

The Calling of Heroes

(working title)

By

Breandán Ó Ciarraí

Prologue: Signs and Portents

"Dream lofty dreams, and as you dream, so you shall become. Your vision is the promise of what you shall one day be; your ideal is the prophecy of what you shall at last unveil." - James Allen, Early 20th Century CE

*October 15th, 1601 CE
North of Kinsale, Ireland*

Thomas shivered in the cold rain as he hid behind the hedge that lined the road. The slender branches of the willow tree above him did little to keep the moisture from finding the young monk, and each drop seemed to insidiously and maliciously penetrate the woolen cloak and robes he wore. The weather fit his mood, however. He shifted from foot to foot and rubbed his hands in a vain attempt to stay warm as the pre-dawn rain poured down. In the distance, he could hear the roar and see the flashes in the night of musket shots and cannons in the battle raging around the city. Spanish and Irish forces, trapped within Kinsale, clashed with the English and their loyalist troops. Thus far, Lord Mountjoy had been unable to lay successful siege to the city, but Thomas' master had been adamant that they flee the night before, taking separate routes and meeting at this very spot. His master was late. He held the reigns of his nervous horse tightly, fearing the worst as he shivered in the cold damp morning air.

This invasion, like others before it, was an attempt by the English to seal their claim to Ireland and to put down the native clans who had risen up against them. This time the English seemed determined to take the entire island by force, no matter the cost. Hugh Ó Neil, Earl of Tyrone and leader of the Irish forces trying to throw the English back across the sea, had asked for aid from the Spanish. They had sent ships and men, but the English had attacked them before they could rally and leave the city to unite with Ó Neil's forces. Thomas had seen much of the fighting as he had slipped out of the Abbey of St. Columba in Kinsale, mostly cannon fire from the English position on the high ground overlooking the city. He had seen men die most grievous deaths as he made his way out of Kinsale. In all of Thomas' seventeen years of life, he had read of battle, but never seen it. The horror of what he had witnessed as he fled the city was burned into his mind forever.

Thomas' brow furrowed as he wondered what madness had driven Master Cruan to wake

him in the dead of night with orders to pack a horse and kit for a long journey. He remembered the cryptic message his master had given him, telling him to meet him under this very tree at the river's edge. It seemed unlikely that old Cruan would choose this particular time to go on a pilgrimage, even though his master was legendary for his eccentric behavior, nor did it seem likely to Thomas that Cruan would flee the city out of fear. Rumors ran rampant throughout the abbey about the forbidden studies that old Cruan was privy to, but Thomas' master had never shown any sign that he feared the Inquisition or any other consequences for such indiscretions. *No, Thomas thought, if Cruan is fleeing, it is because of something in that book of his.*

Thomas began to wonder if his master had fallen victim to the English barrage, or perhaps had been unable to sneak out of the city. He had been waiting here for over three hours and still no sign of him. The rain and darkness obscured the road and muffled sounds, leaving the crossroads feeling otherworldly and dangerous. Once again Thomas worried that his master had fallen into English hands, and then he began to wonder whether he would as well. He began to envision the methods that the English would use to slay him should they catch him. None of them struck him as particularly pleasant. Thomas heard muffled hoof beats and suddenly snapped out of his grim reverie. A rider approached.

"Master Cruan?" he inquired of the hazy form that appeared suddenly from the night, "Is that you?"

"Easy, my son," came the hushed reply, "I live still, though by the grace of God alone."

The mounted figure moved closer, revealed in the dim morning light to be a white haired man of extreme old age, even for a monk. He wore simple robes and a cloak, concealing his true status as a master scholar.

"Master Cruan," the young monk asked, taking the reigns of the old man's horse in his free hand, "Why did you ask me to meet you here? Why in the name of God are we standing out in the rain while a battle rages less than a mile from us?"

"Ah, young Thomas," Cruan said, smiling, "I am soon to shuffle forth from this mortal realm, and travel along the final Imrama. My duties must be passed on before I die, and thus I have chosen you, my finest and most trustworthy student, to carry on those duties. There is so much I should have taught you, but it appears we have run out of time. Now, I must do my best to pass on the most solemn of my duties ere I die."

"I do not understand, master," Thomas said, a puzzled look upon his face as he guided Cruan's horse under the tree, "What does that have to do with any of this? What duties?"

"Thomas lad," Cruan grunted as he dismounted from his horse, his strength not entirely sapped by his great age, "You know of the lore and knowledge I study, you are a bright lad and I know well that rumors have reached your ears. Do not deny it for the sake of propriety, on your oath speak true."

"Aye, master," Thomas said hesitantly, not wanting to confess that he had, indeed, been privy to the rumor-mongering that ran rampant throughout the abbey, "I have heard stories that you study books long thought lost, books from before the time of Christianity. It is said that you even have a book written down by pagans at the time of Saint Patrick, a book of their lore and knowledge."

"Aye," Cruan said with a chuckle, "The rumors speak true, at least those rumors do. I have studied the forbidden writings of the Greeks and the Romans, even the Arabs. Most importantly, however, I have studied the wisdom of our ancestors who knew great things before they were taught the words of Christ."

The young monk looked at his master with a puzzled expression, "This is forbidden knowledge by the church, granted, and the Inquisition would have you excommunicated or worse, but what does that have to do with our leaving the city? Why take flight and set out in the dead of night and risk capture? Surely you do not fear that the Inquisition will be brought forth now, what with the war and all!"

Cruan sat down slowly upon a rock and leaned against the ancient willow, sighing.

"Aye, we would be safer within the city, and no, neither the vicious zealots of the Inquisition nor those buffoons in Rome know of my indiscretions."

Thomas gasped to hear his master speak so, bordering on blasphemy. Cruan ignored his reaction and continued

"But that is not our fate. We have another task, you and I. What the Church has taught you about the ways of this world and the ways of the spiritual is only a drop of water in a bucket as compared to all of the oceans under Heaven that is the reality which you have been denied. There is more...so much more than you realize. There are secrets that only a select few may know; secrets that must wait for the right time, when men are wiser and possessed by a good dose of open-mindedness. There are things held within that ancient lore that affect us now, and will affect generations to come as well."

With that, he pulled a small leather satchel from under his robe, and held it reverently.

"Within this satchel is a manuscript, upon whose pages has been written a series of ancient prophecies. These prophecies were made two millennia ago by Lorcan Maol, a chieftain and seer of the kingdom of Munster, and written down by the first of our order nearly a thousand years ago. Though the heathen faith was all but wiped out, the tales and the histories, as well as their secret knowledge and prophecies, still endure in this book and others like it."

Cruan reached inside his robe. Thomas saw the rope holding the rough wooden cross about his master's neck, and underneath it, a small silver chain that disappeared under the robe.

It was this that Cruan fetched, pulling it up to reveal the amulet suspended from it.

Thomas gasped as he recognized the symbol of three heads connected on a single body.

"Master! That..."

"Yes, lad, I know," Cruan sighed, "Idolatry it would be called; heresy of the highest order. Bah! Truth is truth, and that's all there is to it. God waits for me when I die, but other gods walk the heavens and keep our ancestors close to their hearts."

"But," Thomas stammered, "What does this mean? That symbol is heathen, you yourself have told me this."

"Aye, lad, it is," Cruan laughed grimly, "But it was the gods of the heathens that gave them the visions of prophecy just as our god inspires his prophets. I knew my fate when I read this book, and I know what is to happen now. It has always been our duty to see that the knowledge be faithfully preserved. It is because of this book and the prophecies within it that I know the fate, and the faith, to come, as Lorcan foretold the coming of the one god who would rule Ireland for a great many centuries, but not forever.

"You see, the prophecies within these pages tell much, and what was foretold to happen before this day has, just as the book said they would. Thus, the things to come.... Ah, lad, I wish the thrice-damned Sasanach hadn't forced me to rush things. Time is short, alas, for the prophecies foretell the results of the events of this day."

"What fate does this book say will happen this day?" Thomas asked, his head

whirling with so many revelations that had shaken his ordered world in less than ten minutes' time.

"A bad end, I fear," Cruan replied with a sigh, "The English will win eventually, and for three hundred years they will rule this land with brutality. Of our people, our way of life, very little will survive intact. This is why I have called you here. In the west, hidden away in the mountains and the forests north and west of Galway, and north in Ulster in the rough lands, there are a people who are spoken of in the book that will be able to preserve this knowledge through the tribulations to come. 'Upon western shores and north into the bosom of Éireann shall dwell those who shall take these words to new shores so that they will not be lost.' So says the prophecies of Lorcan, so must we trust to his wisdom and see this knowledge preserved."

"But master!" Thomas exclaimed, squatting down by his master's side, "They are dangerous folk, clansmen of the most violent sort who are as likely to kill us as feed us a bowl of stew."

"Aye, they are," Cruan laughed, "though they are not screaming savages as the rumors tell. Their beliefs are now hidden in superstitions and whispered tales- the quaint customs of rural farm folk- but they have the closest ties to the ways of our ancestors, and will know better than any other what to do with this book. Do not be fooled by the simple guise they wear, or the rumors that mock them, for they possess wisdom and cunning."

He opened the book up to a page halfway through it and placed his hand reverently upon the beautifully illuminated pages, closing his eyes.

"They are our only hope. They have learned the ways of survival, and they have been hardened like lean wolves in winter. They are fierce warriors, and cunning survivors. The book speaks well of them, and they will understand its message. Many are the prophecies held within these pages, some grand, some dire, and many impossible to contemplate.

"It tells of many disasters and horrors to come, as well as many triumphs and great moments of valor and glory. It tells of many wars, including four major ones that will sweep the globe many centuries from now, killing unthinkable numbers of people. It tells of mankind reaching out to walk among the stars in the heavens and making their homes in the sky, and it tells of how those tribes to the west will rebuild one day, and form a great empire in the heavens."

Cruan leaned forward, his face growing grim. Thomas shivered slightly, though he was unsure if it was due to the cold or the look of grim determination upon his master's face. Cruan continued.

"Lorcan charged the bearers of these prophecies to remain vigilant against the great evils that will befall our people, whether that enemy be sent by the Devil himself from the bowels of Hell, or the evils of the human heart. We are no longer the proper guardians to hold this sacred duty, my son, for we are at the beginning of the end for our way of life. Both the English *and* our own brethren would burn this manuscript, as is their wont, for they know not what they do in their ignorance."

Cruan took Thomas' sleeve. A fire of passion burned in his visage as he looked into his pupil's eyes.

"This book must be saved! You must go forth and find the tribes to the west, and stay west of the River Shannon. You must learn it, learn all of the lore, not just the

prophecies. The book foretells which of those tribes will survive, and you must read as you ride, learn who they are, and go to them. Aguilla's forces have been besieged, and shall not be able to aid us. Ó Neill and his army move south as we speak, but he shall arrive too late."

Cruan looked to the lightening horizon where the sun's light was beginning to turn the dark skies gray with the promise of the coming dawn. "I haven't much time, for the prophecies say the bearer with hoary lips shall be struck down before the sun rises on this day. You must take this manuscript and flee swiftly, learn and preserve this knowledge for our people's sake. Pass the duty of vigilance on to those who were the rightful ones to possess it, for the sake of our people. The sun rises, swear it!"

"I will do as you ask, master, but I..." Thomas was interrupted as several loud cracks sounded nearby. Musket fire, and close. Thomas threw himself to the ground as he heard a musket ball whiz by. From among the roots of the willow, he looked into the gloom to try and see the source of the firing, but could see nothing through the rain. He turned back to Cruan, only to find the old man slumped over on the ground as the gray pallor of the sky brightened.

"Master Cruan!" he cried, but in vain. A crimson stain slowly spread across Cruan's back, and Thomas knew that the old man had begun his final Imrama, his death journey.

"I will do as you ask, master," Thomas said, fighting back tears as he took the satchel, "I will not fail you. I don't understand it all, but you were always wise and kind to me, and I will trust you this one last time."

Thomas wished that he could bury his slain master, but had to resign himself to performing a simple purification ceremony and last rites before mounting his horse and riding west to his destiny. He read as he rode, stopping only to rest his horse until he was safely away from the fighting. Others waited there in that distant region, men and women of a forgotten people who's own destiny would shape the future of mankind, and remind the universe that not all things die, though centuries of sleep may claim them.

Time passed, as is it's wont, ignoring the schemes and machinations of man as always...

1

Chapter One: Dramatis Personae Unveiled and a Lament for Bagpipes

"It has often been said that the sudden emergence of the Ahrugan Tribal Confederation as a military superpower in 2255 was the cause of the decline of the North American Union. In truth, while the NAU could never hope to match the more advanced Celtic warrior-nation militarily, they were still the greatest economic and political powerhouse of the Terran Alliance of Nations. The Ahruga had little interest in TAN politics and internal machinations, and were regarded as a borderline-rebellious member. In fact, it was no surprise when they broke away from the TAN after the Whisper War. The NAU, by comparison, more or less ran the TAN just as the United States had run the United Nations until it collapsed during The Fall. Almost everyone followed social trends and entertainment established by the NAU, and they were respected by all nations, even those that hated them. They had a two-hundred-fifty year history of being the leader in universal trends and direction. Why then did they fall into decadence and decline?" - Excerpt from A History of the Rise and Fall of the Terran Alliance of Nations, by Julian Tartatovsky, 2483 CE

*March 19th, 2318 CE
Lagrange Beta System, 2,138 Light Years from Terra*

As the star fell behind the terminator line of the darkened planet below, the prisoners aboard the transport felt their hopes of rescue fade. Here below them was a world devoid of hope. A sooty gray color even in the brightest light of the red giant star it orbited, this forsaken world could crush the hopes and dreams of hardened men simply by looking at it. The Byntai knew how to choose their slave-depot planets. This world, so unattractive that not even a mining colony had been established, was perfect for the raiders' needs. Though it was deep within Terran space, no one would bother them here.

The former passengers and crew of the ill-fated exploration vessel ESS *Edmond Hillary* huddled together in the cold prison bay of the Byntai slave transport, most turning away from the viewport and its bleak view. One man among them did not seem to share their gloom; in fact, he seemed downright frantic, as if caught up in the throes of religious zeal. Dr. Bartholomew Hastings, late of the Academy of Xenoarcheological Sciences in Stockholm, had lost all of his professorial composure. Now, seated among battered members of his team and crew, he gibbered like a madman. The rest of the prisoners ignored him, lost in their own thoughts and horrors.

They had just seen many of the crew of their ship slaughtered before their eyes. A swirl of chaos had overwhelmed their ship as tall, lanky, black-armored aliens had suddenly appeared in corridors and doorways, seizing those that they could, killing those who resisted too much. These were scientists and spacers, not soldiers. Such horrors were never supposed to leave the holo screen or VR nets, yet here they were a part of it. Thus, the mad

ramblings of their chief scientist were less than comforting.

"They were the first," Hastings muttered, "They HAD to be the first...but it's all wrong, all wrong..."

He stood and shouted suddenly "They wrote it in the sky! In the rocks! In the very living matter of the worlds!"

"Calm down, Hastings," Whispered a uniformed young woman to his side as she gently touched his arm, "Do you want them to come back and rough us all up again?"

"The message is the key! Bertram is not just their planet, it is a message! It speaks to the lie that is history!" Hastings shouted, ignoring her, "But it's all wrong... all wrong... Not Bertram, but *on* Bertram..."

Hastings trailed off into incoherent muttering again. His disheveled hair and beard, matched with the maniacal gleam in his eye, caused him to appear more the mad scientist than Terra's leading expert on alien archeology and anthropology. The other prisoners looked at Hastings with concern as the woman moved closer. Matsushita Ayame, simply known as Aya among the crew, had managed to keep her wits about her through this entire ordeal. As the executive officer of the *Edmond Hillary*, she had managed to stay calm as the Byntai raiders ambushed them, striking without warning. The alien warships had hit the *Edmond Hillary* with EMP cannons, knocking out her defense systems and engines, Aya had managed to remain at her post and tried to restart the systems. From the initial boarding by the Byntai, to watching her captain killed in cold blood before her eyes, the raven-haired XO had held it together better than most of the prisoners. Now, she was the ranking officer, and had to keep the situation under control. The Byntai were not known for their predictable natures.

"You have GOT to snap out of it, professor!" she said, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him.

"But don't you see, Aya?" Hastings replied, seeming to look straight through her, "They left the clues! I found them, and I understood them!"

"You were jolted by a device that knocked you out," Aya said, gently pulling the professor into a seated position, "We have no idea what it did to you, but there was no evidence of anything beyond a class nine civilization on Bertram, and nothing like this great race of ancients you keep going on about."

"Ah, my child," Hastings said, finally seeming to see Aya for the first time since he awoke, raving, "Bertram held it, but did not make it...it's all wrong. They gave me thoughts, pictures in my head, knowledge, but it's all a jumble, I'm afraid. All wrong..." The professor trailed off as he slipped into unconsciousness and slumped over.

"Thank god," said one of the other prisoners, "I was worried he was going to piss off the Shakes again!"

"Byntai," Aya corrected, running her small hands through her long silky black hair in frustration, "They hate being called Shakes, and if they are monitoring this room, they just might decide to show you how much."

Three hundred meters away, on the command deck, Uksal Nof, the captain of the transport and Second Regent in charge of this slave raid, was indeed monitoring the conversations. In a particularly human gesture, his steepled hands rested against his elongated gray chin as he watched the holo image in contemplation. His irritation at being referred to as a

Shake, short for 'Genetic Milkshake' - referring to the Byntai's heavy and not entirely successful genetic engineering- was overridden by his interest in what the old human had been shouting. The exploration vessel the slavers had raided had been returning quite fast from unexplored space near the Orion Empire, and this new information raised concerns. What secrets had they uncovered? From the makeup of the crew, and the nature of the loot taken from their ship, it seemed to be an archeological discovery, and of little interest to the Byntai. The old man's ramblings changed things, however, for he spoke of ancient technology and knowledge, and something about a great secret. If there were anything to the slave's ranting, and a cache of new technology could be found as a result, such a discovery could prove to be Uksal Nof's ticket to First Regent of this slaving corporation. He turned the monitor to focus on the woman next to the insane scientist. Athletic, lithe, and, by human standards, very beautiful, she had an inner strength that Uksal knew he must break. He considered it a personal challenge. Judging from her small-boned features, long straight black hair, and almond eyes, he judged her to be descended from the Terran nation of Japan. Uksal prided himself on his knowledge of human nations and ethnicities, for the Terrans were incredibly valuable, if hard to come by, slave stock. The many ethnicities of the humans made them a rarity among sentient species. Such variety was found only in a handful of races, and thus certain types of humans were highly sought after by those who would buy from the Byntai. Such slaves were difficult and costly to get, however. With the Terrans' mighty military and allies, the Byntai dared not assault them frontally. Instead, they picked at small fringe colonies and lone ships in remote regions of space, such as the *Edmond Hillary*. Most humans found in such places were less-than-pleasing specimens, either being weak and pampered passengers on starliners that died in captivity within days, or being fierce, independent colonists who fought to the death to defend their homes. This haul had been a rare success already, with spacers and crew of a research vessel as well as an archeological field team being the prize. Hardy enough to survive the re-education process into proper slaves, but soft enough to be breakable. Uksal delighted at the thought that there might be other profits to be had, however, and was intrigued by the potential possibilities presented in the ramblings of the mad scientist. "As soon as we have touched down," he ordered his Slavemaster-Captain, "Separate that old human and bring him to me, under guard, but unharmed."

"It shall be done, Regent."

Ah, to command an entire fleet, Uksal thought, *How great the profits!* His thoughts were interrupted as his commlink chirped.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Regent, we are on final approach and about to touch down. Subregent Taskul has prepared the temporary holding cells, and the buyers' representatives are in the command center waiting to review the new stock."

"Excellent!" Uksal said, with an evil grin spreading across his face, "Inform Taskul that the review of the new slaves will be delayed a day or two while they are cleaned up and properly conditioned. Have him prepare guest quarters for the representatives, and set up some... entertainment... in the lounge. "

"It shall be done Regent."

Such a bountiful plunder, Uksal thought, *sell off the crew, the ship, and equipment and keep the scientist and that pretty little woman by his side for my own.* He smiled at the thought as the transport landed with a slight lurch, then rose from his couch and

prepared for unloading.

The atmosphere was thin, dusty, and cold, but it was breathable. The twenty-three humans and nine various alien crewmembers were offloaded from the massive transport and hustled between rows of black-armored Byntai soldiers. Only the bound and muzzled lupine Garoudan stood taller than the Byntai. The humans were at a distinct psychological disadvantage being shuffled between the lanky aliens that stood a head taller than most of them. With weapons aimed at them as they passed through this corridor of soldiers the prisoners offered little resistance. Painstick-wielding Byntai slavers behind them, shouting in their loud, guttural language drove the prisoners through blast doors into a small building adjacent to the Surface To Orbit landing pad. Once inside, the slavers crammed the battered prisoners into cells lining either side of the single corridor. The Byntai gave the bound Garoudan a few kicks for good measure, eliciting a dangerous growl from the large alien. Once satisfied that the cell doors were secure, the slavers exited through the single door to the building, leaving the prisoners to shiver and weep at their situation.

