. Vort almost immediately struck the back of the Aeshma's head with lightning, then accelerated and began to rise and fall unpredictably as the abomination took aim at him. The air was filled with the sound of repeating concussive booms as the Aeshma's weapons fire traced all around the darting alien overhead. It paused for a moment, and then lowered its arms. The temperature in the chamber dropped several degrees for an instant, then the damaged or severed tendrils rapidly reformed with a crackling sound. The beast then raised its newly repaired cannons, but Kirby stepped in and struck its chin to prevent it from firing.

Bryluen motioned to Bel'Wa, who was a couple of pillars away. Bel'Wa broke from cover and ran to meet her. "That's officially the limit on being reasonable about this. Want to see me do something ludicrous? I've developed a taste for something I think you'll find interesting!"

Bel'Wa leaned out from behind the pillar they were sharing to unceremoniously send another bursting round into the thrashing Aeshma's head. "You know I live for this. How can I help?"

"Boost me up two pillars that way." Bryluen holstered her rifle, then took her nanowhip and the vise she'd received from Nicadzim in her hands. "Be ready to come up behind me."

Runner stood on a pillar directly across from the monster's current position, and with a quick adjustment of his cannon sent a bursting shot directly into the Aeshma's mouth as it fought Kirby. It reeled for a moment from the hit, smoke flowing from its maw. It huffed a breath—more in irritation than in anything else—causing Runner to throw up a hand in frustration. He cut the motion short as the monstrosity raised one arm to fire toward him. As the Dreaded's arm cannon began to glow for its next shot, Runner's adrenaline peaked. Every violent motion and chaotic flash of the battle stretched out like taffy, slowing to a gentle crawl. Long before any form of conscious thought had registered in his mind, he had already begun vaulting toward the next pillar, the hiss of his boot lifts elongated into a long whistle.

## 29. Almighty Aeshma

Suspended in the air, he witnessed a near-frozen moment in time. Vort swept close behind the Aeshma at the far side of the chamber, a procession of colors normally too fast for a Human to see rippling across his surface. A gout of flame began to jet from his trunk, slowly billowing outward in lurid blues and whites as it washed over the behemoth's back. Halfway across the chamber from Runner, Bel'Wa was braced beneath her shield like an ancient statue. Bryluen stood atop the shield, and with a mighty shove Bel'Wa was throwing her up the side of a pillar closer to the monster.

Nearer to the vigilante, Nicadzim's honeycomb rocket launcher whistled out a stream of projectiles. Each detonation was an iridescent storm of color, the violent shrapnel bursts aimed at the creature's hide pleasingly even and geometric. Kirby was mid-swing, her hammer slowly striking the beast's torso just beneath its extended limb: the air was visibly warped by the pressure burst as the impact triggered the hammer's explosive mechanism. The first hints of fire crawled out from beneath the hammer's head, and chunks of the monster's hard outer flesh spun away from the impact in a stately whirl. Through her cockpit and helmet visor, Kirby's eyes betrayed the bestial snarl she wore. The brilliant light of Dread Naught's firearms glinted off the blue-toned armor of the Marduk and reflected from the cockpit window, coloring Kirby in a dozen wild flares, auras, and colorful rays as she danced with the Aeshma.

As he descended onto the next pillar, the normal flow of time seemed to reassert itself. Bryluen finished clambering up onto the pillar and called out. "Stop shooting for a minute! We're gonna do this the old-fashioned way!"

The team ceased firing just in time for Bryluen to leap toward the Aeshma's back. Dialing her whip to its maximum length, she swung it hard around the abomination's thick neck as she descended. As she landed on its back she neatly caught the weight at the end of the whip, quickly securing it to the handle using the large vise. The body of the whip warped and dented from the immense magnetic force now holding it together—more than enough to allow Bryluen to ride the Dreaded like she were jet-skiing.

The wire pulled against the beast's throat, but Bryluen knew it would take more weight and strength than hers alone to make anything

## The Shadow Among The Stars

meaningful happen. “Bel’Wa! Happy Brightstar, and come up behind me!”

The Storm Mother sprinted around the Aeshma’s back as Kirby and Nicadzim both kept its attention in melee. Bryluen leaned back, holding out her hand. The Storm Mother detached her shield from her arm, then slammed it into the ground ahead of her. She leaped up, catching one foot on the shield’s handle before pushing up onto the top edge of the shield and then off before it fell over. She caught Bryluen’s outstretched hand before the monster turned to investigate whatever was happening on its back. Bryluen pulled her up until she could hook her own hands in the wide vise handle.

Bel’Wa began to laugh as the pair of them stood on the Aeshma’s back pulling on the wire. The monster began trying to extend tendrils backwards to swat them off, and in response Bryluen pulled her pistol and began to fire. Bel’Wa followed suit with her arm cannon. Nicadzim was suddenly present next to Bryluen, his own weight added to the clamp. With one arm he swung his baton at a nearby tendril, causing the limb to twitch and thrash away. The sudden close-range fire against its tendrils caused the Aeshma to focus on attempting to wrest the accumulating task force members from its back.

This gave Kirby increased opportunity to strike out, a pair of blows staggering the creature backwards. Runner soon came vaulting across the remaining pillars, securing his grapple around the nanowire and drawing himself onto the Aeshma. He clasped the curved vise handle next to Bel’Wa, and fired upon the tendrils with one tri-pistol. Lastly, Vort swooped down and hooked one wing through the vise. He flapped hard with the other wing, pulling at the wire and issuing tight goutts of flame toward any questing tendrils. The wire ground back and forth against the monstrosity’s throat, slowly grinding dust from its surface.

The Aeshma was now spinning, trying to both clumsily fend off Kirby’s increasingly aggressive attacks and forestall the exceedingly slow garroting it was suffering. It tried to back into a pillar, but Vort turned and severed the top half of the structure with a fan of lightning before impact. A moment after it fell to one knee after a particularly vicious vertical hammer blow crashed into its knee-cap hard enough to cause a crack.

## 29. Almighty Aeshma

The thing hesitated, and Kirby stepped in. “Everybody, *move!*”

With a roar, she planted her feet and swung at the Aeshma’s lowered head. The blow connected cleanly, the raw kinetic force and the explosive charge enough to blow a number of the creature’s tusks off of its face and send it tumbling over its injured knee. Dread Naught poured off of the vise and ran out of the way. Kirby threw down her hammer, ran past the stricken creature, and jumped up onto its back. She hooked one huge hand into the vise, and crossed her other hand over it. The Aeshma rose slowly with Kirby standing on its back, this time paying no attention to the smaller members of Dread Naught around it. It reached for the wire with its tendrils, realizing a moment too late that its time was up.

Kirby yelled, and pulled as hard as her mighty hydraulic musculature would allow. A chorus of creaking and cracking began as the wire began to pass through the Aeshma’s throat. It howled and gargled—until Kirby hopped off of its back. The weight of the exosuit pulled the wire straight through the Aeshma’s throat with a high singing sound. It stood straight, and began to turn back toward Kirby when its head simply rolled from its shoulders. The turn rapidly transformed into a flop as the enormous Dreaded soundlessly fell to the ground, motionless and limp.

Kirby leaned back and howled toward the pitted ceiling like a berserker. The howl soon turned into a cackling laugh, as she extended the middle finger of each gauntlet toward the enormous corpse.

The team breathed a sigh of relief. Bel’Wa hauled Bryluen into a hug, causing their armor plate to smack together loudly. “I had *no* idea that wire was rated for that much weight!”

Bryluen wrapped her own arms around Bel’Wa, a huge grin on her face. “Yeah, space-elevator grade. Material science is great, but you’d choke if you knew how expensive it was per-meter.”

## A Fraught Future, Part Two

The battle on the surface had gone as well as could be expected. Losses were significant, with a number of incapacitated walkers and several destroyed tanks. More than a third of the Lancers had been shot down or forced to land. The battle may have continued on for some time had the Qixing not opted to dispatch a surprise. The Battle Cruiser class ship *Jio'O-Pahr* arrived through the Gate with a newly integrated system. Though early and still experimental, a new addition to the ships' scanner system could theoretically force a Sjorthursar to materialize. Extrapolated from certain energy emanations discovered from the Stone the Qixing possessed, it had been determined the Sjorthursars had the capacity to alter the quantum states of their particles enough to effectively become invisible and intangible. The new system was intended to force a reversal of this effect.