Aya, crammed into the cell with the Garoudan and three others, suddenly realized that Professor Hastings was nowhere to be seen.

"Hastings," She shouted, "Where are you?"

"They took him somewhere else," shouted another prisoner, "Some kind of administration building I think. It looked big and important"

"Damn!" Aya muttered. She looked about her and, seeing no guards within the building, moved to the Garoudan's side. The wolf-like security officer wore no uniform, as was the wont of her people due to their thick coat of fur, and wore only two utility bandoliers and a belt. Though she looked like a bound humanoid animal, Grishgruchktagh, Grish for short, was one of the most cunning warriors of her pride.

"Grish, I'm going to undo your muzzle, are you level-headed enough to remember who I am?" The Garoudan nodded, and Aya began unbuckling the straps holding the muzzle over her snout. Once free, Grish exploded into a cacophony of snarls, growls and snaps of her toothy muzzle that constituted the Garoudan language.

"Well," Aya said, stepping back a bit and smiling slightly, "I don't think that's anatomically possible, but I'm sure you could manage to put them in that position."

"Shorry," Grish slurred in growled English, "But if I get my clawsh on thoshe grrountg frawghrr..." the rest of the diatribe fell into a five minute series of some of the most brutal and colorful epithets and portents of dire bodily harm that the Garoudan tongue was capable of. Could she smell the scent-syntax underlying it all, Aya would have been suitably impressed. As it was, verbal Garoudishai had one of the most extensive vocabularies of insults of any species, and Grish had just added a few.

"Grish!" Aya yelled, trying to get the frothing lupine's attention, "We have other matters to worry about here!" Grish grew silent, but for a guttural growl. Aya looked out through the bars of her cell down the corridor. It was a simple building, with only one entrance and one corridor, with cells on either side. She was at the end of the right hand row of cells; to her right was blank wall, to her left, the corridor to the hatch. In the cell across from her, two female ensigns from the crew looked to her expectantly. No guards were in sight, nor did there seem to be any listening devices. The building seemed to have been recently set up, and was obviously a temporary holding center. *Just have to risk it, Aya thought, and hope these bastards were as arrogant in setting this building up as they are in everything else they do.* Aya motioned everyone in her cell to gather near Grish.

"We need to find some way of escaping and getting a signal out to let someone know where we are."

"That'sh easy," Grish replied, calming visibly as the ruff of her neck dropped, "All we have to do ish grab one of thoshe guardsh. They have long-range relay transmittersh on their armor."

"Okay," Aya replied, "Score one for the Security Officer. Dean, what about you, can you modify the transmitter?"

"Yup," replied a young man wearing an engineer's uniform in the cell next to her, "Though it ain't gunna be quiet. Anything capable of picking up linear Pulsar transmissions is going to hear it."

"Fine, so long as we can get a burst transmission out and pray that someone's nearby.

Grish, what's the range on those transmitters?"

Grish looked thoughtful for a moment, an odd expression on the face of what was, in effect, an eight-foot-tall bipedal wolf.

"Light-shpeed, limited only by doplar effect."

"Okay, so we have something that can reach just outside this solar system within an hour. We're probably in the Lagrange Beta system, since we weren't in hyperspace that long and this is the closest system with atmospheric planets, so there has to be a Stellarcom relay beacon near here."

"Yeah," Dean piped up, "But it'd take more than an hour for that signal to reach it. We're in the Tarsus Corridor, which has a lot of traffic, so every system with habitable or semi-habitable planets has an emergency Stellarcom beacon in it's Ort Cloud, but even at raw C you're still talking about two-and-a-half hours to clear the system and hit the beacon, and no idea how long it will be till someone gets the message. They may be able to pack up and move us before help arrives if they know the cavalry's coming. Lagrange Beta is in the Andali Confederation, and they're still recovering from their war for independence from the European Union. They don't got much of a military left, even though they won, so they're contracting out to other nations for patrols of their borders. There's a lot of gaps, so it's a fifty-fifty chance anyone will even be there to hear it."

"It's our only chance, we'll have to risk it. What resources do we have?"

With that, everyone began looking around. The cells they were in were simple, one-piece molded ferro-plast boxes that joined seamlessly with the rock floor. The cell doors were simple steel bars, but thick, and held in place by something that resembled a maglock. No provisions for comfort or waste disposal had been incorporated into the design.

"If I can de-construct one of these maglocks," Dean said, "I could use the polarity enhancer to boost the signal, and convert it into a TAN recognizable format."

"Good plan, Dean, except for one flaw: no tools"

"A-HEM!" Dean said, holding his arms out through the bars so Aya could see, he dramatically snapping his hands out in front of him. He pulled one scuffed sleeve up to his elbow, then the other, "Nothing up my right sleeve, nothing up my left....Oh! But what's this?" he said, and with a flourish of his hands, suddenly produced a microtronics kit.

"I do NOT want to know where you hid that when they searched us," Aya said, "But I'm damn glad you have it."

"I'm a techno-nerd, and an accomplished prestidigitator to boot, being without my tools is like being without my penis, ain't gunna happen without surgery. How are we going to get the guard in here and take him down?"

"Leave that to me!" growled Grish. She strained against the straps holding her in place, stretching them out.

"Grish, you're strong, but not that strong," Aya said, putting a calming hand on the Garoudan security officer, "I don't want you to hu..." The rest of Aya's sentence petered off into stunned silence as the straps suddenly blew apart, releasing five-hundred-and-eighty pounds of lupine fury into the room.

"Okay," Aya said, "Forget what I was saying. Now, do you have a plan?"

Grish nodded.

"I know an old trick, one we used to hunt Druckal on our homeworld," Grish said to Aya, "Druckal are predatorsh, like ush, sho we lure them in by giving them what they want-wounded prey. Shcream...."

Nodding in understanding, Aya whispered a quick series of commands to the two female ensigns in the cell across from her, then let out a bloodcurdling scream, frightening many of the prisoners farther down the corridor who had no idea what had been going on in the conspirators' cells. As expected, the door immediately opened and a Byntai cautiously moved into the building. His face was hidden behind his environmentally sealed helmet, but his expression of fear would have boosted the morale of the prisoners if they could see it. He moved cautiously toward the end of the cell block, where he saw a female human arm laying outstretched through the bars of the cell on the left side. He knew the penalty if any of the merchandise was damaged through carelessness, neglect, or suicide, so he moved in to check. His arm firmly encased in the handle-sheath of his weapons pod, he whirled to face the cell, weapon aimed steady with a stunner bolt charged and ready. One woman lay on the floor, seemingly dead, while the other growled and chewed on her leg. Horrified and confused by this act of cannibalistic savagery, the Byntai soldier recoiled, stumbling backward... right into the powerful arms of the now-free Garoudan reaching through the bars behind him. He felt the Garoudan's claws rip into his throat, choking off the cry for help he tried to voice. The last sight he saw before his helmet (and head) were removed violently, was the seemingly dead female across from him suddenly standing up, unharmed. The last thought to go through his mind was "Wha...?!?"

"Well," Aya said, looking at the ensign across the way with a raised eyebrow, "The snarling and chewing was a nice touch, if a bit odd."

"It worked, didn't it?" the ensign said, "I just had to think Garoudan." she said with a smile.

Grish grinned at the ensign and opened the helmet, dropping the Byntai's head to the floor. The look of shock on his ridged, gray-skinned face was priceless, but there was business to attend to. She tore the lining of the helmet and found the transmitter unit. Grish ripped it out of the helmet and then reached back through the bars of her cell and grabbed the guard's weapons pod and yanked it off of his arm. The weapons pod was DNA encrypted so that only Byntai could use them, but there were components in it that Dean needed. Grish handed these through the bars into the technician's cell, and proceeded to loot the body. His sidearm was, like the weapons pod, useless to her, but his vibroknife on the other hand... Grish smiled.

Dean worked quickly, knowing it was only a matter of minutes before the other guards came looking for their comrade. He removed the cowling from the weapons pod, and removed the power cell for the particle beam weapon within. He then cross wired the polarity amplifier from the maglock with the transmitter, and linked the

entire contraption to the power cell. In less than two minutes, he had hammered together a piecemeal Hyperpulse Transmitter.

"All right, it's a go," Dean declared proudly, then looked puzzled, "Um, what do we want to say?"

"Hand it to me," Aya said, "I'll handle that part."

*Illian System, Tarsus Corridor,
1,975 Light Years from Terra*

"Unusual transmission coming in, sir," A comms officer on the bridge of the *USS Holden* called out to the captain seated above him on a peninsula-like promenade that overlooked the circular operations center of the bridge.

"Report," came the reply.

"Seems to be some sort of distress call. Burst transmission, fired off twice, then silenced mid-burst during a third transmission. No origin ID, trace code, or Omninet transit log from the origin, only from a bounce at Stellarcom relay beacon 1327 in the Lagrange star cluster. It looks like it originated from a primitive transmitter, probably scratch-built."

"Hand me the hard copy," Captain Thomas Miller said as he looked down into the ops pit from the overhead holographic display of ship activity in the Illian system. The comms officer fast-walked up a set of stairs to the command promenade and handed Captain Miller a transparent flexi sheet with glowing text scrolling across its surface, then returned to his post at a nod from the captain. The bridge of the North American Union destroyer was quiet, except for the occasional sensor ping and the soft steady sound of the air recycling system. Captain Miller read the hardcopy aloud: *"To any Terran Alliance or allied ships in the area of the Lagrange Beta system, we are being held by Byntai slavers on the second planet in the system, exact coordinates unknown. Surviving crew and passengers of the ESS Edmond Hillary being held in one small building near the STO landing pad. Send help ASAP."*

"What do you think, sir?" asked Ulan Ramirez, the first officer, "Is it a trap? There's still remnant loyalist factions in the region that are looking for any way to get vengeance for the Alliance's recognition of the Andali Confed's independence. "

"Could be, and it could be legit," Miller replied, "We can't risk it, if Alliance citizens are being held by hostile aliens, we must intervene."

"Sir, permission to speak freely?" Ramirez asked.

"Granted as always, Ulan."

"Sir," Ulan said as he swiveled his chair to face the captain behind him, "We are a long range patrol, with one destroyer and three corvettes. We have no backup within 75 light years if anything goes sour, and if it IS Byntai, you know as well as I do that they travel in pack-fleets, some of them large."

"I know this, and I am considering this. Suggestions?"

"Would it not be wise to hold position here and wait for an assault fleet, or at the very least another patrol group to join us before we go in?"

“While I do appreciate your caution, Ulan,” Miller said as his eyes scanned the screen in his chair’s console, reviewing navigational data, “The fact that the message was cut off in the middle of their third burst seems to indicate that whoever got that message out got caught. The Byntai are cagey, and will probably assume that their location has been compromised and bug out within a few hours.”

A chime sounded from the console in front of Miller as a course was plotted to the Lagrange Beta system. He looked through the holoscreen at his first officer, determination in his voice.

“No,” Miller said as he tapped the flexi in his lap, “We have no choice but to respond, backup or no.”

“Well, sir,” Ulan said hesitantly, “While I don't like it personally, we may well need backup, and it is my duty to recommend any alternatives available. There is a TAN member nation fleet near there.”

“The Ahrugan patrol near Satori Shar on the other end of the Tarsus Corridor?” Miller said as much as asked, understanding Ulan’s reticence and bringing the matter up.

“Aye sir,” Ulan said, shifting uncomfortably, “If we have no other options, of course.”

Captain Miller ran his hands across his gray hair, which stood out strikingly against his dark brown skin. He leaned back in his command chair, and folded his hands behind his head. Like most member nations of the Terran Alliance of Nations, the North American Union was heavily involved in the political, military, economic, and social affairs of the Alliance, and had changed very little since its birth in the 21st century with the merging of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The Ahrugan Tribal Confederation, on the other hand, was in many ways even more alien to the other nations of Terra than some of the races humanity had encountered over the centuries as they expanded out into the galaxy. A fierce and warlike people, the Ahruga were descended from many Gaelic cultural and religious movements originating in the 19th and 20th centuries that had consolidated and organized into a powerful regional organization during the chaos of The Fall. They had built up a respectable economic power-base through tribal corporations, and were among the first private groups of people to leave the Sol system when jumpships became commercially available. Upon settling their new homeland, somewhere in the Sagitarian arm of the Milky Way, they genetically engineered themselves into a new race, renaming themselves “an Athrugadh”, the Reborn.

Miller studied his first officer for a moment. A good officer, he was a staunch Catholic; Orthodox Catholic at that, rather than the far more liberal Reformed Catholics.

Considering this, it was expected for Ulan to have negative emotions towards the polytheistic Ahruga, but something more seemed to be behind Ulan’s discomfort.

“Ulan, what do you know about the Ahruga?”

“Well, sir, if you mean their history, they were among the first explorers to settle off-world due to their quest for a new homeland. They relocated their entire population offworld in 2102 and disappeared from public view until the Cappelan War in 2255. They were...”

“No, I mean what do you know about them, not their history. And speak candidly.”

Ulan leaned back in his chair with a grim face.

“They're a warrior culture, with much of their society dedicated to military pursuits. They seem to have no civilians, *per se*, just warriors and various castes that support those

warriors. They love to fight, and do so with the same enthusiasm civilized folk have when they go out for a night on the town. They have won every war they have ever fought," He waved his hand as if to dismiss the impact of this statement, "Not through strategy, however, but savagery. They have piss-poor tactics, and tend to simply line up and smash everything in their path. If it weren't for their superior military technology and their use of genetic engineering to turn themselves into half-feral monstrosities, they'd be wiped out in a heartbeat."

"But," Miller said, raising a finger in a professorial gesture meant to emphasize a point being made, "They scare the hell out of the Byntai."

"They scare the hell out of anyone on the business end of their military. They're barbarians," Ulan said, with obvious disgust, "Savages, sir, and they strike fear into their enemies through their brutality." Ulan's voice dropped to a whisper, "They....they take the heads of their enemies as trophies, sir!"

"Men just like you and I did things just as bad or worse in Vietnam in the 1960's, Korea in the 2020's, K'Thar in the 2140's, etc. We have taken trophies off our enemies before, though we don't like to admit this. My great great grandfather had a blanket made of K'Thari pelts."

"Yes sir, but it's sanctioned by their government, even glorified. I only suggest them as backup because I agree that we must respond to this distress call, and I don't like the idea of doing it without some measure of caution."

Miller grinned and leaned forward "And if it is a trap, you feel they're expendable and likely to throw themselves into the enemy so we can escape, making them perfect cannon-fodder, correct?"

"Well, no, sir," Ulan sat up straight and protested "I would never consider using troops of a fellow TAN member nation as..."

"Save it, Ramirez," Miller said, sitting up in his chair, "I am wiser to the ways of the Ahruga than you are, and I know they are more than they seem, but I agree, they do love to fight. Hell, they pick fights with anybody that might give them a challenge just to keep their warriors busy. They'd probably prefer it to be a trap."

"Yes sir," Ulan said, considering the discussion at an end.

"Navigation," Miller said, sitting up and assuming his posture of command, "Helm to 193 by 38 by 9, Lagrange Beta system, and step on it."

"Aye sir!" came an affirmation from below in the operations pit.

"Comm, get ahold of the Ahrugan patrol at Satori Shar and apprise them of the situation. Tell them that whoever gets there first gets the glory, and if they want a piece of this, they'd better haul ass. Tell them that they can come and clean up the scraps after we're done if they want to move as slow as they usually do."

"Um, Aye sir!" came the uneasy reply from the communications officer. Ramirez glanced over at Captain Miller.

"Sir?" He asked uncertainly, unsure of how to address his captain's unusual breach of protocol.

"You have to understand their mindset," Miller replied with a smile. "We hold duty and efficiency above all else, and to us the most important thing is doing the job right, as efficiently as possible, with the least loss of life and cost. They hold honor above all else, and glory a close second. They see us as dishonorable, backstabbing, and weak. If there is a fight near them and they get one-upped by Americans, they lose a lot of

honor. If they get to show off their prowess and make us look bad, they gain glory. Either way, they'll have no choice but to fight."

"I don't understand the mindset, but I trust your experience with them, sir."

Miller grinned, his white teeth seeming to glow against his dark skin in the dim light of the bridge.

"Sir," came a hesitant call from the ops pit, "Reply from the Ahrugan ships...um, I'm quoting here, sir: 'Your broken down rust-bucket of a ship won't even make it in time for the leftovers, we'll start the barbecue.' As I said, I'm quoting them, sir."

"Affirmative," Miller replied with a laugh, "Jump status?"

"Sir, Navigation reports all ships ready to jump to hyperspace."

"Affirmative, go for jump." The destroyer lurched suddenly, and the stars outside the view port were blurred into a swirling cloud of colors. The destroyer shimmered as it entered hyperspace, and was suddenly flying through a tunnel of light and energy with vortices of blue-white, green, and purple streaks forming the tunnel walls. In front of the ship was a spot of pure blackness from which the vortices seemed to stream, only to disappear into an identical spot behind the *Holden*. The sleek corvettes followed soon after. In this alternate dimension, known as a wormhole, the laws of physics worked differently. A ship traveling a few thousand kilometers in a hyperspace wormhole emerged many light years from their starting point. As the *USS Holden* and her escorts sped through this strange realm of altered reality, a small group of frightened prisoners on a distant world waited.

It didn't take long for the Byntai to detect the transmission, and retaliation was swift in coming. Several guards had burst into the cell block, waving weapons and shouting. They shot Grish with a stun pulse the second they realized she was loose, and Aya was seized and removed from the cell. An hour later, Grish regained consciousness and looked around.

"Aya?" She asked.

"They took her," said one of her cellmates, "To the admin building probably. I'm worried, the Byntai are brutal bastards to those who disobey them."

"They won't hurt her," Grish snarled as she pulled herself upright. She felt in the bandolier she wore across her chest and found the vibroknife still tucked tight into a hidden sheath on the inside. It wasn't as good a fit as her original, but it would have to do. She looked at the young man next to her, obviously worried about the XO and put a paw-hand on his shoulder, "She'sh too valuable to them, they won't hurt her too bad. They'd want to keep her intact."

"I'm not sure I'm comforted by that," Dean said glumly from the next cell, "I think I'd prefer to know our signal worked, but if it didn't, I'd at least like her here." Grish nodded while checking her new weapon, her muzzle twitching slightly as she tried to formulate an escape plan that would include rescuing Aya and the professor.

In the command building, Aya found herself face-to-face with Uksal Nof, his gray, ridged face looked like a parody of a human's. An elongated chin, heavy brow ridge and high cheekbones made him look like a hornless version of Satan. Unfortunately for Aya, Satan had a better sense of humor.

"You have slain one of my soldiers," he yelled in accented English, standing up to his

full height and slamming his fist down on his desk, "Then you have the audacity to think you have a chance in whatever hell your people believe in by sending out a signal for help! You are possessed of a tragically fatal sense of over optimism!"

"Will you be acting so high-and-mighty when an Alliance defense fleet is parked overhead ready to bomb you back to the Stone Age?" Aya held her head up defiantly.

"Impudent slave!" The regent snorted. He pressed a button on his desk opening the shutter covering the window behind him. Through it, Aya could see the huge manta-shaped black transport that had brought them here.

"Your precious little band of incompetent and squabbling nations does not frighten me," He sneered, "I will have you packed up and shipped off of this rock, and have this entire outpost loaded up and removed before the nearest Alliance colony can send out help." Uksal smiled, an evil sight to say the least.

"And once you are off of this rock, I will personally break you of your irreverent attitude."

"Not likely, Shake."

The Byntai commander looked stunned for a moment, and then with a snarl snatched his hand out across his desk and grabbed Aya by the throat. With ease he lifted her lithe frame a full foot off of the ground and brought her around his desk face-to-face with him. His amber eyes burned into hers.

"Call me that again," He growled, "And I will rip you open with my bare hands, regardless of how valuable you may be. Disobey me, and I will torture you so slowly you will think it is a career!"

A door chime interrupted his tirade.

"Enter!" Uksal yelled.

The door opened, and a Byntai soldier entered, dragging Professor Hastings beside him.

"This is the human you wished to interrogate, regent."

"Thank you Cah Sul," Uksal said as he dropped Aya to the ground, then pointed to a chair in front of his desk, "Seat him there."

Professor Hastings looked no better than he had on the ship, and was mumbling to himself incoherently. The Byntai guard pushed him forward and then down into the chair, then returned to stand watch by the door.

"And now, professor," The regent said, sitting on the edge of his desk to face the human, "Tell me about this knowledge you seem to have discovered..."