The moment the *Jio'O-Pahr* began to sweep near Gru'Thiall, the Qixing scientists' work was shown to have paid off. Immediately two Sjorthursars were revealed, and the gunnery crews of the defending craft wasted no time in striking out. The Sjorthursars saw their situation was hopeless as further scanner sweeps revealed the others. Unable to pick up their cargo of remaining Dreaded, they cut their losses and attempted to flee toward the Gate. The massive particle cannon arrays across the Qixing Battle Cruiser dug large wounds and tears in the Sjorthursars around it, slaying one of them in less than a minute and a half with a tight bombardment. Within the following several minutes, every single Sjorthursar was slain—three of them pounded into dust and chunks by the *Jio'O-Pahr* alone.

On the ground, the remaining Dreaded were unaffected by the loss of their spawning craft, but one of the Qixing frigates remained behind to provide orbital bombardment. Between the reinvigorated defenders and starship fire support, the remaining Dreaded were mopped up in less than an hour. The last Rabisus were swept away, and clusters of En-Rabisus eliminated en masse by rocket fire. Gugalannas were corralled and slaughtered by infantry formations, while coordinated

## A Fraught Future, Part Two

walker fire swept away the last Ur-Rabisus and Omukades. A number of Ogumos attempted to roll off the plateau, only to find themselves picked off by the remaining Lancers.

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Within a couple of hours of the battle's end, discrete CSOE craft arrived to take both the Stone and the glowing capsule from the tower. By then, Dread Naught was on the way back to Raven's Landing. The Qixing had already agreed to allow Human custody of the items found at Gru'Thiall under the condition that qualified Qixing researchers and military personnel would be permitted unfettered access. The location the Stone and capsule were sent to was one of the largest and most well-secured installations in Human space. Fort Salamis was a monstrously large space station able to berth three dozen craft at a time, and bearing some of the largest non-terrestrial anti-starship emplacements ever developed by Humans. An assault on the fort alone would be suicidal for an entire battle-group, not to mention the ever-present Marine craft patrolling the system. Due to the danger posed by holding onto a Stone so large, the Commandant Prime ordered not only the H.S.S.Dr. *Veringetorix*, a venerable Dreadnought, but the gargantuan H.S.S.B. *Mictēcacihuātl* to defensive posts at Fort Salamis.

The CSOE and Astral Marines had already scheduled a number of high-profile meetings with the Qixing Commonwealth to communicate and organize initiatives against the Dreaded. Political committees had been formed, and a major piece of budgeting legislation—the first in Human history created with the consideration of a civilization-wide war—was already being drafted in the halls of Terran High Parliament. In addition, a number of diplomatic overtures to the T'hròstag Empire and Ly Aulth Stellar Confederacy had been set into motion in an attempt to warn them of the full extent of the danger and to possibly garner support of some kind. Even aside from the data previously collected, the temple complex showed it to be an ironclad certainty that the Dreaded threat was going to escalate to astronomical proportions. Numerous specialists were being dispatched to study the temple in an attempt to garner any possible information in a quest for usable answers.

## The Shadow Among The Stars

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Dread Naught's armor was back on the stands in the entry way, the multicolored row of suits marred with burns, scratches, and warped sections of plate. The armor printing machines were hard at work generating replacements for the dented and scarred pieces, to renew the armor suits come morning. Night was falling rapidly at Raven's Landing, the sky brimming with the jeweled tones of dusk. The entire team was thoroughly worn out both physically and mentally.

In the coming weeks, they'd each understand what Bryluen meant about delayed traumatic reactions. Even with the highest quality care, coming to terms with what they learned would not be easy. Without any official designation or notification, High Command placed a three-week inactive status on the team to allow them to recover.

Runner had gone straight to bed, mostly undressing on the way to his room. He was intent on a thorough amount of rest before anything else. As he drifted away into unconsciousness, his thoughts drifted as they always did toward an early memory. Fire, confusion, blood on his hand. He felt no pain or fear at the memory, not anymore. Every night it reminded him of why he had made the choices he did, and reignited the vengeful furnace in his chest. Dread Naught was a more straight-forward affair than his years of vigilantism, but was equally as dedicated to protecting those who needed protecting.