Half a million kilometers above the regent's head, reality altered temporarily. Two points, thousands of kilometers apart, suddenly fell to the forces of gravity and quantum mechanics as two jump points opened with a flash, resembling blue-white whirlpools disappearing into infinite blackness. The *USS Holden* and her escorts emerged from one, and to their relative left, four larger ships appeared.

Captain Miller looked at his tactical scan of the Ahrugan ships; sleek shapes, resembling elongated spear heads. Their dark forest green hulls were mostly smooth, massive plates of atomically bonded armor. This deceptively smooth hull design hid enough firepower to atomize the biosphere of a planet in mere minutes. In the rear, between armored cowlings,

were the powerful contragravity drive engines that allowed the ship to maneuver more like a giant fighter than a capital ship.

Miller felt a twinge of jealousy. Powerful though his ship was, the *Holden* was an anachronism. A design developed nearly one hundred years earlier, and having undergone subsequent refits, she was tough and capable, but looked archaic. The *Holden*, which resembled a two-by-four on its narrow edge with engines stuck on the rear and gun turrets along the hull, was built for function, not aesthetics. The Ahrugan Tribal Confederation's ships were hundreds of years more advanced, and were a testament to their military research and development.

"Yeah, but we still got Las Vegas." Miller muttered.

"Sir?" Asked a comms tech.

"Nothing ensign," Miller replied, shaking himself out of his thought, "Contact the Ahrugan ships and let them know that they have first pick of targets if they wish. Tactical, what do we have out there to say hello to?"

"Sir, LIDAR shows we have eight Byntai capital ships, and forty fighters."

"Relay tactical data to the Ahruga and put me in touch with their commander ASAP."

"Yes sir!"

Aboard the *ATCS Cuthach Diaga*, command destroyer of the Ahrugan ships, Taoiseach Cormac Niallach sat in his throne-like command chair on the bridge viewing the holographic tactical display suspended in the air before him. The throne, sitting upon a dais between four stone columns in the center of the command deck, was surrounded on three sides by such displays, rattling off vast amounts of tactical data. Beyond the throne area were the various command stations of the ship, surrounding Cormac's command center in a circle. Occasionally, information would be relayed from a warrior occupying one of the cockpit-like seats in these command stations.

Cormac rested his chin in his hand and stroked his braided red beard in thought, looking more like an ancient Celtic chieftain than the commander of one of the most advanced warships in known space. The blue spiral and zoomorphic tattoos that spanned his face and neck glowed slightly in tune with his emotions. Grey eyes, witness to countless battles, regarded the data with a calm wisdom. Cormac had fought his way from among the ranks of the Airí, the warrior-nobility of his people to become the chieftain of his clan, and was fifteenth in line for succession to the throne of his tuath, his tribe-nation. Though he looked no older than thirty, he had fought in the great Cappelán War sixty three years previous, and bore the scars- and trophies- to show for it. Many of those trophies, skulls of Cappelán commanders, occupied niches in the columns surrounding him. Even in the depths of his ship, he wore his armor- dark green plates of the same atomically-bonded armor as that which protected the ship over a black energy-dissipating jumpsuit- and held his pulse rifle across his lap. Cormac was a hardened veteran among a people who boasted warriors more skilled and ferocious than any other nation of Man, though the Ahruga could hardly be called human anymore.

A slight smile crossed his lips as he compared the NAU data with his own.

"Get the American on the horn," he ordered his comms officer, "They missed something."

"He's on, sir." Said the comms officer. A new holo image appeared next to the tactical screen, and Cormac found himself looking into the face of a smiling older black man in an NAU captain's uniform.

"You rang?" Miller said. He knew this Ahruga from previous encounters. Fierce and honorable, Cormac also possessed a sharp sense of tactical knowledge that contradicted his people's reputation for being less-than-cunning.

"Aye, I did. You missed something, Miller. You getting enough sleep on your patrols, or is it just old age creeping in?"

"Stow the comments," Miller retorted, grinning in spite of himself. He knew Cormac was jesting, but underlying it all, the Ahrugan warrior's experience fighting the Byntai was far more vast. "What did I miss?"

"Your LIDAR scan shows ten ships, but I'll bet you a thousand credits it's more akin to thirty."

"How so?" Miller's grin vanished and he became concerned. LIDAR may have been an old system of detection, but for short ranges, such as those in this arena of high orbital theater combat, it was extremely reliable.

"Byntai raiders are non-reflective," Cormac said, "And don't register on LIDAR. Are you running gravitic sensors?"

"Passively, yes."

"Switch them to active, they know we're here anyway. You're closer to the planet, and you might pick something up. We're running full bore broadband sensors, and getting shadowy blips near the third moon and across the terminator."

Miller ordered the tactics officer to switch to broadband sensors, and was surprised to see eighteen more blips register.

"Damn, your right."

"I've got two hundred warriors ready and loaded, and I already scrambled a fighter squadron. I can drop them off dirtside and let them play, if you can keep an eye on them. Then we can go teach their ships how to dance our way."

Miller checked his tactical data. *Damn, they're efficient, he thought, In system less than a minute, and he's already got marines and fighter groups ready to attack.*

"Tactical," Miller called out to the ops pit, "How long to launch marines?"

"Three minutes sir."

"That's what I thought." Turning back to the vidscreen, he looked at the tattooed face of the other commander.

"We'll maintain orbital superiority for your troops, but remember, this is a tactical raid. There are civilians down there, so make sure your troops don't go berserk or do anything that will leave the hostages in psychological therapy for years. I don't want a repeat of the New Eden incident."

Cormac grinned, his genetically elongated canines gleaming like a wolf's.

"We'll behave ourselves, Tommy boyo, don't worry." With that, he signed off. Somehow, Miller was not any more at ease.

In a troop drop bay deep in the bowels of the *Cuthach Diaga* an alarm sounded. Ahrugan marines in heavy environmentally sealed battle armor began scrambling from their prep couches lining the walls and headed for the drop bays. Each of these warriors, male and female, were powerfully built epitomes of the glory of Ahrugan genetic engineering. Although they looked like rather large, well-muscled humans on the surface, they were no longer able to call themselves *Homo Sapiens*. Two hundred years ago, when their ancestors had first settled offworld, the most militant tribes of the Gaelic settlers had accomplished a feat of genetic engineering that remained a closely guarded secret. This project, called the

Neogenesis Program, re-wrote the genetic structure not of a single settler, but of the entire colony, creating a new race- heightening strengths, removing weaknesses and flaws, until they had become supermen and women. It was, in effect, a jump-started evolutionary burst.

Later, this project combined extremely advanced nanotechnology into the mix through genetic replication of nanites, minute robots only a few atoms in size. The Ahruga were now born with these nanites in their system, allowing them amazing regenerative capabilities and slowing their aging to a crawl after they achieved adulthood. Fifty times stronger than a human, a hundred times tougher, larger and possessing feral traits and internal weapons such as retractable claws and elongated canines, they had truly evolved into another species: the Ahruga, *the reborn*.

These powerful warriors crowded into drop pods that resembled matte gray elongated eggs, one per pod. No drop ship, no slow decent, these pods were launched like bullets at the target, relying on the advanced inertial dampening fields that surrounded them to reduce the G-forces and impact to survivable levels. Occasionally a field failed, and thus the pods filled with a redundant inertial dampening gel. Sometimes, though, even this gel wasn't enough, but the warriors viewed that as just another joyous risk of battle. Those who survived a battle felt an elated rush that no drug or Better Than Life sim in VR could ever equal: the rush of living. Thus, the mood was jovial.

One of these warriors, a comparably small and lithe woman named Fionna Ní Connal, smacked a few of the male warriors on their butts as they hopped into their pods, eliciting a squawk from one or two younger ones. These were her warriors, her assault team, and she was going to make damn sure they brought glory to their people today.

"Éoghan," She called out to a technician who was prepping the pods for drop, "I want to drop some empty pods down with them as decoys just in case. Set them to self-destruct at fourteen thousand."

"Aye, *Gruaig Lasánta*." Éoghan replied with a smile. Fionna grinned at her nickname, *Fiery Hair*, even though she had heard it since childhood. She kept her flame-red hair long, not uncommon among Ahrugan women, but never wore it in the common braid while in combat. When her armor shifted into full-form- the metallic hydrogen reverting to liquid form and flowing from the breastplate like water to harden and reshape into a visored, sealed helmet- her hair sank into it and became one with the armor. But when her helmet was down, the way she preferred it, her waist-length auburn mane of wavy hair was striking indeed. She got back to business quickly, however.

"I want a LOT of debris falling to scramble their point defense systems and keep our warriors safe."

"Trust me," Eoghan said, "I'll make damn sure they won't know what's hit them, so no sweat."

Fionna nodded and climbed into her pod. Then the battle was joined.

The *Holden* and her escort corvettes began firing salvos from their fusion cannons and pulse lasers, pinpointing the impromptu Byntai defense grid satellites. Since the Byntai had set up for a short stay, they hadn't dug in very well, and their orbital defenses were soon annihilated. One of the corvettes engaged a handful of Byntai fighters, and the ship-to-ship combat began. Three of the four Ahrugan ships broke off and accelerated toward the Byntai fleet coming their way, while the *Cuthach Diaga* accelerated past the American ships toward the planet. As the massive ship

neared, she turned her belly to the planet's surface, letting inertia carry her forward into the upper atmosphere. Several dozen small circular hatches opened in the armored underbelly, each only six feet across and almost imperceptible in comparison to the three-kilometer-long bulk of the ship. With a sudden flash, each one began firing drop pods towards the surface. Inside each of these capsules the warriors sped towards the surface, more often than not, giggling like maniacs. The night side of the planet below lit up as what appeared to be a meteor shower streaked towards the surface. Amidst the drop pods were a half-dozen Bran Rua aerospace fighters, their swept-forward wings mounting four large particle projection cannons and missile pods. As soon as the troops were away, the *Cuthach Diaga* broke out of low orbit and accelerated towards the flashes in the distance where the Ahrugan ships had met the Byntai raiders. The two NAU corvettes continued mopping up orbital defenses that had either been missed or only damaged, and the *Holden* began blasting several anti-aircraft and anti-orbit bases on the planet's surface that had been determined to not hold any prisoners.

Fifty-thousand kilometers from the troop drop, the three Ahrugan frigates had plowed straight into the midst of the Byntai defense fleet. Whereas most militaries stayed thousands of kilometers from each other in ship-to-ship combat, the Ahrugan crews preferred to close with their opponents, fast and hard, preferring their naval combat the same way they liked their ground combat- close and vicious.

As the Ahrugan warships approached, large blast doors in their outer armor slid open, revealing large, double-barrel turrets and ports denoting the openings for missile launch tubes. These turrets emerged from their armored cradles and swiveled to target their rapidly nearing foes. The clouded skies of Lagrange 2 lit up as the Byntai fired barrage after barrage of particle beams and pulse laser fire. Their aim was true, impacting on the shields of the Ahrugan warships, but did nothing more than create an eerily beautiful aurora of charged particles and refracted light as the energy shields absorbed or reflected the damage. Not to be outmatched, the Ahruga returned fire as they closed. Their particle projection cannons were slower than the Byntai's light speed weapons, but did far more damage. Whereas the particle beam weapons used a laser to guide a stream of charged particles to their target, particle projection weapons fired a self-contained packet of protons at an enemy. Hundreds of such blasts ripped into the shields of the lead Byntai vessel. To her credit, she withstood the first barrage, though two of her smaller escort ships lost their shields. The Ahrugan warships slowed as they glided through the Byntai fleet, and opened up with withering broadside fire. With their flanks to the enemy, the Ahrugan frigates opened smaller blast doors, revealing four domes under each door. These domes spun, the thirty-foot wide lenses in their centers seeking their prey. These lenses focused and locked onto the Byntai ships as they passed. With a brilliant flash, the Ahrugan ships opened up with these assault lasers, concentrating several on one point of the shields of the enemy ships. The Byntai, knowing this tactic well, rolled their vessels to prevent the lasers from overwhelming the shields at one point. One of the Byntai escort raiders suddenly imploded as a laser pierced its hull, only to blossom outward again in a fireball of plasma and debris. Ships from both sides began weaving and dodging around one another, a beautiful ballet of deadly ships and fighters illuminated by energy weapons and the explosions of vessels as they perished.

Thousands of kilometers below, three Byntai anti-aircraft gunners scanned over the earth berm embankment of their entrenched pulse laser cannon. They were on high alert and warned to look for incoming fighters. Their attention quickly turned towards the distant horizon in surprise as the clouds were suddenly illuminated. It looked to be crimson and blue lightning flashes deep within the clouds far to the east. Over their tactical comms channel, they heard the confused screams and curses of several anti-aircraft installations as Ahrugan fighters smashed them one by one. So distracted were they looking for fighters coming from the east on their sensor screens that they failed to hear the scream of incoming objects directly overhead until it was too late. With a crack, several drop pods tore through the clouds and impacted into the ground just yards from their entrenchment. The impact was so great that the gunners were knocked from their feet. As they scrambled to reach their weapons console, they heard a sound no enemy of the Ahruga ever forgot: a low moan, quickly followed by several horrific wailing tones in some demonic cacophony of sound, resembling a cat or some other wailing beast being tortured horribly. The Byntai knew from those sounds, made by an instrument called "bagpipes", that they had only seconds before the Ahrugan marines were upon them.

The leader of the three brought the pulse laser turret to bear on the impact zone, now obscured by smoke and dust, and proceeded to fire. With a sizzle-CRACK the laser burned into the dusty night and the bagpipes fell silent. The team leader smiled beneath his visor, confident that he now had the Ahrugan warriors pinned down, so his surprise when a rapid fire pulse of protonic energy blew him in half was total. The other two gunners managed to get to their weapons pods. Whirling toward the direction of incoming fire, they saw huge shapes leaping inhumanly fast towards them. The gunners opened up with every weapon module in their pods, screaming in desperation. The Ahruga were notorious among their enemies for being incredibly tough, and today that reputation was proven correct as lasers, particle beams, and projectiles ricocheted off of their heavy armor. With a snarl, an Ahrugan warrior landed between the two gunners, vibrosword and pulse rifle in opposite hands. One of the Byntai gunners managed to fire off a projectile from his multi-weapon, but it bounced off of the warrior's armor with a dull thud, leaving only a scuff mark. The Ahruga slashed through one gunner, his sword's harmonic blade separating the molecular cohesion of the gunner's armor and then his body, and blasted the other one with a quick burst from his pulse rifle, ending the firefight as quickly as it began. The warrior glanced around quickly.

"Sector four clear," he said into the comm system in his helmet, "Anti-air down, moving on to inner perimeter."

"Affirmative," came the reply, "Be aware that we have drawn their fleet away, but they may have ground-based fighters."

The warrior grumbled under his breath. He hated commando raids; they lacked glory and the ecstatic thrill of honorable combat. In this case, however, subtlety was not a loss of honor, for they were being sneaky to save the lives of innocents, this raid simply lacked the challenge of the battlefield. He knew the risks, though, and was not about to put civilians in jeopardy for the sake of glory.

Back to work, he thought. Then he looked at the mess at his feet that had once been Byntai

gunners, he smiled

"Cleanup on aisle five." He laughed.

Behind him, a string of vehement curses blasted forth in a mixture of Gaelic and English as one of the Ahrugan warriors walked into the entrenchment. His forked and braided red beard, along with his distinct accent, was reminiscent of Highlanders from nearly a millennia before. He held a scorched scrap of plaid cloth in his hands with three tubes dangling from it, one of which was still on fire. The angry warrior looked at the commando who had slain the Byntai.

"Which one of these thrice-damned ill-bred mongrel bastards shot me bloody pipes!?!?"

The first warrior, who's nameplate on his armor read 'Liam Niallach', laughed out loud as his helmet melted off of his head and flowed into the breastplate of his armor. The piper, furious, threw the destroyed bagpipes at Liam's chest and yelled

"And what in all the nineteen-flamin'-hells-o'-tap-dancin'-China is so bloody funny? Me pipes is ruined you Irish bastard!"

"Oengus," Liam said, laughing as he re-sheathed his vibrosword, "I don't know why you Albanach clansmen insist on playing that horrific thing every time we hit dirt-side."

"It's a bloody-damned important part of me heritage," Oengus replied, kicking one of the Byntai corpses hard enough to fling it clear out of the trench, "And you Éireannach and your sissy harps canna tell me you know the first thing about music!" He picked up his ruined bagpipes and shook them in Liam's face to emphasize his point, "Only us Highland-bred Albanach know what REAL music is!"

"a-HEM!" came a voice above them both. They looked up to see Fionna perched cat-like on the barrel of the Byntai pulse-laser, "You two, stow the musical debate for another time and go kill me some Byntai. We have work to do."

"Aye!" the two warriors replied in unison, their helmets flowing back up and re-solidifying on their heads as they raced off to find the Byntai command post.

Fionna just shook her head in amusement and followed after them, quickly followed by the rest of her assault squad.

Overhead, the battle in orbit had turned very sour for the Byntai. Most of their fighters had been destroyed as an overwhelming wave of Ahrugan and NAU fighters slammed into them. Of the twenty-eight capital ships, three were nothing more than clouds of ionized gas and dust, three more were devastated debris fields, two were on fire, venting atmosphere in sheets of rolling flame and attempting to flee, and one more was plunging into the atmosphere, her engines disabled. The Ahrugan ships, now joined by the *Cuthach Diaga*, had barely suffered any damage, and no serious losses. A handful of fighters had been lost after being caught in capital ship fire, and one had been disabled by flying too close to a nuke blast against one of the Byntai raiders' shields, but that was all.

The *Cuthach Diaga* showed her true colors as she waded into a cluster of four of the Byntai's largest vessels, destroyers and one battleship by their classification. On the bridge, Cormac stood in the middle of a holo display of the surrounding scene, seeming to stand in empty space with no ship around him. His genengineered brain multitasking and noting millions of details a second, he was aware of everything from a Byntai fighter on fire spiraling into the atmosphere a thousand kilometers away to

the enemy flagship launching hundreds of fusion nukes at him. He smiled.
"Conlan, fire by the quarters: four high, three low, three high, and four low."
"Aye sir!"

A volley of devastating PPC blasts traced a figure-eight pattern through the oncoming missiles, detonating most of them. A few slipped through and impacted the shields, jolting the ship. Cormac was unconcerned.

"Gut that destroyer," he said, pointing to a destroyer below and to the relative left that was bringing its bow cannons to bear.

Thirty double barrel PPC turrets, each barrel large enough for a man to walk down standing upright, swiveled and locked on to the destroyer. As the PPCs sent a searing torrent of fusion energy to their target, followed swiftly by dozens of missiles, several of the assault lasers bore into the forward shields. The destroyer, unable to roll its bow away fast enough to spare its shields, was suddenly left naked as they buckled against the onslaught of the lasers. The end was swift as several gigatons of protonic energy ripped into the hull, blistering off several meters of atomically bonded armor. Then the missiles ripped into the secondary hull. Huge gaping holes were torn deep into the heart of the ship, and the second volley of PPC shots found these open wounds. The Byntai ship seemed to glow incandescent for a second, then blossomed outward into a fiery ball of debris and plasma. The ship's engine section was sent spiraling down towards the planet, then suddenly flashed into a brilliant halo of plasma as the magnetic retention coils containing the small star at the heart of her reactor failed. Cormac smiled, as it was now the enemy flagship's turn.

"Conlan, prep the PSP for firing."

"Aye sir!"

The philosophies behind Ahrugan ship classifications were a little different than the NAU's. To the Ahrugan mindset, a destroyer should, as the name implied, be able to destroy things. Really BIG things. Thus, the main weapon of every Ahrugan destroyer was a spinal mount PSP running through the core of the ship, with the emitter in the bow covered by a massive cowling. Deep in the bowels of the *Cuthach Diaga*, the Pinpoint Singularity Projector, or grav cannon as it was known, began to form a massive pocket of quantum energy. Drawing on the very essence of the cosmos itself, a packet of super-dense exotic matter the size of a bus formed up inside the magnetic womb of the PSP. A sheen of crackling blue energy arced like witchfire across the bow of the *Cuthach Diaga* as she powered up.

"PSP ready to fire sir!" called the weapons officer.

"Conlan, remove that from my sky." Cormac said, pointing at the Byntai battleship.

A sudden lurch signaled the singularity's launch. Visible only as a distortion of the stars surrounding a dark spot with a crimson hue as it moved near light speed toward the Byntai ship, the exotic matter began collapsing in on itself, forming a tiny quantum singularity. This baby black hole moved at incredible speed with the mass of thousands of stars, exerting its pull on everything for hundreds of kilometers. The singularity impacted against the enemy ship's hull, punching right through the ship and continuing on into space beyond. Suddenly, the Byntai battleship seemed to fold in on itself as the tidal forces of the singularity pulled the inside of the vessel where it had punched through with it. The battleship was torn inside out and dragged, a stream of debris, into the PSP's super-dense projectile. Suddenly, the artificial forces that had created the singularity collapsed, and it

unleashed its energies into the surrounding space. In a flash, the two remaining destroyers were ripped apart, reduced to debris flung outwards along the shockwave. The remaining Byntai ships immediately began turning from the fight, their morale shattered at the sight of such a powerful weapon being used. Those not already engaged with an enemy ship pulled out of orbit and fled toward the outer edges of the solar system as fast as they could, a few even making the risky move of jumping to hyperspace even though they were not clear of the planet's gravity.

Aboard the *Holden*, Captain Miller flew out of his seat, "They fired WHAT?!?!"

"A gravitic weapon of some sort, sir; a PSP I believe."

"Comm, get me Cormac, NOW!"

"Aye sir!" came the frantic reply.

Cormac's smiling image appeared on the screen, "I assume you're calling me to remind me that TAN weapons treaty 19764-A outlaws the use of gravitic, biological, teratogenic and mutagenic weaponry, am I correct?"

"You're damned tootin' I am!" Miller said.

"I should remind you, Tom, that the ATC never signed that treaty."

"And I should remind YOU that you are not in the ATC! This is Andali Confederation space, and they will go through the damned roof if they find out about this. Are you trying to cause a damn incident here? Your ships could mop the floor up with the Byntai using conventional weapons, why did you have to use a grav cannon?"

"You want the honest answer?" Cormac said, thoughtfully.

"yes!"

"Because these sacks of shit have been raiding Terran Alliance outposts, fringe colonies and shipping lanes for ten years now, and none of the other nations have bothered to do a damned thing about it, claiming it is too much of a cost for too little gain. We just did something about it."

"Blowing up one battleship is hardly telling, Cormac..."

"Trust me, Tom, I know what I'm doing, I just can't get into it right now. Orders. You know all about that. *Cuthach Diaga* out." With that, Cormac cut the transmission.

"What the hell do you have up your sleeve, Cormac," Miller muttered as he stared at the blank screen for a moment before shifting his attention to the defense of several Ahrugan dropships headed for the surface.

On the outskirts of the Byntai base, Liam and Oengus squatted behind a low rock formation atop a small hill. Liam was using a pea-sized spotter drone, hovering a few feet overhead, to scout out the compound.

"I got a couple of Byntai personal vessels," he said, scanning the heads-up display imprinted in his retina, "Probably buyers. One Byntai Manta-class slaver on the ground, empty slave hold, though there's soldiers watching it, and three Khurian light freighters."

"The Khurians are probably buying as well," Oengus spat, venom in his voice, "They're the Byntai's biggest customers, the rat-humpin' bastards."

"Yep, and there's a....hang on, I got some activity."

One hundred yards away, Byntai soldiers began shoving a rag-tag group of people, the crew of the *Edmond Hillary*, out of a low building near the landing pad. Several more

soldiers emerged from the large building at the center of the complex as well.

"Shit!" Liam muttered, "They're prepping for liftoff. They've got the hostages on the landing pad."

"Any other Alliance citizens in the area?" Fionna asked from down the hill. Her implanted transceiver made her sound as if she was whispering in Liam's ear, even though she waited with the rest of the squad nearly fifty feet away.

"I got three in the main building, none anywhere else."

"You sure they're not Khurian?" Fionna asked, tapping her retinal display into the spotter drone's feed, "Being human, their DNA scan might register as Terran."

"Nope, I got the Khurians in a lounge further back with one of the Terrans. The other two are also Terran. One's an old guy I recognize from an archeology lecture I attended at the University, and the other two are female, and Khurians never let their women outside."

"Alright then, you and Oengus go get those three, we'll get the rest."

"Aye."

"Support?" Fionna asked, switching channels on her commlink.

"Support wing here, commander," came the reply.

"Tactical data is being fed on a sub-channel. I want everything but the main building and prison block reduced to cinders on my mark, understood?"

"Aye!"

Several kilometers away, six Bran Rua fighters hovered over the blasted remains of a bunker they had leveled during the initial assault. Using the heat rising from the twisted smoldering wreckage to hide their thermal signatures, they waited motionless for the attack command. They didn't have to wait long.

Liam and Oengus approached the compound across the STO pad, slipping past the guards by using their armor's cloaking field. Using micro-gravitic fields- the same fields used in their gravity-manipulating AG fields that adjusted their weight and inertia- they bent light from one side of their bodies around to the other. Advanced electronic countermeasure, or ECM, emitters throughout their armor masked their movement, sounds, energy signatures, and even the heat signatures left by their passage in the air and on the ground. The two warriors were, for all intents and purposes, invisible to the sensors and eyes of the Byntai. They moved quickly across the STO pad to the main building, slowly shuffling along the wall towards the main entrance.

When they were less than twenty feet from the door to the main building, they stopped, awaiting the signal. Suddenly, a howling war-cry came over the tac com net just as massive explosions threw everyone, Byntai and otherwise, to the ground. The scream of jet engines mixed with the dull thrum of gravitic repulsors was heard overhead as a delta formation of Ahrugan fighters strafed the STO pad. A burst of full-auto PPC fire ripped into the Byntai slaver, blowing a landing strut off of the vulnerable ship and sending it crashing to the ground. Liam and Oengus wasted no time in leaping to the doorway. A Byntai guard had the misfortune to open the door just as they arrived, and Oengus was still very irate at the loss of his pipes. He let the Byntai know just how upset he was by ramming the remains of the pipes into the Byntai's face hard enough to puncture his skull with one of the tubes and snap his neck.

"Suck on that ye gray-skinned bastard!" Oengus yelled, kicking the corpse as he went through the door. Liam just shook his head and followed after.

Aya was bleeding from a busted lip and a broken nose, gained by her attempting to silence Dr. Hastings when he had begun his mad ramblings. She held herself up on her knees and one hand, the other clutching the bruised ribs she had gotten when Uksal Nof had thrown her to the ground. She looked up at the Byntai soldier at the door who had his weapon trained on her still. Hastings continued to ramble on as he had for hours now about his vision of "worms of the ancients" coming back to life and bringing their wrath down upon all of the races of the galaxy. To Aya, it sounded like insane babble inspired by one-too-many horror novels. Uksal held his hands steepled against his chin and smiled evilly. An alarm suddenly chimed from his desk, and Uksal looked down at it in surprise. "What?!?" he exclaimed, a look of fear crossing his face before he regained composure.

"Soldier," He said, regaining his look of smug superiority, "The defense fleet has run into some uninvited guests. Prep the slaves for departure and inform our guests that the meeting shall be relocated to our secondary rendezvous point."

"It shall be done, Regent" was the reply, and the soldier who had been aiming his weapons pod at Aya stepped out of the room. *One left*, Aya thought, eyeing the other guard at the door. Spying the soldier's vibroknife, she began coiling her legs under her for a leap. Seeing Uksal momentarily distracted on a commlink of some sort, she leaped at the soldier. Then everything went to hell as one massive explosion after another rocked the building. Aya's neat leap-and-grab turned into a smashing impact as she slammed into the soldier, knocking them both to the ground. Even Uksal was thrown from his chair to sprawl in a far corner. Hastings had come out of his insane reverie long enough to scramble under Uksal's desk and hide. Another explosion, this one very close, blew the door off its frame inward and momentarily filled the room with incredible pressure. Smoke began pouring in, and from somewhere in the building came the sounds of shouting and weapons fire. Aya looked down and found the soldier fumbling to try and bring his weapons pod to bear on her. She rolled over, pinning his arm to the ground and felt desperately for the vibroknife. Aya felt her hand wrap around the handle just as the soldier bucked, sending her tumbling off of him as he rolled onto one knee. He brought his weapons pod up and fired, but Aya snapped out a side kick, sending the shot wide. She spun with the momentum of the kick, whirling inside the Byntai's reach. He reached out defensively and caught her long hair in his free hand, pulling her up short and spoiling Aya's aim as she tried to stab him in the throat. The knife glanced off of his shoulder pauldron and hit the side of his helmet, stopping cold. The Byntai yanked her hair down, trying to throw her off balance and bring his knee up into her jaw. Aya, having trained in *Aikido-Jin Ryu* for self-defense since she had set out on her own, went with the downward momentum, diverting at the last second from the rising knee and turning the yank down into a tight forward flip. The Byntai lost his grip on Aya's hair as she flipped, and her heel arced over and smashed into his nose. Stunned, the soldier reeled backwards, snapping his visor down to protect his bloodied face. Aya rolled to her feet, again inside his reach, and thrust the knife upward as she rose. The tip skipped off of the visor of the Byntai's helmet and was guided in and under, where it pierced the underside of his jaw and penetrated into his brain, killing him instantly. Aya stepped back from the corpse as it dropped to the ground, and suddenly stopped cold as she heard a voice made of ice behind her.

"Turn around, little slave," Uksal said calmly, "I want to watch the life fade from your defiant eyes."

Aya turned and found Uksal standing behind his desk, a pistol aimed dead-on for her heart. "And now, defiant one, you die." Then all Aya felt was a searing blast of energy.

Liam and Oengus had split up, with Liam heading towards the ground floor office and lounge where the hostages were being kept, and Oengus sweeping the upper floor of any resistance. Liam's pulse rifle held in his right hand, he was using the other to move debris out of his way. He looked one way, his helmet's sensors scanning through the walls, and aimed his pulse rifle in the opposite direction, it's onboard sensors performing the same task. Overhead, he could hear Oengus firing periodically. Liam stopped suddenly, his sensors picking up bodies on the other side of the door to his left. Not the one's he was here to rescue, however, these were slave-buyers. He raised his pulse rifle, an over-under double barreled weapon resembling a sleek, magazine-fed assault rifle of days gone by, and took aim at the door. The top barrel of the A-7 pulse rifle was a powerful particle projection cannon, a rapid-fire smaller cousin of those used by the capital ships engaged overhead. The under barrel, on the other hand, was a magazine-fed grenade launcher that carried a payload of special ordinance grenades ranging from pulsar stunners to forty-kiloton-yield mini-nukes. Liam was about to send a nasty incendiary grenade through the door, but thought better of it. There was supposed to be a hostage somewhere in there, and besides, this needed to be handled in a more personal fashion. He lowered his rifle with a grim expression on his face. Yes, these individuals had to be dealt with in a MUCH more personal manner.

Though the Khurian and Byntai slave-buyers were most likely civilian, no-one, not even the self-righteous NAU, would mourn their deaths. The Khurians were one of three parallel-evolution human races, having evolved into humans on other worlds completely independent of Terran DNA, but there the similarities ended. Their civilization was built on treachery and powermongery, and many made their livings as slave traders and black marketers. Byntai were universally hated by everyone except for the Khurians, mainly because the cultures of the two species were so similar. Both races were living embodiments of all that the Ahruga hated.

Thus, when Liam kicked in the door to the lounge and found the buyers hastily packing their things, he smiled. His smile faded as he saw a naked girl stretched out spread eagle against the wall, her wrists and ankles held by shackles. Her back was covered with bloody welts. Liam triggered his bio-sensors and was relieved to see that she was alive, but unconscious. Then he saw the whip one of the Khurians was holding. He began to feel the rage build up in him.

"I'll give you assholes a chance," He said, laying his pulse rifle down, "I'm going to do this bare-handed, so you don't feel like I was being unfair, and when you get to whatever hell you belong in, tell them Liam Niallach sent you, with more to follow." One of the Byntai lunged for a weapon on the couch across from him, but Liam was quicker. He leaped and caught the Byntai by the throat and easily lifted the slaver off of the ground with one hand.

"Humph! And they say you're supposed to be smart." Liam said, as he snapped the Byntai's neck. Across the room, the Khurians, slave merchants by their dress, drew curved knives and advanced. Another Byntai rushed Liam, followed by four more

from the opposite direction. Liam threw a palm strike into the chest of the first Byntai, sending him sailing across the room like a rag doll to smash into the advancing Khurians, and kicked at one of the assailants coming from the rear. With an audible crack the neck of the Byntai broke, and he dropped to the ground. Liam whirled to face the three Byntai behind him.

"Time to show you why my people are feared across the galaxy," he said, "I think it's time for you rapist slaver bastards to know the fear you instill in those you enslave, plus interest!"

Liam dropped into a hunched-forward position and dropped his head down. A low growl issued from him as he crossed his arms under him. Suddenly, Liam snapped his arms out, the nails of each finger morphing and elongating into two-inch-long talons. His head snapped up and a visage like that of a demon from the darkest pits of hell met the Byntai, stopping them cold. Though Liam's face and shape had not changed, his optical implants glowed a brilliant blood red, so bright that no pupil was discernible, a tool of psychological warfare to instill fear in his enemies. His mouth yawned wide as an unearthly roar like that of a lion issued forth from his throat, reverberating off of the walls around him. His elongated canines gleamed in the light, as if in anticipation of the throats they were about to rend. Thus, the animal rage inside every Ahrugan warrior, enhanced through genetic engineering and technology, was let loose upon the slavers. What happened next was nothing short of an animalistic orgy of butchery that, when finished, left Liam walking from the room covered in gore. In an odd conflict of imagery, he tenderly carried the young woman in his arms, wrapped in a med-blanket, trying to keep any of the blood from dripping on her. Behind him, in a room now turned red, very little was left identifiable as humanoid. Liam, his eyes back to their natural blue-gray hue, and all semblance of the monster he had become gone, continued to head for the office. He met Oengus on the way and handed the unconscious woman off to him.

"Don't ask," he said in reply to Oengus' look of concern, "Get her to the medics, I'll get the other two."

"Ye sure ye dinna want help?" Oengus asked, taking the unconscious woman into his arms as gently as a new father cradling an infant.

"No," Liam said, raising his pulse rifle, "I got this."

He reached the office shortly, and found the door blown off of its hinges inward. A room off to his left had been destroyed, leaving a flaming pile of rubble blocking the hallway. He could see a Byntai officer through the smoke aiming a pistol at someone to the right of the doorway. Looking at the wall where the Byntai was aiming, Liam switched his optics implant to thermal. Through the heat of the scorched wall, he made out the outline of a human female, and the fading heat of an obviously dead Byntai on the floor. Liam knew if he shot, he would scorch the girl, but he had to risk it. He raised his pulse rifle and sent the neural command to it to extend the collapsed stock. Seating the stock in his shoulder, he aimed and fired a single shot at the unarmored head of the Byntai officer.

Amidst the swirling chaos of the aftermath of the PSP's firing, a single Bran Rua fighter moved swiftly through the burning debris of a destroyed Byntai ship towards the fringe of

the battle. Nial an Ciúin, the pilot of the fighter and one of Cormac's many sons, dodged the spinning and burning wreckage that had been a Byntai heavy frigate minutes before. He was intent on the three Byntai vessels attempting to break away from the fight and head for a safe place to form a jump point.

"You're not going to slip away from this party without a going away present," he muttered, "And I wouldn't mind slapping the 'farewell' card on you as well."

A sudden "thwack" on the starboard wing of his fighter caused him to shift his focus in that direction. The Neurolink system that bonded his neural impulses to his fighter fed the data to the onboard AI, which redirected a tiny HUD window in the right side of his vision to show him the starboard wing. A grisly piece of debris, the explosive-decompression-mangled torso of a Byntai crewman, had caught up on the weapons pod on his wing. Nial muttered several annoyed imprecations under his breath as he spun the fighter, flinging the corpse free. His attention returned to the task at hand. The closest of the ships was nearly ten thousand kilometers away, but he could close the gap in seconds. Activating the inertial dampening systems would send up an energy signal, but he was hoping the Byntai sensors were still recovering from the massive gravitic and radiation burst of the PSP explosion. He reached the edge of the debris field and lined up on his target. With a howling war cry, he kicked on his inertial dampening field and mentally slammed the thrust to maximum. The Bran Rua fighter streaked toward the trailing Byntai transport like a missile. Even with the dampening field, Nial was slammed by the force of nearly fifteen G's into the cushioned seat of the cockpit of his fighter, his vision blurring at the edges. Were it not for the dampening field, the force exerted on his body would have been thousands of times the current load, liquefying his body. The straggler saw him coming, and began lighting up the space in front of him with anti-aircraft pulse laser fire. Several hits deflected off of his shields, shaking the fighter. He switched fire control from manual to neural and began opening up with everything the Bran Rua had. Dozens of missiles streaked from pods above and below his wings, the spent pods jettisoning in his wake as he continued to accelerate. The four heavy particle projection cannons mounted along the body of the craft and the wings opened up, streaming full-auto bolts of protonic fusion energy at the enemy. The PPCs impacted the Byntai shields with hardly a ripple, as expected, for those shields were designed to take hits from the gigaton-yield impacts of capital ship PPCs and nuclear fusion weapons. The missiles, however, were special Shield Splitters, loaded just for this mission. The first four slipped through the phased shields and impacted the hull of the Byntai ship. Three exploded with a force of a small star, five gigaton yield each in a compression field to contain and amplify the damage. Huge gouges formed in the Byntai hull where these three struck, but the fourth simply smacked into the hull and stuck, an apparent dud. Nial had reached the ship, and was sliding along the energy plumes of the remaining missiles impacting along the hull and shields. Three more of the missiles failed to detonate, sticking to the hull like splattered bugs on a windshield. A sudden jolt flipped Nial's fighter over, and nearly caused him to spiral into a large weapons array coming to bear on him. Through the Neurolink, he knew he had just lost port-side shields and a healthy chunk of that wing. Nodding in satisfaction, he broke off and headed back toward the Ahrugan fleet. Nial opened a comm channel.

"Delta four to Alpha one, tail is pinned on the donkey."

"Alpha one received," came the voice over the commlink, "Return to base."
"Delta four returning, out." With that, Nial did a series of victory rolls as he streaked back toward the looming collection of ships.

As the bolt of plasma slammed into Uksal's head and through the wall behind him, his entire upper torso exploded in a flash as a small star was briefly created where his head had been. The passage of the blast had scorched the door frame, and the detonation had singed Aya and Dr. Hastings, but they were alive. Aya felt as though she had received a bad sunburn on the left side of her face, and she was seeing spots where the brilliant flash had erupted in front of her, but she was alive.

"Hastings?" she called out.

"He's alive," came a deep voice, carrying a hint of a brogue, "But he looks a wee bit scatterbrained right now."

Aya blinked several times to clear the flash-spots from her eyes, finally closing them for a count of ten. When she opened them again she could see clearly. In front of her was a seven foot tall man helping Hastings to stand steady. His helmet was off, and a braid of auburn hair hung over the back of the gorget of his armor. His camouflage armor was spattered with too much blood and gore to make out any unit insignias or rank, but she knew immediately from his size, the silver torc around his neck and the sword on his back that he was an Ahruga. He turned to look at her and she saw the spiral and zoomorphic tattoos running along his neck up behind his right ear and onto his forehead, ending with a stylized wolf over his right eye, confirming her assumption. Unlike many Ahruga, this warrior was clean-shaven, and his smooth, strong face was, to Aya, ruggedly handsome.

"Thank you," she said, "I owe you my life."

The warrior grinned, "Any time a beautiful woman tells me something like that, battlefield or no, my day is a happy one, but you owe me no debt."

Aya smiled in spite of herself. She looked past the warrior where his shot had blown a large hole through the wall and shattered the window. Outside, several Byntai had surrendered and were being trussed up with manacles by more Ahrugan warriors.

"Am I to assume, then, that the ATC received the call?"

"Nope," Liam said, "An NAU fleet picked up the distress signal and called us in for support. We got here first, so we got the honor of the ground battle"

"I see," Aya said, "And who will be debriefing us?"

"I haven't a clue as of yet."

"My name is Matsushita Ayame, err, call me Aya. I was the executive officer of the *ESS Edmond Hillary*, which was boarded by these bastards."

"Liam Niallach, Aire Déso of Tuath Niallach. I think your equivalent rank would be captain. Call me Liam."

"You bear your tribe's name as your own," Aya said, wanting to take her mind off of the smoldering corpse next to her, and remembering some obscure bit of knowledge that Dr. Hastings had once told her, "If I remember correctly, that means either your ancestors founded the tribe, or you were orphaned at an early age, right?"

"Aye," Liam said as he hopped out the window and held a hand out to assist Aya as she helped the professor out, "My grandfather was Nial Ó Conor, the founder of our Tuath.

Not that it means much, since Ol' Nial had nearly four hundred grandkids," Liam then reached out and easily picked Aya up, eliciting a gasp from her as he set her down on the ground as if she weighed no more than a rose petal.

"I am one of the nobility of my tuath, but that is by deed and not blood," he said with obvious pride, then with a wink "But I dinna think my lineage is what you're most interested in right now, is it?"

Aya smiled, then eyed the Byntai prisoners as they walked towards the STO pad.

"What will happen to the Byntai?"