Vort and Nicadzim loitered on the balcony for some time, idly chatting. One of them would say a few words the other would quietly acknowledge, then a gap of several minutes would follow. They mostly just each enjoyed being in the company of a friend, unable to yet put words to the ideas spinning in their minds. Nonetheless Vort would sleep well, dreaming of inverted towers, the sulfurous scents of the Great Market, and a million feathers of every color flying below and above. His dreams of home had not yet taken on the dark character they would later assume. For now, such subconscious idling was as comfortable as a worn couch. He would distinctly miss that feeling later, as less-nostalgic ideations slowly supplanted the fading memories of his people.

Nicadzim, on the other hand, would lay awake that night. At no point did he depart his bed, and for the first time in many years he did not travel. Nicadzim had spent his life learning to accept the shifting

## A Fraught Future, Part Two

variables of the future rather than fear it, but tonight was the exception. The catacomb inscriptions awoke some creeping, distant feeling in his soul. He did not truly appreciate or understand the sensation until it returned at far greater strength in the Hall of Dissolution. The feeling was ... uncertain, a paradoxical collection of sensations and emotional impulses. He felt some winding connection to the unfurling events, but had no idea how to explore or analyze the feeling. At the moment he was simply in shock, something he realized he had never experienced.

Bryluen and Bel'Wa still had a number of things to attend to. Reports, communiqués, after-action reports from their respective militaries. The wives disarmed, bathed, emerged in fresh clothing, and immediately left on a shuttle headed for Fort Salamis.

This left only Kirby sitting alone in the conference room. All was dark around her except for the glow of the holo-projector. She had not changed clothes or washed herself yet, and as such she still looked like a disaster. She sat in one of the conference chairs with one foot up on the seat with her. She held her own knee and glanced at the projector image. Her CSOE therapist was shown sitting at their desk three Gates away. Kirby knew she needed to get some things off of her chest before she could rest, and figured an emergency call to her therapist would suffice. The jockey had experienced an uncharacteristic difficulty in getting her ideas out. Most of what she said was little more than word-salad, but the therapist patiently asked questions and clarifications. Slowly, Kirby found the point she wanted to articulate.

"I mean ... no, I ain't ... I ain't talked to nobody about that still. Just you and my old Marine shrink. I ain't had nobody close that I could tell, really."

The therapist was an older woman with kindly hazel eyes. She slowly sat back in her chair. "Well, from what you've told me, you have \_\_\_"

"—Yeah. Yeah, that's ... that's true, maybe. But ... well, I dunno. Just now I'm wonderin' if it matters at all."

"What do you mean, Kirby?"

"The-the vision, the tunnels. All those people screaming, dying. More ... more species than we knew were even out there, just goin' over like ... not even cattle. More like germs on a counter top getting cleaned off. Their whole fuckin' world just burning. And now the things that did

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it are *here*. They're comin' for us. We've got shit able to wipe civilizations off the map pouring outta space all around now. From what I can tell, we're a level of fucked I'm not sure there's a word for. Maybe I'll ... I mean if it's gonna...when the time comes, maybe I'll finally ..."

Kirby's voice trailed off. She gazed into the corner of the room, her inner voice locked in a despairing debate with itself.

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Bryluen and Bel'Wa stood before the capsule inside Fort Salamis. The pair were a strong contrast; Bryluen in gray and black, Bel'Wa in a robe of brilliant orange. A large bay spread around them, sterile metal to every side. Various warehouse drones moved about in the distance, but the couple were the only living things in the bay. The area was both a warehouse, and a secure site for the many experiments to be conducted on both items recovered from Gru'Thiall.

The capsule sat upon an elevated platform with a wide open space around it. Across from it sat the Stone on a similar platform, surrounded in various forms of shielding to ward off any effects of the strange energies emanating from the dark object. The capsule's white glow continued unabated in defiant opposition to the ruthless darkness of the Stone.

Bel'Wa squeezed Bryluen's hand tightly. Bryluen glanced over to her wife and smiled, before once more gazing into the strange object's warm light. The battle at Gru'Thiall was a great victory by most measures, but Bryluen felt little optimism at that moment. She knew that all they had learned amounted to little other than to inform them of how afraid they should be. No matter how many Dreaded they slew, one great and terrible fact remained:

Somewhere in the benighted emptiness between the stars, Jörmungandr stirred.



## **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 San Antonio, Texas with his wife. She is his muse, and spends far too much of her time trying to keep him alive. Follow Dylan on Facebook and Instagram as AuthorDWSanchez, and on Twitter as @CaptainVentriss.