"Depends," Liam said, shrugging, "If the NAU gets them, they'll probably put on a pretty show trial that will last a year, then put them on a penal asteroid for life. If we get them, they'll be executed on the spot."

"Oh....I see."

Aya fell silent as she contemplated the troublesome division of authority among the rescuers. It would complicate matters greatly, and there were secrets from the dig that she did not want being discovered yet. She knew little more about the Ahruga than the rather biased references to them on the trid, and she didn't know whether she could trust them. The NAU, on the other hand, she knew she could not trust. With their penchant for regulations, control, and a bureaucratic desire to have fingers in everyone's business, she knew they would discover the data she had found and suppress it, and that was not something she could afford. *No, better to take a chance and trust the Ahruga*, she thought.

She followed the warrior as he headed towards the gathering of the now-freed crew of the *Edmond Hillary*. As they approached, she was stopped in her tracks at the sound of Grish roaring the fiercest primal roar Aya had ever heard come from a Garoudan. Her eyes searching through the wreckage on the STO pad and the amassed Byntai, she saw Grish snarling at several of her former captors, a bloodied vibroknife in one hand and her natural climbing claws unsheathed and extended, also dripping with blood.

"Seems your friend beat us to her guards," Liam laughed, "Just got the report over the tac channel. By the time we got there, she had killed or incapacitated them all, and had released your crew."

Aya smiled slightly "Sounds like Grish alright."

Grish spotted Aya, and held up her fists in victory and roared again, the cowed Byntai flinching against a shattered piece of landing strut. Ahrugan warriors were putting blankets over the shoulders of the now-freed prisoners in a centuries-old ritual of rescue. Medics, identifiable by the blue harp on a white sleeve-band, began to check them out one at a time. Fighters screamed overhead, seeking out any remaining Byntai forces. To Aya, the dull reddish-gray dawn seemed beautiful indeed, now that she was free. It seemed strange to her that less than twelve hours ago, she was as scared as the rest of the crew, prisoners of an alien slaver.

"Liam," she asked casually, "There are some data cores and a few artifacts that are of significant value that I have to account for, as it is my duty. You understand duty, so you know how important that is, right?"

"Aye, I do, lass," Liam said with a smile, "And right now I have a duty to check in with my commanding officer and account for you and the others we took out of there, so I need to do that first. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes, so sit tight here

while I check in and then we can find out where your wayward data cores have wandered off to.”

“Thank you,” Aya said with a relieved smile. As she watched Liam walk off, she began feeling more confident in her choice to trust him, even if she was being evasive still.

“Aya!” someone called out from her right. She looked up and saw Dean running towards her.

“Dean!” she yelled, smiling as he jogged around pockets of hulking Ahrugan soldiery. As he passed Grish and her captives, he suddenly pulled up short, gave one of the Byntai a swift kick in the groin, and then continued his jog to Aya.

“Damn, you had me worried!” he said, “All I saw was them hauling you...what happened to your hair?” he asked suddenly, pointing to Aya's singed bangs.

“Got a little cooked by a blaster shot,” she said, and then, seeing Dean's look of worry, quickly added, “It's okay, I'm safe and in one piece.”

“Alright, I trust ya. Any idea what's going on,” Dean said, sticking his hands in his pockets and looking around at the commotion, “Any idea who's in charge?”

“I think the Ahruga are basically in charge down here, but that may change, and I want to recover the data as fast as possible.”

“Yeah, because you know as well as I do that the NAU will confiscate a lot of what we found on...” Dean looked around at the many soldiers surrounding him, “Uh, found on Bertram. The Ahruga don't care, so we need to see if we can get the finds out of here before the NAU takes....” Dean stopped, his eyes widening as he looked at Aya's face in the growing light, “What happened to your lip? And your nose is bleeding!”

“I'm okay!” Aya laughed, “I'll live, I'm fine, and I appreciate the concern, but I am good, Dean. I agree, we need to get the data and the finds out of here. And I think I know a way.” She looked around for Liam and spotted him headed towards a growing group of his fellow warriors.

Liam called out to the other warriors in Gaelic, and they laughed and replied in turn. Aya knew five different human languages, but Gaelic was not one of them. However, she was a cultural anthropologist, a requirement for an officer position aboard an exploration vessel like the *Edmond Hillary*, and was able to get the gist of the conversation. They were proud of their victory, but seemed uncomfortable with something. Liam and several of the other warriors gathered together in a tight knot and began a quiet yet heated conversation. One of the skills a female learned growing up in the Nippon Empire, even on a fairly liberal colony as Aya had, was the ability to become seen but not seen; invisible, not by virtue of science or some supernatural element, but by simply being so innocuous as to be overlooked. She slipped into this spectral realm of psychological invisibility to get closer to the knot of warriors. The smallest of them, a young teenage woman with shoulder-length strawberry-blond hair with a blue band tattooed across her eyes, was still nearly half a head taller than Aya, so she found it easy to slip right up to Liam's side unnoticed. She could discern that they were growing increasingly angry at something, but she couldn't tell what. She noticed that they would all stop talking at once, and seem to be listening to something, and then the heated discussion would begin again. It took a few moments for it to dawn on Aya that the warriors must all have internal commlink implants, and that they were listening to a communications channel reporting some event or order. She knew that the fight must be pretty much over, for Ahrugan warriors would never sit idle if there was fighting to be done, so the source of their consternation was a mystery.

Aya took a risk. Reaching up to gently touch Liam's arm, she got his attention. "What is the trouble?" She asked.

"The bloody NAU are trying to claim jurisdiction," Liam replied with obvious disgust, "And the bastards have already reported to the Alliance that they have rescued you, making no bloody mention of our having done all of the damn work. Captain Miller gave us the heads-up, saying his superiors had done it behind his back. He's as pissed as we are. Just like the NAU military to stab even their own in the back."

"We need to get that research data now, then," Aya said, switching from the 'Silent Kimono' to the firm, confident young woman she really was, "I need your help, Liam."

"We located your ship, or what's left of it, on the other side of the fourth moon. They fragged it on the way out, not much left I'm afraid."

"Yes, but they must have taken the computer core and any important artifacts onboard their ship," She looked up at him. Liam looked down, about to protest, about to say there was plenty of time, but he found himself lost in Aya's dark almond-shaped eyes. She looked so sincere, innocent and lovely, even with a swollen lip and singed bangs, that he felt his resolve slip. If ever there was a weakness possessed by a male Ahrugan warrior, it was his soft spot for women, especially innocent-looking ones, and MOST especially beautiful innocent-looking ones. This was why so many women in the Ahrugan military spent so much of their time smacking love-sick warriors out of their reveries to get them back to the task at hand.

"Okay," Liam said, "But I have to clear it with my commander first."

Liam walked over to Fionna and repeated Aya's request. Fionna, having a husband, three male consorts, forty-three brothers, and two-hundred-fifty men under her command, knew that lost faraway look in Liam's eyes all too well. She reached up and grabbed his armor's gorget, and pulled him down to eye level with her.

"Suren you're doing this for the good of her crew and not because you are hoping to be courtin' her, now?"

"I'm sure!" Liam said, seeming to snap out of it, a little at least.

"Then take Oengus with you. You two will be too busy arguing over the virtues of one thing or another to be falling in love, or lust, with any of the women."

"Aye," Liam said, though he seemed to slump a little bit.

Aya had noticed the shift in Liam's bearing from fierce and proud to dreamy, almost blushing, and was more than a bit puzzled. What she knew of the Ahruga was that their warriors tended to be fierce fighters, loving the thrill of battle. She suddenly realized that she had never heard them described as anything but a nation of killing machines. The Ahruga were an enigma, having disappeared from the human sphere for nearly two centuries after leaving earth, and none of the studies commonly available had looked beyond the movie-and-sim face of high-tech noble savagery. As Liam and Oengus moved to flank her protectively, and gently helped her up into the listing wreck of the slave ship, she began to wonder if they intentionally hid this gentler side from the outside world.

Probably the Anthropologist kicking in, she thought as she climbed through the hatchway. Entering the vessel was a strange experience. Though it listed at a twenty-degree angle, the artificial gravity was still in effect, and thus there was a moment of vertigo as "down"

changed for each of them. Once inside, Liam went first, crouching as he walked with his pulse rifle at the ready. Oengus brought up the rear, walking backwards to guard against any enemies from that quarter. Being all of five foot eight and slender, Aya would have had to jump to either side to have even been seen, much less hit by weapon fire, so she felt relatively safe. The corridor was tall, but narrow, and they moved through the ship cautiously. Liam seemed to know where he was headed, so Aya was content to follow along. Liam suddenly tensed, and Aya heard the thunderous roar of his pulse rifle fire off a burst. She heard a high-pitched shriek of an ion weapon, and saw Liam buck backwards from the impact. Liam sent another burst towards the Byntai, blasting large divots in the alien's armor. The Byntai soldier ducked back around the corner to avoid the withering fire. Liam cursed under his breath and sent the neural impulse to his pulse rifle to switch to grenade, and sent a smart grenade down the hall. The grenade launched with a dull *THUMP*, and sped down towards the corner. As it reached the corner, the grenade suddenly veered hard to the right, making an almost ninety degree turn and followed the terrified Byntai as he fled down the hall. The grenade was faster.

With a concussive thud that shook the whole ship, the grenade went off, ending the firefight. Liam turned to check on Aya

"Ye alright there?"

"Yeah, though my ears are ringing."

"It'll clear soon enough. We're almost there, their storage unit for booty is around the bend."

They rounded the corner, and Aya had to fight down the urge to be ill at the charnel mess that filled the hall. Liam stopped in front of a door midway down the hall and stood back from it.

"Aya, get behind Oengus."

Aya moved behind the Albanach warrior as Liam raised his pulse rifle and took aim at the maglock. A quick burst blew the lock apart and melted the power coupling, releasing the door. Liam lunged through the door into the room beyond, emerging a moment later to signal Oengus and Aya that all was clear. As she entered the room, Aya immediately recognized many of the artifacts they had gathered from Bertram, and the computer data cores from the *Edmond Hillary*.

Aya nodded in satisfaction that everything was here.

"I need you to ask your commander if I can have these items transferred to your ship, and take them, myself, and some of my staff to New Melbourne in the Australio-Pacific Coalition."

"I'll see what I can do."

Liam switched over to a neural commlink and was patched through to the command deck of the *Cuthach Diaga*. He relayed the request, and received an answer quickly.

"The APC is too far out of our way," He told Aya, "But we can drop you off at Freeport Casablanca, it's a trade station in the Tarsus Corridor that's outside of any nation's jurisdiction, and you can arrange a pick-up there. Command says we can transport you and only those key personnel that are mandatory, as well as Professor Hastings. He'll need advanced medical attention that the Americans can't provide in the field."

"Very well," Aya said, "Myself, Grish and Dean, then."

"Done, done and done. We have a few Garoudan troops aboard, so Grish will feel at

home."

With that, Liam and Oengus grabbed a static field tray from one of the shelves and began placing artifacts on it's suspension field. The static field tray was a sort of energy cart that hovered at waist height, and was made up of a handle that generated a flat field upon which items could be carried. Many species had developed variations of the same device, and the Byntai one was often used by the Ahruga after storming slave ships to transport wounded slaves back to their own medical bays. Thus, the operation of the device was second nature to the two warriors. They loaded all of the artifacts and the computer cores onto two static field trays and headed out of the ship. As they worked their way out of the Byntai vessel, they heard the howling of turbine engines underscored by the deep thrum of a contragravity drive. Liam looked up as he helped Aya drop from the ship and spotted the lift shuttle he had requested swooping in for a landing. Resembling a bulky fighter more than an actual shuttle, and bristling with weaponry, the ship set down next to the looming hulk of the Byntai vessel as gently as a butterfly.

"You're ride's here," Liam said to Aya, "We'll load all this up, you get Hastings, your gear, and the other two, and we'll get you out of here before the NAU can drop inspectors to give you any grief, since you seem worried about that."

Aya gave Liam a surprised look and nodded. *Not as naïve as you seem, big guy*, she thought, *interesting*. She jogged over to where the rescued prisoners were being assembled for pickup by dropships that even now swooped down from the overhead clouds.

"Dean, Grish, grab your stuff and Dr. Hastings and move it! We're getting on that shuttle."

Dean gave Aya a puzzled look but obeyed. He scooped up a bag as Grish picked up Professor Hastings, who had been staring off into space muttering incoherently, and carried him toward the Ahrugan shuttle, the two humans right behind her. Liam and Oengus jogged the static field trays with their load to the shuttle door, and began offloading them into the troop bay.

"Secure this stuff somewhere safe," Liam told the warrior inside the troop bay as he handed the computer cores to her, "And cloak it so that the Americans can't scan it." "Aye, sir!"

Liam heaved the last computer core onto the troop bay deck, and then turned to Aya with a grin as he helped her in.

"I hate to admit it, but sneaking you past the Americans is fun!"

"You don't like them much, do you?" Aya asked.

"Many of their people I love to death. Remember, a lot of our people are descended from Americans with Gaelic ancestry, and it was in America that the Ahruga were first born, so we share a common heritage up to a point," He pointed up towards the sky, in the general direction of the orbiting NAU ships, "Their government and military leaders are corrupt and totalitarian. They don't like us anymore than we like them, so it's even."

Liam helped Dean and Professor Hastings into the lift shuttle, and then climbed in after Grish, ducking as her tail lashed. Oengus hopped in and closed the hatch behind him, and the shuttle lifted off.

As the shuttle rose through the atmosphere, a flash outside drew Aya's attention to the view

port. She saw what looked to be a meteor shower. Objects of various size were plunging in fiery streaks into the atmosphere. Off in the distance, she saw a particularly large piece disappear behind a mountain range.

“Wreckage of the Byntai fleet,” Liam said, noticing her gaze, “Burning up as they re-enter.”

“The fight is over then?” she asked.

“This one, yes. The rest of the Byntai ships escaped. The battle has just begun, however. We’re tracking their ships back to their base.”

“I thought no-one knew where the Byntai raided from. You think you will find their homeworld?”

“Well,” Liam said, looking slightly nervous as he shifted in his seat, “I didn’t want to say anything, because I know you think we came charging to the rescue so gallantly, but your rescue was not our primary mission here.”

“Oh?” Aya said, raising an eyebrow. This was indeed odd. The Ahruga did not have a reputation for subterfuge, quite the opposite in fact, and thus their apparent intent was almost always their true intent.

“We have been hunting for the Byntai homeworld for nearly three years now. We discovered some information from recovered databases that indicates that they apparently ran into a scuffle with the Cappelans centuries ago, and the Cappelans destroyed all but a handful of the Byntai worlds. They managed to hide those through dimensional displacement technology. They literally phase them out of this dimension into a parallel universe, then move them. They have to bring them out of hiding every now and then, and its when they do so that the raids occur.

“We outfitted all of our patrol ships with Hyperpulse tracer beacons disguised as dud missiles. Thus, in the next encounter with the Byntai, we had planned on hitting them incredibly hard, scaring the hell out of them, and tagging them with these beacons. The tags were successful, and now we are tracking them back to their homeworld.”

“How can you be sure they will return to their homeworld?”

“Byntai scare easily, and when they do so, they retreat to the place of greatest safety. We hit them far harder than we needed to in order to spook them into running home. Now we just need to hit them before they phase into hiding again.”

Aya turned to look back out the portal, her brow furrowed in confusion. So much had changed, not the least being her worldview. Less than a week ago, she was the newly appointed executive officer of an Amshir-Buckland YT-198 research vessel, sipping synthetic coffee, reading over reports from the Hernik Group archaeological ground team about the newly discovered ruins. Now, she was sitting in a combat lift shuttle, battered, bruised, her uniform in tatters, sitting next to several warriors from a nation and race that she was quickly having to re-evaluate. Her ship destroyed, most of the crew and passengers taken for debriefing by the NAU, her employer apparently insane, and her commanding officer dead, her entire world had been turned upside down. She hated and loved that chaos at the same time.

Part of Aya preferred things scientifically oriented; neat, tidy, classified, and not prone to change. Another part of her, the part that had led her to run away from her homeworld and join the TAN Expeditionary Corps, loved the thrill of it all. All of her worries prior to this seemed so trivial; fighting for promotion, fending off Lt. Terrence’s advances, filing reports on time, the size of her quarters on the *Hillary*; all meaningless now. How strange it

seemed that she could have considered such worries so great, when here she had just survived a battle and narrowly avoided being a slave to an abhorrent creature. The scientist in her had known that the data stores they had saved would have to go to a nation with a free flow of information, and not to the NAU. The adventurer in her had compelled her to come along for the ride. Both thrilled at the chance to study the mysterious Ahruga up close, but where the scientist shied away from their intensity and passion, the adventurer basked in it, craving more. Everything she thought she knew about them had been turned upside-down in less than two hours. She wanted to learn more about these warrior-poets, and that scared and excited her at the same time. She knew that, regardless of her motives, she was along for the ride of her life.

2

Chapter Two: The Rattling of Sabers

“...I see much chaos and turmoil, great wars and great deaths, and the children of Éireann will be hard-pressed to survive. A time of kings turned against one another by evil men, Deceit and treachery will be the rule of the day, Nation will rise against nation in arms, Dark deeds be done in the name of slights that never were, And behind it all are those long dead and gone to dust, Those who's worms spread their corruption anew, Who laugh their eternal spite from ancient graves in the heavens, Ancient treacheries strike down the innocent, New treacheries brought forth by the heirs of Rome, Pawns played on the chessboard as the dark star explodes, To the death of many.’

*‘Terrible times! What shall our children do, then, to defeat these evils?’ said Daithí
‘They must find their place and learn to be heroes’ said Lorcan” - Excerpt from the Prophecies of
Lorcan Maol, 9 BCE*

March 20th, 2318 CE

Terran Alliance of Nations Headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland, Terra

Chancellor Li Gao read the report he had received while on the bullet-shuttle from Beijing for the fifteenth time. The Emperor himself had assigned Li Gao to this mission, which struck more fear into his heart than any potential wars that may be brewing. The Emperor was descended from the ancient bloodline of the original Great Han Dynasty, and as such, he was descended from the Gods themselves. When such a mighty man took notice of small men like Li Gao, it could never be good. Li Gao knew his duty, however, as did all members of the great Han-Zhou Empire. He would do as he had been ordered to do.

He looked up from the scrolling text of Chinese characters on the transparent flexi pad he held as his taxi came to a stop. The autocab had delivered him to the one-hundred and twelfth floor of the TAN headquarters, nearly a kilometer high above the city of Geneva, five minutes ahead of schedule. Li Gao hated that. It meant waiting, and he hated waiting. He was a punctual man, never late, never early, always right on time. Arrive too early, Li Gao believed, and you would be seen as too anxious; too late, and you would seem unprofessional and rude. He must appear to be neither in these proceedings.

Li Gao was in Geneva to meet representatives of several governments, each of whom seemed more agitated than usual. Such disturbances generally preceded some sort of major event, usually war, and this concerned the Emperor. He had dispatched Li Gao to gather as much information as possible on the various rivalries, disputes, and hostilities in an off-the-record- and thus more honest- manner. His contact in Geneva had put him in touch with the right people to arrange private audiences with each of the key representatives that he needed to meet with, an impressive feat considering their busy schedules.

This visit would be one of the most difficult, however, for Li Gao had never met the Ahrugan representative, and he had no idea how to prepare. He had researched as

much as he could, but the Ahruga were so isolationist that very little was known about them. Most of the other representatives had chosen to meet with him in various restaurants or in their private offices, but the Ahrugan government maintained only a small cadre of staff based in an office in the TAN headquarters building. Ireland and Scotland were considered sacred to the Ahruga and off-limits to outsiders, and had been since the Ahruga had seized them from the European Union during the so-called "Homeland Wars". Thus, the TAN headquarters was the only Earth-based point of contact with their government.

This particular visit was to discover if the rumors were true, that the Ahruga were about to go into open warfare against the Byntai. No nation- not even enemies of the Terran Alliance such as the Garoudan *Garouja*, the Naradi Empire, and the Suj Collective- cared for the Byntai. However, since they were little more than glorified pirates, and barely stood out against the plethora of other raiders that preyed on the fringe colonies and space lanes, they were generally seen as too troublesome to hunt down with military force and considered a colonial law enforcement matter. Only the Khurian Empire- a decadent and corrupt den of thieves, slavers and murderers themselves- had what could be called friendly relations with them. Not even the Khurians, however, knew where the Byntai homeworlds were. Apparently, the Ahruga were hell-bent on finding them. It was a well-known fact that when the Ahruga set their mind to something, they did it. The only problem was, it was also a well-known fact that the Ahruga would roll over anything in their way to achieve their goals, no matter what it may be. With tensions so high throughout so many nations, and even races outside of the human sphere becoming agitated with the possibilities of a widespread war, such bullish behavior could be catastrophic. Many Chinese interests lay in the Tarsus Corridor, where the fight was rumored to be brewing. There were delicate trade alliances with the Tarsus Corridor Alliance, the Andali Confederation, the Nippon Empire, and even the NAU renegade colonies of the Free Systems Alliance. Not to mention the colonies of the Han-Zhou Empire that were located in that region. The last time the Ahruga went to full-fledged war, they destroyed three entire star systems, and left an entire swath of Hyperspace distorted beyond the capability of most ships to navigate. This potential conflict seemed to worry the Emperor more than any other.

Li Gao was playing the meeting to come in his mind as he stepped off the autocab and onto the landing platform. The massive edifice of the TAN Headquarters building resembled four great sweeping spires rising thousands of feet into the Swiss sky, joined every ten floors by narrow, transparent walkway-tubes. A grand work of art, it had replaced in principle the original UN building in New York that had been destroyed during the cataclysmic shockwave of Toutatis A's Atlantic impact during the Fall in the twenty-first century. The asteroid's fragments had devastated much of the world with multiple impacts, and Europe had felt its touch as well. Most of the Eastern seaboard of the former United States had been erased by a three-hundred-meter-high wave that had washed inland to the Ohio valley. The devastation in Switzerland had been minimal, however, and thus the UN had moved operations to Geneva. Shortly afterwards, the UN collapsed in the chaos of the Fall, only to be replaced during the Restoration twenty years later by the North Atlantic Alliance, one of several regional political treaty organizations that would later merge a century-

and-a-half later and became the Terran Alliance of Nations. Built on the site of the Swiss UN office building, the new Alliance headquarters had been one of the first architectural masterpieces of the Restoration.

However, the same wonderful view that it offered of the mountains and the lake also left exposed landing pads such as this one open to the elements. The chill winds blowing off of the Alps penetrated even the thick *Cheongsam* he wore, sending a shiver up his spine. For a moment, the planning of verbal tactics and diplomacy was replaced by a longing to be back in his warm home in Guilin Province. Shaking his head to clear it, Li Gao focused back on the matter at hand. He walked to the entry gate and got in line. A loud and boisterous gaggle of diplomats from the Russian Federation were taking their time passing through the security checkpoint, and Li Gao began to worry that maybe he would be late rather than early. He tossed his head to hide his frustration, sending his long braided que flipping back off his shoulder. Finally, the Russians were through.

Li Gao handed his identicard to the soldier at the security station, who ran it through the scanner. He envied the soldier the warmth of her environmentally sealed armor, though, out of courtesy, the visor of her helmet was up. A chime sounded from her console and she handed his identicard back with a smile.

"The ATC representative is waiting in conference room seventeen," she said in German-accented Mandarin, showing that she actually knew the language rather than used a translator implant, "Through the door, down the hall about two hundred meters, on the left."

"Danke," he replied in equally accented German.

As he passed through the decorative chrome-and-glass airlock-like door, he once again found himself suppressing nervousness about this meeting.

Walking down the hallway was a trip through artistic magnificence. Many great European works of art had been salvaged from museums and private collections during the Restoration, and many of those had ended up on display in the TAN Headquarters as the original owners had been among the billion-and-a-half killed in the Fall. Part governmental central office, part cultural and artistic museum, the halls were distracting to all but the most jaded visitor. Vaulted cathedral-style ceilings arched sixty feet overhead, the white marble carved with engravings and embellishments that would have made Michelangelo blush with jealousy. Paintings and sculpture of many eras and countries were displayed in niches and along the walls. Even Li Gao, focused on his diplomatic mission, slowed his walk and let his wandering eyes appreciate the majesty surrounding him. When his eyes came to rest on a nineteenth-century painting of a Scotsman in full kilt and hunting regalia, his smile slipped and he renewed his journey to the meeting room.

He checked his chronometer as he reached the door to conference room seventeen and was relieved to see that he was right on time, with forty seconds to spare. He used those seconds to straighten his *Cheongsam* and que, lift his chin, and assume a more businesslike aire before entering. As he stepped through the door, he was more than a little shocked at what he found.

Li Gao had seen many reports and vidcasts about the Ahruga, but had no real-life experience with them. Being Imperial Zhonguoren, he believed, as did all other Chinese, that the westerners were less-advanced. It would be impolite to openly say barbaric *per se*, but that was the general feeling. If the westerners such as the Europeans, Australians,

Russians and Americans were barbaric, then the Ahruga were downright savages. At least, this was what Li Gao had always believed. He had always heard them described as half-feral brutish giants with no manners beyond that of a wolf. Thus, it was more than a shock when he entered the conference room to find himself enveloped in the wondrous melodies of Frédéric Chopin's *Fantasia Impromptu*, Opus sixty-six, one of Li Gao's favorite classical pieces. An even greater shock was the representative.

He had expected a large hairy man in some military uniform dripping with meaningless medals, not the creature of beauty before him. She was quite large, standing at least six-and-a-half feet tall, but sleek, muscular, and beautiful. No military would ever have issued the glittering black spaghetti-strap evening dress she wore; nor the strange, eagle-shaped hair claps of a metal unfamiliar to Li Gao. Before him was a creature both beautiful and frightening; an Amazonian seductress with a knowing smile and platinum blonde hair. Li Gao cleared his throat to cover the embarrassing moment of silence.

"Honorable representative of the Ahrugan Tribal Confederation," he said, bowing slightly, "I bring tidings and good wishes from his most radiant majesty, Ruler of All Under the Celestial Veil, Bearer of the Jade Seal, descendant of Shi Huangdi himself, Emperor Han Sun Jiang."

"Thank you," the woman said, "And I bring you tidings and good wishes from the supreme leader of the Ahrugan People, leader of all tribes, commander of our armies, and the sword of Nuada Airgetlaim, Árd Ríghan Siobhán Ní Bhranua. That," she said over her shoulder with a mischievous smile as she walked back to the head of the table, "Would be me, by the way."

Li Gao managed to maintain enough composure that he did not reveal his shock. This was not an ambassador before him, but the overall head of the entire Ahrugan people, their Empress, so to speak. He was left unsure of what to do, as he was completely unfamiliar with the protocol to be used in this situation. He quickly assumed it would be best to use Zhonguoren protocols. He dropped his eyes and bowed his head, clasping his hands before him in a respectful fashion.

"My apologies your Majesty, my ignorance knows no bounds. I was unaware that I would be meeting with such an esteemed individual. You honor this humble ambassador with your presence"

"Ambassador," Siobhán said, her smile growing into a barely-suppressed laugh, "I am not your emperor. Address me as you would an ambassador of my people, because that is exactly what I am in these proceedings."

"As you wish, Majesty" Li Gao said, raising his head slightly.

"Call me Siobhán, or we'll never get anywhere. I am here to speak bluntly and plainly for my people. I demand the same from you. That is the only demand I will make of you, but it is an important one."

Li Gao raised his head fully and looked at Siobhán again. He saw the mischievous smile that hinted at the corner of her lips, the glint in her eye that told of an easy laugh, of great mirth, and an easy-going aire. He also saw the inner strength that belied her capabilities as a powerful warrior and shrewd diplomat. This was going to be the most intense meeting of Li Gao's career thus far.

"I will get straight to the matter at hand, then," He stated, still nervous, but wishing to appear as honest and straightforward as possible, "My government has concerns about the recent military activities of your nation in the Tarsus Corridor," he said, figuring that he

would try to maintain a polite but somewhat accusatory air in order to try to appear to be blustering in order to cover up for a lack of true knowledge. He wanted to see how Siobhán would react to this standard approach, and then adapt and change his tone as the meeting progressed in order to keep her from guessing how much he really knew, and what his real motives were. For all he knew, she was as likely to play into his ploy as she was to grow frustrated with him and snap his neck like a twig. He prayed it would be the former.

“As you know,” he continued, “the Tarsus Corridor is a band of space along the middle of the Orion arm of the Galaxy that is rich in habitable worlds that are close together, thus making it a very valuable stretch of space. As a result, we have over thirty-seven colony worlds in the Corridor, and many other nations with whom we have friendly relations have thousands of colonies in that stretch of space, as well as many independent systems that owe allegiance to, and are thus protected by, no one. One might be tempted by your nation’s recent activities to think the Ahruga were operating in an expansionist manner, possibly establishing a foothold to expand your territory into the Corridor by seizing some of those independent systems, or even attacking and annexing one of the smaller nations.”

“We have no such objectives, and if we did, you would know it,” Siobhán said, sitting down at the head of the conference table, “The operation was not a premeditated act by my government, but in response to a request for aid from the North American Union patrol that responded to a distress call. It was not solely an Ahrugan military operation as the NAU had principal jurisdiction. It was a joint operation to rescue a kidnapped archaeological team and some crew members from an Alliance exploration vessel returning from beyond the frontier, and thus sanctioned by TAN Security Council procedures. We are even providing medical care to some of them aboard one of our ships. Typical rescue operation, really, nothing of concern.”

“Ah, yes,” Li Gao replied, taking a seat to Siobhán’s left so that his right side faced her. He knew that there was something about the left side that the Ahruga found insulting, but he couldn’t remember specifics. “There are, however, rumors that a gravitic weapon was used, indicating a significant escalation in the level of conflict from conventional tactics- such as would be used in a rescue- to strategic ones, such as would be used in war. Is this true?”

“Yes,” Siobhán said, “One of our ships used a PSP to destroy the enemy flagship and two escort vessels, an act which ended the fight faster so that rescue operations could begin.”

“Yes, but the fight did not end, did it? Even now, your vessels are tracking the retreating Byntai ships deeper into the Tarsus Corridor, and your government dispatched an entire battle-fleet minutes into the battle at Lagrange Beta. That fleet was not headed towards the Lagrange star cluster, so they were not reinforcements for the patrol involved in the operation. Their trajectory seems to be towards the far end of the Tarsus Corridor near the Orion Empire.”

“Your intelligence is good,” Siobhán said, with a slight smile, “I’ll grant you that. I just gave the order to dispatch those ships a few hours ago. Yes, they are tracking the Byntai ships, hopefully back to their homeworld.”

“You must understand,” Li Gao said with a smile, “That such a fleet of hundreds of warships passing through such a politically-charged region, with so many independent systems with rich resources, raises questions. No one has ever been able

to track the Byntai homeworlds, as they phase them in and out of normal space. It would appear to some of those nations who are in the Tarsus Corridor, especially those with no ties to Earth who have only themselves to turn to for defense, that the Byntai hunt might be a smokescreen for a lightning invasion of some nation or nations in the region. You can understand the concern our Emperor has for our trading partners, after all, it was only sixty years ago that your nation annexed territory from another Terran nation.”

“The Homeland Wars did not need to happen,” Siobhán said with a slight smile, “We offered to pay five trillion credits to the European Union for our ancestral homelands and for the relocation of the members of the population who did not wish to live under our rule, and they laughed at us. Their ambassador told us that if we wanted them, we would have to take them. So, we did. No, chancellor” She said, her smile growing wider and somewhat mischievous, “You are not concerned with a possible invasion of the systems in the Tarsus Corridor. What are you really after?”

Li Gao cleared his throat uncomfortably. This meeting was not going as he had expected, and he was surprised at how easily Siobhán had seen through him. He could tell from her smile and body language that she hadn’t bought the act at all, and seemed to know his true thoughts. A chill ran down Li Gao’s back as he considered the possibility that Siobhán was an empath. Psionic ability was not unknown among humans, and had grown stronger as it had become an accepted ability by the scientific community and schools developed to focus the abilities. However, psionic abilities were often accompanied by emotional, mental, or social instabilities, and Siobhán exhibited none of these. Perhaps the genetic engineering her people had engaged in had allowed them to increase their abilities without the attendant problems.

“Pheromones, chancellor,” Siobhán said with a laugh suddenly, bringing a blush to Li Gao’s face, “My people have heightened senses, and because we have such enormous families, we developed a hyper-acute sense of smell when it comes to pheromones. It allows us to identify members of our own family instantly, and has, over the years, evolved to allow us to sense the moods and feelings of others. I sensed you were not being honest, and now I sense your worry and fear. No worries, chancellor, I enjoyed the game.”

“My apologies, Siobhán, I meant no disrespect.”

“As I said, be blunt with me. Play your games with the other representatives, but here, speak truth or not at all.”

“Very well,” Li Gao said, clearing his throat again, “Is the assault fleet you dispatched truly tracking the Byntai back to one of their homeworlds?”

“Yes, it is.”

“And,” Li Gao said, concern showing on his face, “What if the trail leads into Orion space? Their hatred for you is second only to their disgust for the Alliance as a whole. They will never allow your ships to enter their territory, and to violate their borders would surely start a war.”

“We are not concerned with the Orions, their opinions are meaningless to us. Rest easy, however, the trajectory of the fleeing Byntai is headed to a cluster of systems on the Alliance side of the border.”

“You do realize, of course, that you are about to engage in a military operation in a system on the border of the Orion Empire, and they will likely take such an action as a provocation and this will, in turn, lead to an escalation of tensions, yes? Are you

willing to risk a war with them, considering that such a war will spill over into other nations' territories and likely drag the entire Alliance into it as well?"

Siobhán leaned back in her chair, taking a sip from the glass of water on the table before her. She looked Li Gao squarely in the eye.

"Before you became a Chancellor, were you ever a soldier?"

"Yes," Li Gao said, somewhat surprised by the question, "All Zhonguoren men must serve in the military for three years, even members of the nobility and the royal family."

"Were you ever in combat?"

"No, though I fail to see what my combat experience has to do with these matters."

"More than you know," Siobhán said as she set the glass down. She sat up, and suddenly Li Gao felt very afraid. There was a perceptible shift in Siobhán's demeanor, a sudden change towards seriousness that made her seem tall and commanding, "My people love to fight, this is well known. We also hate everything the Orion Empire stands for. They are an oppressive tyrannical police state that makes the semi-veiled totalitarianism of the NAU seem like the epitome of freedom in comparison. Their emperor believes himself to be a reincarnation of Caesar, and has openly declared a desire to destroy the Alliance, including my people. We know it is only a matter of time before we go to war with the Orion Empire, and we will do so with relish.

"However, we are not the foolish, impetuous savages many proclaim us to be. We will not start that war yet, that is for another day. Any soldier who has seen combat knows its cost. I send men and women into battle almost every week, in battles ranging from border conflicts to mercenary operations for any one of thousands of clients, human and alien. I do not do so lightly, and I balance the cost of their lives against the gain."

"I don't understand what this has to do with..." Li Gao began, but was cut off before he could finish.

"The Orion emperor doesn't care for his soldiers the way I care for my *laochra*, my warriors, but he does understand cost. He is not so foolish as to start a war with us which will cost him so dearly that he will be unable to defend his empire from the many other nations and races who want to conquer it. The Orion Empire could stand for a while against the Ahruga, but would fall eventually. Against the entire Alliance, they would fall in months. At that point, the Naradi, Garoudans, hell, even the Bythrani would invade them from either side, and they would lose more territory than such a war is worth. No, we risk only more saber-rattling and rhetoric from the Orions so long as we do not cross their frontier, which we have no intention of doing. That war will happen when *we* choose to have it."

Li Gao leaned back in his chair. Siobhán's logic was harsh and blunt, but accurate. His intelligence thus far also pointed to the fact that the Orions wanted to take a chunk out of the Alliance for past grievances, but were not ready to do so yet. They had once been a colony of the Trans-Atlantic Exploration Coalition, which was one of the earliest deep-range exploration groups to ever form. A part of the North Atlantic Alliance and made up of the European Union and the North American Union, it had been the most powerful colonizing entity of the early 22nd century. Like hundreds of other colonies, however, the Orion colonies- which were the farthest from Earth, being over four thousand light years distant- had grown tired of Terran control and

declared their independence. Unlike most of those breakaway colonies, which were reclaimed during the Reunification Wars in 2165, the Orion Federation as it called itself was too distant to reclaim, and had maintained its independence. The Orions never forgave the Terrans for attempting to seize them by force, however, and cut all ties with their former homeworld.

Over a century later, the Alliance discovered the Orions had not only survived, but prospered and formed a mighty empire that declared its borders with the naked threat of force should any Terran nation cross it. Since that point, relations had been tense to say the least, with only independent frontier merchantmen, called Freetraders, able to cross the border between the two territories. Everyone knew a war was inevitable, but the Freetraders also acted as smugglers, including the smuggling of intelligence to the right buyers, and enough of that intelligence had made it to the Alliance to assure them that such a war was a long time in coming. Siobhán was correct in this regard, but it still raised questions about how effective such a venture could be.

“Very well,” Li Gao said, changing subjects, “Then let us discuss the Byntai. Do you know where their homeworld is?”

“Let me answer your question with one of my own,” Siobhán said, her smile returning, “If you were the Byntai, where would you hide your homeworld?”

“I have no idea,” Li Gao answered, his brow furrowing as he thought about it, “I would assume in some dark, hidden part of the Galaxy, preferably outside of known space.”

“Exactly. That’s where they would be hidden if they were humans. They are Byntai, however, and vile though they may be, they are incredibly cunning when they don’t let their arrogance get the better of them. No, they would hide it where we would least expect it, in a region that is densely populated. Yet, they would also place it in a star system not likely to be visited. In this case, we have narrowed it down to a small sector of space that is heavily populated, yet has a few empty systems due to the TAN’s treaties with the Orion Empire. We believe they have hidden their homeworld in one of three uninhabited and uninteresting star systems in the Sigma Cluster along the border between the Alliance and the Empire. These systems have many massive planets, so one small one emerging from phased space would hardly be noticed on any sensors. Hell, if they were smart, they probably put it in orbit around one of the larger gas giants.”

“Then why hasn’t the Security Council been convened to mount a joint operation?

This is an international matter, not simply a matter for the Ahruga.”

“We have sent a memo to the Secretary General. What he does with it is his problem. We will be on-site in less than four hours, and will probably be engaged in battle for a few days. They’ll have plenty of time to catch up.”

Siobhán touched a keypad on the table in front of her, and a holo image appeared over the table. It was a star map of the region of space near the Orion Nebula, where the territory of the Terran Alliance of Nations ended and the Orion Empire began. Three stars on the border between the two were highlighted a bright blue.

“These three systems,” She said, pointing to each, “Are the most likely targets, and thus we have dispatched Fianna units to each to reconnoiter. All data we receive will be processed through our intelligence bureau and then forwarded to the TAN Security Council. You and I both know that they will argue as to the best course of action, and in their indecisiveness,

they will give the Byntai the time they need to dimensionally shift their world. We will NOT let that happen.”

Li Gao sat back and looked at the map in thought. He knew that the Ahruga were not stupid, but they had earned a reputation for impulsiveness, aggression, and a devil-may-care attitude. He was sure they knew the risks of what they were doing, so he pondered what they hoped to gain from it. He looked at the map where the TAN met the Orion Empire.

“Tell me, Siobhán,” Li Gao said, “Speaking bluntly, you are not doing this for any sense of altruism. You would not be sending such a massive fleet unless you knew that you would be facing a major conflict, probably involving thousands of ships, millions of troops, and the use of weapons of mass destruction such as you have already used,” He looked her squarely in the eye, “Why? What has you so ready for blood?”

Siobhán looked hard at Li Gao, and he had to fight to maintain his composure and not recoil in shock. Few men had ever looked at him in such a fierce manner, and no woman ever had.

“The Byntai raided a farming settlement on one of our outlying colonies, chancellor. They killed thirty civilians, mostly women and children, before the farmers were able to drive their forces off. That colony was established by my eldest son, and under my personal protection. Those killed were my family. For that, they will pay. The ravens of *an Mórríghan* circle over their heads, waiting for their time to feast. When the Byntai can raid no more, when no more innocents, Ahrugan or otherwise, have to look to the skies in fear, then and only then will we be satisfied.”

Li Gao recognized the reference to an *Mórríghan*, the Ahrugan war goddess, and knew that there would be no hope of dissuading the Ahruga from this course of action, so now he was left with finding some way of mitigating the damage that might be done.

“Siobhán,” Li Gao said, “The Ahruga have, in the past, annihilated entire planets and even solar systems in war, and such heavy-handedness would be dangerous in the Tarsus Corridor, and could be catastrophic so close to the Orion Empire. On behalf of my government, I wish to encourage restraint in your actions, and remind you that others will suffer the consequences of the unchecked wrath of the Ahruga. I understand you are out for vengeance, but for the sake of the billions of innocent lives in the Tarsus Corridor, please do not do anything that will cause others to suffer the loss of family the way you have.”

Siobhán looked into Li Gao’s eyes, causing him to blush and look away.

“You are a good man, chancellor,” she said, “Because you speak the truth when you say you want to prevent more bloodshed. I will make you this oath then, an oath to you, not your government, to set your mind at ease- I will do whatever it takes to end the Byntai threat, but I will also do everything in my power to protect the innocent from that wrath. Fair enough?”

“It is more than I could ask for,” Li Gao replied, relieved, for he knew the Ahruga never gave their word unless they intended to keep it, “But what shall I convey to my government regarding their concerns over this matter? Such an oath to a humble envoy will not mean much to them.”

Siobhán rose from her seat and walked over to the window overlooking the city below.

“Tell them,” She said, turning to look at Li Gao with a sly smile, “Tell them that we’re simply going to deal with a ‘pirate nest’, nothing more. We will use as much subtlety as we

can so as not to upset the balance of power in the Tarsus Corridor.”

“Thank you,” Li Gao said, rising from his seat and bowing, “On behalf of the Han-Zhou Dynasty, I thank you for your promise of restraint and your understanding of the sensitivity of this matter, and I thank you for your candor. I must take my leave and speak with my superiors.”

“*Slán go fóill*, Chancellor,” Siobhán said, bowing slightly in response to Li Gao.

Li Gao smiled and left the room. As soon as he was gone, Siobhán turned to the seemingly empty room.

“Well?” She said in Gaelic.

“Interesting,” Replied a deep voice in the same language, “I am less than happy that the Chinese know our operations so well.”

“Declan, you surprise me,” Siobhán laughed, “You of all people should know that the Chinese have always been masters at political subterfuge, spying, and intelligence gathering.”

A shimmer, like a mirage in the desert caused by the rising heat off of the sands, formed into a large humanoid shape, wavered for a moment and then solidified into an armored Ahruga. Like his brethren thousands of light years away who had snuck up on a Byntai compound, Declan Mac Branain had used his armor's cloaking field and remained hidden in the room during the meeting. Siobhán's champion and bodyguard, it was his duty to remain by her side at all times.

“I studied ancient cultures from south-central Asia at the University,” He said, “India and the like, not China.”

“Yes, but you are also in charge of intelligence for the Confederation, so drop the ignorant act. Your impressions?” Siobhán asked.

Declan took a seat at the table, his helmet deconstructing and flowing off of his head like water. He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then turned to Siobhán.

“I think, my lady, that the chancellor is a good man, and honest once the political games are dispensed with, but I fear he is being used. The leading questions, the information he already possessed, his whole manner seems to indicate that the Chinese are being used as a go-between by someone else. Our intel says he has been all over Geneva meeting with reps from the major governments, and he has been dropping some serious bribes and calling in some interesting contacts to arrange those meetings. It's almost like he was given a shopping list of people to talk to and information to gather, which makes no sense as the Chinese like to work more subtly and over longer periods of time. They are good at intelligence gathering, there is no doubt about that, but the information just doesn't jive with current Chinese intelligence interests.”

“Not to mention,” Siobhán said with a smile, taking a seat across from Declan, “That the intel about our operations in the Lagrange cluster and our tracking the Byntai has the aura of the NAU all over it. They may have garnered it from the American tactical nets, but most likely they asked the American rep and bribed him heavily. The problem is, as you say, this information is not of value enough for the Han-Zhou Empire to warrant the expenses, which means they are gathering it for a third, unknown party. I have no idea who it would be, though. Corporate or alien agencies most likely, since any of the other nations of the Alliance would either have that information or figure it out eventually.”

“Are you having second thoughts about the plan?” Declan said.

“No, not unless it is discovered before we can initiate it. They don’t know yet, though, so the plan is still a go. If they knew exactly what we had planned, they would have raised unholy hell on the floor of the council chambers already, screaming ‘sanction’ this and ‘embargo’ that.”

Siobhán leaned back in her chair and looked up at the crystal chandelier that hung from the ceiling, light from the windows glittered in rainbow patterns among the prisms that descended from the fixture, reminding her of the Crystal Tower of Nua Tara, the Ahrugan capitol city on their homeworld of Éiriú, thousands of light years from Earth. She wanted to finish this business and go home.

“How are things progressing on the front?” She asked.

“The *Cuthach Diaga* and her escorts are holding position in the Tangiers system,” Declan replied, “They’re awaiting the return of one of their assault ships who is delivering some of the rescued hostages from Lagrange to Freeport Casablanca, but they report that they can either return to their patrol duties or join the fleet in the assault, as needed. Tuath nUaithne is pissed that we didn’t contact them for this operation.”

“That’s because they WOULD start a war,” Siobhán said with a laugh, “That tribe is the most militant of the militant, and while I appreciate the directness of their methodology, there are probably tens if not hundreds of thousands of slaves from many races held by the Byntai, and we want to repatriate them in one piece. No, let the Uaithne stew, they will have their chance to bathe in blood soon enough, I fear. What of the assault fleet?”

“Tuath Éoghanachta will have their fleet in place in less than an hour,” Declan replied, “And Tuath Liatháin is already in place one jump away, way ahead of schedule as usual. Both tribes already have their Fianna teams in place in all three star systems, awaiting your orders.”

“Have them report to us the instant they discover any trace of the Byntai homeworld.”

“Aye, my lady.”

“It’s bad business, this.” She said, letting out a sigh of resignation.

“You’re worried about the repercussions?” Declan asked, touching Siobhán’s hand gently.

“Yes,” She replied, smiling and taking his hand in hers, “I fear that I may be over-reacting, but then I think of my kin slaughtered in their sleep, and of all the innocents that these butchers have killed, raped, and enslaved, and my purpose becomes clear.” She looked hard into her champion’s eyes.

“I am going to kill them, Declan. Every last one of them!”

March 20th, 2318 CE

Hesperus, third moon of the fourth planet of the Sigma Nine Star System

Fianna Elite Tuan Mac Iain checked the monitor again. The gravitic sensors they had dropped in the outer orbital ring of Hesperus were reading an unusual flux on the fifth planet of the system.

“No way in hell that’s a fleet,” He said under his breath, “Too bloody big. Guess that’s it.” He switched the monitor to receive telemetry from a stealth satellite thirty-thousand kilometers overhead and did a scan of the surrounding area of the star system. No ships, no fighters, nothing except the icy debris that made up the rings of the gas giant that filled two-thirds of the sky. Hesperus had a stationary orbit which kept the gas giant it circled between the Byntai and the listening post his team had just set up. They would not be visible, and the Byntai were apparently afraid of running long-range sensors lest they reveal their homeworld’s position. Their mission was simple: locate and report the Byntai homeworld that had been phase shifted into this region, then shoot down any fleeing vessels that came their way once the fight began. There was rumored to be more than one such homeworld, a dozen or so by the best estimates, but only one was known to be used at a time. The Byntai had once had a huge empire, but they fell victim to the Cappelan hordes a thousand years before mankind had ever set foot on the moon. The homeworlds they had were the ones they were capable of phasing into alternate dimensions to save them. Though the Byntai were fairly weak militarily, this dimensional shifting technology made them formidable opponents to track down. Cracking the databanks of captured ships and bases had revealed that they only used one homeworld in a raiding operation. The rest were kept safely tucked away in alternate dimensions, either raiding in those alternate realities, or waiting for their turn to attack this one. Tuan idly wondered if there was another Tuan in some alternate universe sitting on a duplicate of Hesperus waiting for the chance to give the Byntai what-for. If there was, he hoped that his other-self gave them hell.

Tuan looked out over the red dusty surface- resembling Mars before terraforming began, except this world had no atmosphere to speak of. Several mounds of rock on the horizon were actually camouflaged assault ships and a base camp where his fellow Fianna were setting up scanning instruments. The Fianna, named for the legendary elite warriors of Fionn Mac Cumhail, were the special forces of the Ahrugan Tribal Confederation, and very good at intelligence gathering. Unlike the front line warriors of their military, who were chosen for their size and ferocity, Fianna were chosen for their initiative, self-reliance and cunning. Thus, they were used to operating with small numbers and in isolated environs such as Hesperus.

“Cait,” He said over the commlink, **“Let the fleet know that I am getting readings of a gravitic displacement of 5.98 by ten-to-the-twentieth metric tons creating a wobble in Sigma Nine-Five’s rotation. No planets or moons that size are supposed to be there, so best guess is that’s it.”**

“Affirmative,” Cait replied, **“I’m sending one of the stealth satellites out to get a look, but it looks like you’re right.”** After a pause, she added, **“Hey, Tuan, while you’re out there, could you check out an anomalous reading we’re getting from the EM sensors? It’s about seventeen kilometers south-southeast from your current position.”**

“Not a problem. What’s it registering?”

“It’s odd,” she said, sounding puzzled, **“It reads as an artificial energy source one second, and then a natural gravity-field fluctuation the next.”**

“It may be Byntai scouts, though I doubt it. Just in case, send out Greaghoir and Bron, and we’ll do it by the numbers.”

“Affirmative, they’re on their way.”

Tuan checked his scan again while he waited for the rest of his squad to arrive. Sure enough, the distortion matched the target planet’s profile. Weighing slightly more than

Terra, and set into an artificial orbit around the gas giant Sigma Nine-Five. He checked his chronometer. A little more than an hour until the fleet arrived, which gave him plenty of time to zip out to the anomaly, blow the hell out of it if it was hostile, and get back in time for the show.

As if reading his thoughts, Bron and Greaghoir suddenly appeared at his side, riding Viper hover bikes. These sleek bikes had no windscreen, instead relying on an energy shield to protect the pilot from threats natural and hostile. Thus, it looked like the two were riding dark green mechanical sharks with no fins and an engine where the tail should be.

“Ready boss?” Bron asked.

Tuan nodded in silent reply and hopped onto his own hover bike. Tuan lifted off and joined his squad, and the three shot off across the airless desert in a delta formation. They covered the seventeen kilometers in less than three minutes and soon were closing on the anomaly. The target area was a small impact crater about three hundred feet across, with several intervening ridges between them. With no atmosphere, it seemed odd to Tuan that there weren't more craters, but he assumed that the gas giants pulled in most of the asteroids and comets before they were able to strike the moon. As they neared the crater, they slowed their speed, dropped down to just above the ground and switched on ECM fields that would hide them from any sensors.

“Bron, break right and flank,” Tuan said, “Greaghoir, drop in behind and cover me. I'm going to fly over and see if I draw fire.”

A pair of 'Aye's followed and Bron veered off sharply. Tuan sped up and flew over the last ridge between them and the target area, his pulse rifle at the ready. A quick sensor sweep showed no hostiles, and nothing out of the ordinary, but Tuan caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye; something unusual in a depression to his right. He keyed his commlink as he banked back around on the other side of the crater for another look.

“Greaghoir, I got no activity down there, but when you follow up, go slow and check to your right. I thought I saw something.”

“Roger, I got it. Looks artificial, maybe old ruins.”

“This world was catalogued as never having been inhabited,” Bron asked, “how could there be ruins?”

“Those surveys are done by remote drones,” Tuan replied, bringing his bike to a stop next to Greaghoir, who was hovering over the indentation he had spotted, “They are less than comprehensive.”

Bron joined the two warriors as they hovered over the depression. Tuan dismounted and climbed down into it cautiously. What had caught his eye was a symmetrical square outline barely visible under the dust and rubble. Tuan switched the optics on his helmet to infrared, but no more detail was revealed. He switched to ultrasound imaging and was surprised by the results.

“Damn thing's a door!”

“Huh?” Bron replied, looking closer, “A door to what?”

A broad grin crossed Tuan's face. He had always had an almost irrepressible curiosity, and this mystery piqued it. He raised his pulse rifle and sent the neural link to load a seismic charge.

“Let's find out!”

March 20th, 2318 CE

Tarsus Corridor near Lagrange Beta System, 2,138 Light Years from Terra

Aya looked around her in awe. The shuttle had landed in the fighter recovery bay of the *Cuthach Diaga* minutes ago, and she had been standing here looking around in amazement ever since. Liam had called it a fighter recovery bay, but this hangar, deep inside the *Cuthach Diaga* and protected by a series of enormous armored doors, was big enough to swallow the *Edmond Hillary* with room to spare. Several dozen shuttles were parked along the wall to her right, and fighters were flying in through the open doors, passing through the atmosphere retention screen with barely a ripple. The undamaged ones had their missile pods reloaded immediately and were then picked up by a grav-field and loaded into a launching rack, stacked like so many bullets in the clip of a gun. As soon as the “clip” was filled, it was lowered through a hatch to be shuffled through a series of access ways to be loaded into the launch bays, and an empty one replaced it. Damaged fighters, of which there were quite a few, were parked along the left wall where automated maintenance systems and a swarm of ground crewmen quickly patched them back together. One badly damaged fighter, little more than a blasted and burned cockpit, was the source of a heated argument between the warrior who piloted it and a ground crewman. Aya couldn't help but let a smile cross her face at the humorous sight of a ground crewman furiously waving a wrench at the hulking pilot while threatening dire bodily harm for the latter's disrespect of the mechanic's ‘baby’.

“As soon as we recover all of our fighters,” Liam said as they walked towards a large set of doors partway down the left wall, “We'll be jumping to the Tangiers system. I'll take you and your people to Freeport Casablanca in my ship since they get really twitchy when capital ships pop up on their doorstep.”

“Thank you,” Aya said, still distracted by all of the activity and noise. She had never been aboard a warship before, much less one actively engaged in military operations. Further into the bay were three dropships lined up in a row in the center of the hangar. These beautiful craft reminded Aya of swans in a way. Long slender necks ending in arrowhead shaped cockpits, broad wings that swept slightly forward at the tips, and a fan of engine ports that flared out like tail feathers. The only disruption in the swan imagery were the large oblong troop pods under each wing. Lining the walls on either side of the dropships were battlewalkers; enormous, vaguely humanoid bipedal artillery walkers that stood between thirty and forty feet tall. A pilot of one of the walkers was waist-deep in a barrel of one of the arm mounted weapons, apparently cleaning it, merrily whistling some lilting tune that echoed back out of the barrel.

All of this was more than a little overwhelming for Aya. The scientist in her was intrigued by the technology of it all, and the adventurer was fascinated by all of the military machinery around her. Only Dean seemed more enthralled by their surroundings. Aya shook her head and tore her eyes away from one of the battlewalkers walking in thunderous steps across the far end of the hangar and looked around her as they walked. She became acutely aware of how tiny she, Dean, and Hastings seemed against all of the Ahruga surrounding them. It seemed less like

they were surrounded by giants and more that they were diminutive people surrounded by normal ones. Aya shook her head again and turned her attention to her companions. Grish was carrying Professor Hastings, who was unconscious again, and she seemed concerned for his health.

“Liam?” Aya asked, pointing to Hastings.

“We’re on our way to medbay, lass, don’t worry.” He replied with a comforting smile as a set of doors in the wall opened as they approached, revealing a transport pod with large padded couches that was not unlike a bullet-tube in any major city. They were soon whisked away on the transport tube towards Medbay. The tube resembled a subway maglev train and, as Liam explained, was part of a network of such transit tubes that ran throughout the ship.

“She’s three kilometers long, so we need these tubes to get around the outer hull quickly.”

“Outer hull?” Aya asked, puzzled, “I thought we were deep inside the ship?”

“We’re on the inner half of the outer hull,” Liam replied, “Our capital ships are made up of two hulls, one within the other. The outer hull is weapons systems, hangar bays, shield generators, hydrogen ramscoop intake vents, sensors, etc. The inner hull is the living quarters, engines, ship’s stores, core systems, and, of course, the Sanctuary.”

“Sanctuary?” Grish asked, her ears perking up.

“Yep,” Liam replied with a smile, “You’ll see it in a moment.”

With that, the transport was suddenly riding a rail over a vast chasm. Dean gasped and gaped, causing Aya to turn. Aya’s eyes went wide as she looked out the window of the tube. Behind and ahead of them were towering walls of dull blue-gray metal, curving away above and below like some great arch on its side. Other tubes similar to the one they were in currently connected the two walls together, and several enormous struts connected the two at various points. Aya realized that this was the space between the inner and outer hulls and was amazed at the engineering marvels she was witnessing.

“I am SO in love!” was all Dean could manage to say as he marveled at the scene outside. A soft blue light illuminated much of this space, giving an eerily beautiful cast to the whole scene. View ports were spaced regularly along the wall they were approaching, many spilling bright light into the chasm. Then Aya noticed the gun emplacements along both walls and several fighters floating in this space.

“In case enemy fighters or boarders penetrate the outer hull through a breach” Liam said, noticing her gaze.

“I have heard your people called stupid, foolish and savage,” Aya said, turning away from the window as the transport entered the inner hull, “But those who say such things are wrong. They are, however, right when they say your people are paranoid as hell.”

Liam laughed.

“We’ve earned it, lass, oh how we have earned it.”

Suddenly, the transport was filled with the bright light of a summer’s day. Aya quickly turned back to the window and again stared in amazement. Grish purred in appreciation at the sight outside.

The transport was traveling along a track suspended over a small forest bisected by a river with a small lake in the center. Overhead, wisps of clouds floated lazily across the blue sky, and a bright sun beamed down on them. The sky was holographic of

course, Aya realized, but the warmth she felt was real. The forest below and the birds flying along the trees were apparently real as well, and Aya turned to Liam with a broad smile.

“The Sanctuary?” She asked.

“Aye,” he replied, “It takes up over half of the inner hull, measuring nearly a kilometer long. Our residences and medical facilities all surround it or are built in the columns over there.”

He pointed towards their destination- four columns seemingly carved of granite that rose from the floor of the forest to disappear into four permanent clouds where they connected to the ceiling. Behind the columns, shrouded in mists, a waterfall cascaded from what looked like a cliff face and down into a large pool below, which in turn fed the river.

“It’s beautiful!” Aya said, “I thought this was a warship. I guess I expected...well, I’m not sure what I expected, but this was definitely not it.”

“Oh, she is a warship,” Liam explained as the transport slowed as it neared a platform jutting from the side of one of the columns, “But they are also our homes away from home. We spend months or even years on these ships, and as land is sacred to our people, we bring a chunk of home with us in the Sanctuary. All of the forest, the animals, the trees, etc. you see below you are from Áilleacht Diaga, our tribe’s homeworld.”

The transport came to a stop and the doors opened. Aya stepped out and turned to help Grish with Professor Hastings, but stopped short when she saw the medical team waiting on the landing platform.

“K’Yaren!” She exclaimed softly.

The two female medics, looked at each other with barely stifled laughter, their furry tails twitching in amusement at the look of surprise and awe Aya regarded them with.

“You’ve never seen a K’Yaren before?” Liam asked.

“No, I mean, not in person.”

Aya regained her composure and helped Hastings, who was now awake, but disoriented, climb onto the hovering gurney the medics held.

Grish, upon exiting the vehicle, saw the K’Yaren and snorted in disgust. The extremely pious and conservative Garoudans did not care for K’Yaren much, considering them flighty and annoying. Despite this, however, Grish was determined to remain as civil as possible.

Aya couldn’t help but stare at the medics as they carted Hastings off to the medical bay. K’Yaren were a mysterious near-human race discovered by the Ahruga towards the end of the Cappelan war. The Ahruga fought one of the bloodiest battles of the Capellan war, losing over half a million warriors in the process, defending the K’Yaren from the genocidal Cappelans. They gave ten times as good as they got, however, and managed to liberate the K’Yaren homeworld. Since then, the two races had become inseparable allies and, in some cases, more.

K’Yaren were very human-like in appearance, except for a prehensile tail, elongated ears, and varying amounts of body fur, and thus it was not unheard of for K’Yaren and Ahruga to become intimate, even marrying in some cases. What had always fascinated Aya about the K’Yaren were their psychic abilities, as their entire species had some psionic skills, mostly oriented towards healing and regenerative abilities which made them invaluable as medics. Though by no means common, psionic

abilities existed among humans, as with many races, but they were the only known race that, to a one, had such abilities.

“No,” giggled one of the medics, Rulian according to her name tag, “I am not reading your mind.”

“How...” Aya began to ask.

“It’s the first question we usually get asked, so I get used to it,” Rulian said with a smile, “We don’t read minds of outsiders, we just heal people, so your thoughts are your own, and we’re here to get you all fixed up.”

Aya turned to Liam and found him and Oengus talking in their native tongue. They clasped arms in a brotherly fashion, then Oengus hopped back into the lift, which shot out across the valley below on another track than the one they had used moments before. Liam turned to Aya and smiled.

“He’s prepping the *Joker’s Wild*,” he said, “My personal ship. As soon as you’re checked out by the medics, we’ll get you and your people aboard and head out to your rendezvous. You can make arrangements from the Stellarcom in the medbay. I don’t know about Hastings, though, he looks to be in pretty bad shape and may have to join you later.”

“I understand,” Aya said, returning Liam’s smile, “It will only take me a few moments to make the arrangements, so we shouldn’t take long. Thank you for your hospita... Dean! Watch it!”

Liam’s hand shot out and caught Dean by the back of his coveralls, neatly lifting him from the edge of the platform he had nearly toppled from and setting him back down.

“Whoa!” Dean said, “Crap, sorry about that, I was looking down at the valley and kinda got a little close to the edge. Figured there would be a retention field here or something.”

“No need,” Liam laughed as Aya shook her head in exasperation at Dean, “We don’t fall off, thus there was no need to put such a device in.”

“No falling, got it.” Dean said.

With a laugh, Liam clapped Dean on the shoulder gently and went through a doorway that opened automatically at his approach. The two medics giggled again and followed him through into the corridor beyond, pushing Hastings through the hatchway on the floating gurney. Aya rolled her eyes at Dean’s antics and followed along. Grish came last, snorting indignantly at the suggestive scents the K’Yaren had left behind in the hallway.

The corridor beyond was softly illuminated, with a carpet-like padding on the floor and lower half of the walls. The ceiling and upper walls were covered with frescoes of abstract spiral patterns and scenes from Celtic mythology and history. At chest level (for the Ahruga, anyway) were a series of plants in alcoves along either wall.

“Damn,” Dean said, looking at the plants, “you people have a thing for plants, don’t ya.”

“It’s part of our emergency life support,” Liam said, pointing to the alcove.

The plants were small green-leafed shrubs with red berries the size of grapes throughout. In Dean’s mind, they resembled miniature Apple trees.

“They’re genetically engineered plants,” Liam said as they walked along, “They give off enormous amounts of oxygen for their size, and the berries are loaded with nutrients. The light source above them is an engineered bioluminescence cell that emits enough UV radiation to give them nourishment. We can loose all power, everything, and still be able to survive indefinitely.”

They came to a stop at a door labeled in Gaelic, English, and swirling, fluid characters Aya had never seen before, but assumed was the K’Yaren alphabet. The English label read

“Medical Bay 9”, announcing the end of their tour for now. They entered a large oval central room that was twice as long as it was wide. Five large tables with clusters of smooth, white machinery above them lined the center of the room, apparently critical care diagnostic exam tables. Lining the two shortest walls were two dozen vertical tanks filled with a blue gel-like substance. Aya could see the body of a mostly-nude Ahrugan man in one of them who was missing his entire left arm, most of the shoulder, and the left side of his rebreather-covered face and torso badly mangled and burned. Floating in midair in front of the tank were three holo-screens displaying vitals and data on the wounded warrior. Even as she watched, the burns on the warrior's face and torso were rapidly disappearing and being replaced by healthy skin. More impressive, however, was the sight of the shoulder rapidly rebuilding itself, and a stub of bone growing as she watched into a humerus, which was then quickly covered by muscle and other tissue as the missing arm was rebuilt. Aya had heard of regeneration tanks before, but had never seen one in action. She was suitably impressed.

The long walls of the medical bay were pierced by dozens of exam room doorways labeled with numbers overhead in all three languages. Several of the doors were closed, and other medics- both Ahrugan and K'Yaren- entered and left these rooms as they treated the warriors and pilots who were wounded in the battle.

“Humans on the tables in exam one,” said Rulian, her emerald eyes seeming to glow in the soft light as she pointed to the first room on her left, “Except for the Elder, he goes on the first critical exam table. Walking shag-rug in exam twenty-four.”

Grish let out a deep growl at the less-than-veiled insult. K'Yaren were notorious for their mischievous sense of humor, often pulling pranks on the Ahruga they lived and worked with, or making smartass remarks at their expense. Unlike the Ahruga, however, as far as anyone had been able to determine in nearly a century of studying the lupine aliens, the Garoudan possessed no known sense of humor with which to make light of such comments. Dean and Aya lay down on two side-by-side gel-pads in the first exam room, and Grish scooped Hastings up and placed him on the first exam table in the main room before moving into a room opposite from the one Aya and Dean occupied. The younger medic went to tend to Aya and Dean while Rulian began fiddling with touch pads and holo displays around Hastings. She whistled softly as she looked at the readouts, her eyes going wide.

“Aire Déso Liam,” she said without looking away from the screen in front of her, “We're going to need a neural specialist. Get Healer Am'Ydar down here. This man has severe synaptic disruptions and neural scarring, way beyond my capabilities.” Liam keyed his internal commlink and sent out the call. Throughout the entire ride from the hangar bay, he had been in communication with various members of his command, including Taoiseach Cormac, and the events of the day from his perspective had been relayed to all concerned. While not a hive mind in the conventional sense, the Ahruga possessed a great deal more intimate contact, even when far from one another, through their engineered senses and technological enhancements. Generally, if it was deemed important, what one Ahruga knew, his or her entire tribe knew.

In addition to briefing all of his commanders of the situation, Liam had also been receiving orders based on that information, as had other members of his team. The orders he received next made him frown, though.

“If you don't mind,” he said, “I'm going to go talk to Aya.”

“If by 'talk', you mean oggle her perky breasts and near-perfect, though sadly tailless, ass,” Rulian replied with a grin, “I can always have her remove her clothing for examination.”

Liam blushed despite himself as he walked away, a reaction that sent Rulian into a fit of giggles. K’Yaren, being very liberal sexually, often enjoyed the embarrassment they could cause in humans with idle comments or flirtations. They took even greater delight in doing so to the big, strapping warriors of the Ahruga, finding a humorous irony in making a blooded veteran blush like a boy on his first date.

The second medic emerged from exam room one with a flexi pad, entering data as she walked towards a console.

“How are they?” Liam asked.

“Good, considering,” she replied with a smile as she passed him, “Just gave them both a shot of MediBots to fix them right up. They should be good to go in five minutes or so. I’m going to check on the grumpy rug right now,” she said, rolling her eyes as she walked to the room where Grish could be heard muttering unpleasant things in her native tongue.

As he neared the exam room where Aya and Dean were, Liam’s sensitive ears picked up a whispered conversation within. He stopped. He didn’t wish to eavesdrop, but he was under orders to find out why Aya wished to avoid inspection of her cargo by the NAU so badly. He cocked his head and filtered out the background noise using an audio-augmentation implant embedded in his tympanic membrane and listened in from around the corner.

“What if they go through the sensor logs?” Dean asked Aya, “They might find out where we were actually digging.”

“All of our data logs were tweaked,” she replied, “the artifact from Adaris that zapped Hastings was listed as being from Bertram. Even Hastings doesn’t know about the side dig.”

Liam’s eyebrows raised at the mention of Adaris, a planet well within the Orion Empire and thus forbidden to outsiders. Other than the roguish Freetraders, who’s ability to cross the border was dependent solely on the need by the elite and wealthy from both sides for the various forbidden vices of the other, no one from the Alliance was allowed to cross the frontier at all. Aya’s team had not only violated multiple treaties in their actions, but had risked immediate execution by the Orion border troops for espionage. Liam found himself liking her style.

“How is the Professor doing, anyway?” he heard Dean say, “He was still babbling nonsense when he was last awake.”

“I don’t know,” Aya said, “It’s almost like that device tried to cram things into his head, and just scrambled it up instead. I’m going to go check on him, Be back in a sec.”

Liam heard her shift on the gel pad and stepped back from the door. He started back towards it to make it appear as if he was just now approaching. Aya opened the door and smiled as she saw Liam coming towards her.

“How’s the Professor doing?” she asked, looking past Liam to where Rulian was fussing over Hastings like a mother over a sick child.

“Well,” Liam said, looking over his shoulder, “He’s got some neural pathway damage, so they are calling in a neural specialist. She is damn good at what she does, so hope for the best. It looks like he will be in our care for a few days, though, to judge from

all of the fussing they are doing.”

Liam walked with Aya as she moved to stand beside Hastings. She looked down at the now-unconscious professor.

“*Gomen nasai, sensei.*” she said softly.

“Why are you apologizing?” Liam asked, a hint of a smile forming at the corner of his mouth as Aya’s eyes went wide.

“You speak Japanese?” she asked, surprised.

“Well,” Liam said, now grinning ear to ear, “I wouldn’t say I speak it half as well as I speak Russian or French, and my accent is terrible, but compared to my Dunark, it’s not too bad. Now, what were you apologizing for?”

“All of this,” Aya replied, gently biting her lower lip, “I can’t help but feel like what happened to him was my fault.”

Liam gently put a hand on Aya’s shoulder. She was surprised by the gesture, and how tender it felt. It felt comfortable somehow, even though her entire shoulder was engulfed in his great hand.

“It’s not your fault,” Liam said softly, “You couldn’t have known.”

Aya reached up with her own hand and placed it on top of Liam’s, squeezing it in silent thanks for the reassurance. She noticed that his skin felt thicker than a human’s, but was still soft and warm to the touch. Liam squeezed her shoulder gently in response, and then stepped up beside her. He looked down at her as she stared intently at Professor Hastings. Liam knew that Aya felt responsible for the device having fried Hastings’ neural pathways, but he was positive she would never have harmed the old man, through intention or neglect. Whatever secrets she may be hiding, this was a good and honorable woman, Liam decided.

The door to the medbay opened, and through it stepped a gray-maned K’Yaren. Even in her old age, Master Healer Am’Ydar was still a creature of regal beauty. Her presence was such that all around her knew that she was gentle and wise, yet not to be trifled with. She had been a Senior Healer, a physician for her people’s resistance during the Cappelans Occupation, and had been there firsthand when the Ahruga landed and began tearing into the enemy ranks. As the weeks and the battles wore on, she had healed many of the Ahrugan warriors as well as her own. One of those warriors was a fierce and cunning commando who had saved her village from destruction by the vengeful Cappelans. That man was named Cormac. Now, as a Master Healer, the highest level of physician in the K’Yaren tribes, she had become Cormac’s personal chief medical officer.

She walked in a slow but smooth gait to the bed where Professor Hastings lay. As she came to his side, she looked into Rulian’s eyes. For a moment, nothing was said. Liam knew that the two K’Yaren were communicating telepathically, a far faster and more efficient means of communications, but it was still disconcerting to watch. Am’Ydar placed a hand on either side of Hastings’ temples and closed her eyes. A moment later, her eyes opened.

“I can heal him,” Am’Ydar said with a sigh, looking down at Hastings, “But it will take a day or two. His spirit and mind have been separated, and much has been placed into his mind that was never meant to be there. I must remove the damaging energies and his spirit and mind must be shown the way to find one another.”

“Uh,” Dean said from the doorway of his exam room, “Translation for the not-so-

esoteric?”

Am’Ydar smirked at the young man, and touched a screen in front of her. The image of Hastings’ brain became three-dimensional, and expanded to fill the space between them. Am’Ydar pointed to several red glowing streaks that started in the frontal lobe and veined their way across his brain.

“This is the physical damage done by some sort of neural interface device,” she began, “Not unlike those that are used to download information or to implant artificial reality simulations. I have seen this sort of damage done to humans who have used Better Than Life sim disks, and the damage is caused by far too great of a data transfer rate combined with an incompatible neurology. This was no BTL sim, however, because of this.”

She touched the screen again and a new image filled the room, this time a jumble of images, colors, flashes of video, and other assorted visual chaos. Accompanying the visual display was a cacophony of sounds- music, voices, screams, explosions, machinery, beeping and other assorted multitudes of audio chaos that matched the visual. Grish emerged from her room and growled deeply at the noise.

“Sweet Jesus,” Dean said, “What the hell *is* all that?!”

“Hastings’ mind,” Am’Ydar said heavily, “It is as if he has an entire library of books, video, sim, and composition chopped into unintelligible bits and crammed into his head with all of the overwhelming force and hyper-reality of a BTL sim.”

“BTLs are supposed to be pleasant, though,” Liam said, “Incredible sex, food, adrenaline rushes, or whatever it is the junky is looking for, all far more intense than the real thing could ever be. This,” he said pointing to the chaotic images, “Looks like a nightmare, not an addictive dream world.”

“You are correct, warrior,” Am’Ydar said, “This device was not meant to do this, and is either broken, or was meant for another species entirely. As I said, this will take a while for me to sort out and correct.”

“Nothing for it, then,” Liam said turning to Aya, “We’ll have to send him by another route to meet up with you in APC space when we’re done, best we get you to your meeting.”

“I’ll make the arrangements,” Aya said as she walked back to her exam room.

“*Liam,*” Cormac’s voice said in the warrior’s head through his neural interface link to his commanders, “*I know you feel for this woman, and I have been monitoring the situation down there while we have been en route to Freeport Casablanca, but you must keep your mind on the task at hand.*”

“*My liege,*” Liam replied, “*I have no doubt that she is honorable, and her subterfuge is due to her fears of reprisal for having been involved in an illegal archaeological dig. You taught us in the academy to trust our instincts, and mine tell me that she is a good woman, and that is from my heart, not my groin.*”

“*Be that as it may,*” Cormac said, “*My gut tells me that there is a lot more to this than meets the eye. I have sent all pertinent data to the Council of Draoithe for their opinion, but in the meantime I want you to stick by her side no matter what, and learn everything that you can. Something tells me that there is much more to this than meets the eye, and that your meeting her was no coincidence, though whether that was by mortal design or the hands of the Gods at work, I cannot say.*”

“*I will do as you ask, my liege,*” Liam replied, “*And I agree that there is much more here than meets the eye, and others around her or behind the actions affecting her may*

not be so benevolent.”

“Liam?” Aya asked from the doorway of her exam room, “All of the arrangements are set, we’re good to go.”

“No worries,” Liam said with a smile, “Oengus is ready for us if you’re ready.”

“I’m shtaying,” Grish said as she moved to stand by Hastings’ side, “I’ll shtay with the Profeshor until he’s healed and meet you in the APC.”

“Alright then,” Aya said, “Me and Dean then. Where to?”

Liam led them back to the platform and they loaded into another transport module. In seconds they were whisked across the valley, quickly disappearing into another tunnel in the cliff-face that masked the wall of the inner hull. Traveling length-wise through the ship, their journey was longer than before, and much less scenic, with transit tube walls speeding past outside the windows.

“Liam,” Aya asked, staring out the window at the blue-lit walls of the transit tunnel, “I’ll be leaving with the APC representative when we get to Freeport Casablanca, so this may be my last chance to ask...”

“About my people?” Liam interrupted with a sly smile.

“Yes,” Aya replied, giving Liam a sideways glance with a slight smirk, “Perceptive, aren’t you?”

“I’m seventy-six years old,” Liam said with a laugh, “With age comes wisdom.”

“Seventy....” Dean said and stared blankly at Liam.

“Why so surprised,” Liam asked, “I thought it was common knowledge that Ahrugan lifespans are a lot longer than humans.”

“Longer, yes,” Dean said, incredulous, as Aya laughed at his expression of shock, “But you look like you’re in your twenties! I thought you were my age.”

“*Mo Deithe*,” Liam laughed, “WE don’t even know how long we live because no one has died of old age. We age slower, much slower, due to the reengineering our ancestors did to our genetic codes. I could be twenty or two-hundred and you’d not see a difference in my appearance.”

Sweet Buddha,” Aya said, “Most humans are lucky to live to be one hundred and eighty years old, I can’t imagine how bad your overpopulation problem must be.”

“Well,” Liam said as he leaned back in thought, “Considering that our people all descend from an initial population of forty thousand colonists, and we’ve only been Ahrugan for less than three centuries, overpopulation hasn’t been a problem. Yet.”

“Yet?” Dean asked.

“We currently have a total population, including the Exiles, of around one-and-a-half billion. There are single planets with twice that population in the European Union or Han Zhou Empire. However, we grew from forty thousand to a billion and change in a little over two centuries, and it is a matter of growing concern that we may grow too numerous to live the way we do.”

“Wait wait wait,” Dean said shaking his head, confused, “Exiles?”

“The Exiles are fourteen tribes that broke away from the Confederation in self-imposed exile.”

“Why?” Aya asked, surprised that she had never heard of this faction within the Ahrugan people.

“You,” Liam said as he pointed at Dean.

“Me? I don’t...” Dean stammered, looking like a child caught with his hand in a

cookie jar.

“No,” Liam said with a grin, “Humans, outsiders. After the Capellan War, the tribes of the Confederation voted to return from our self-imposed isolation from the rest of humanity. Too many people among our young generations were curious about the race we came from, and Árd Ríghan Siobhán felt that we could learn much from our parent race. The problem is, fourteen of the tribes who voted against it were so angered at the decision that they broke away entirely.”

“I had no idea,” Aya said, amazed at how much more complex Ahrugan society was than she had ever imagined, and also coming to understand why so little was known about them, “But why did they break with you?”

“That’s a private matter,” Liam said with a sly smile, “Besides, you wanted to know about how we live and who we are, not our internal political squabbles.”

At that moment, they came to a stop and the doors open, revealing a well-lit corridor lined with the same plant alcoves and decorated with more murals.

“Alas,” Liam said as he stood and helped Aya to her feet, “It will have to wait for another time.”

“I’ll take a rain check,” Aya said with a laugh, “Where are we?”

“Crew quarters,” Liam said, “And the main corridor to the ventral drop bays where our personal assault ships and shuttles are docked.”

Passing through the intersections of several crossing corridors, Aya saw many more Ahruga, some in armor, others in uniforms, but some in civilian dress. The anthropologist in her noted the styles of dress and managed to discern a propensity for finely-made, but comfortable and oft-revealing clothing. She took note of the many types of jewelry they wore, such as bangles, bracelets, and rings. All of the warriors she saw in normal clothing wore neck rings, torcs from the books she had read, made of decorated and twisted bronze, with finials ranging from the abstract to the zoomorphic. One warrior, who regarded Liam with an apparent equality that stood out against the subtle deference he seemed to receive from the rest, wore a silver torc around her neck capped with two wolves’ heads as finials. Her clothes seemed to be more stylish and richer in appearance, though still in the sensual style typical of the Ahruga, showing off her muscled arms and midriff. Her coal-black hair was coifed in a particularly elaborate style involving tiers of braids that merged into each other like a waterfall of hair cascading down her back.

“Silver torcs are officers, aren’t they?” Aya asked suddenly as they passed the woman and turned into another corridor.

“Perceptive,” Liam said with a raised eyebrow, “Yes, bronze torcs signify enlisted, silver for officers, and gold for royalty such as the Taoisigh- the chieftains- and the ríthe- the kings and queens.” Liam was surprised by Aya’s ability to note details so readily, and reminded himself to maintain a much more subtle level of observation of her meeting.

Liam stopped suddenly and turned down a side corridor. Several doors were open, allowing Aya glimpses of Ahrugan warriors watching holo-vids, playing virtual games, or, in one case, playing guitar and singing softly. Liam called out to a young Ahrugan woman at the end of the hall who immediately snapped to attention. Aya noticed that she was tiny for an Ahruga, a little under six feet tall and lithe in build. Liam conversed with the woman for a moment, who looked around Liam at Aya with a curious look on her face. She then turned back to Liam and nodded, disappearing into a room near the end of the corridor. Liam

answered Aya's quizzical look with a wink and a smile. A moment later, the young Ahrugan woman emerged from her room with a bundle of dark blue cloth with silver trim. She handed it to Aya with a nod and a smile before turning back to her room.

Aya held up the cloth to find herself staring at a single piece jumpsuit with an open midriff and low-cut v-neck.

"Um," Aya said, "Thank you."

"No worries," Liam replied as he headed back to the main corridor, "Figured you wouldn't want to meet the APC rep in a tattered uniform. You can change on the *Joker's Wild*."

As they walked down the corridor, Aya and Dean were both startled by the sounds of snarling, crashing, roaring, and a rapid series of dull thuds coming closer ahead. Liam growled deep in his throat, but his expression was more one of annoyance than alarm. Suddenly, a knot of two Ahrugan males tumbled out of a door into the main hallway. The two males were snarling and striking each other with fists and slashing claws, and one had the arm of the other firmly clenched in his teeth, his fangs drawing blood and keeping the wound open. As they rolled across the corridor into the far wall, causing a crewman to jump back to avoid their furious flailing, Aya noticed that both had the tattooing of warriors, but were unarmored and seemed to be young, teenagers by her best estimation. Liam roared and lunged forward, eliciting a surprised yelp from Aya and a stammered *I-didn't-do-it!* from Dean. He grabbed both of the young males by their heads, wrenched them apart and slammed them face-first into the opposite walls of the corridor with an audible crunch. As the stunned youths fell to the floor, leaving bloody trails on the wall as they slumped down them, Liam half-snarled, half-yelled a tirade in Gaelic. Both youths groaned as they slowly recovered from the head-knocking, their bodies rapidly regenerating the wounds and cracked skulls. As they came to and were able to focus on their annoyed superior, Liam's hands shot out and grabbed both of them by the throats. He lifted them clear of the ground and brought them both within inches of his face, but his volume did not lower as he continued to chastise them. Aya quirked an eyebrow in amused puzzlement as the two youths' postures rapidly shifted from snarling combatants to resemble that of children of any race being berated for bad behavior. Their eyes wide as Liam appeared to render unto them portents of dire punishment for their indiscriminate fighting, they responded in unison with appropriate replies as he chewed them out. With a final barked command, Liam dropped the two young Ahruga, who saluted sheepishly before heading back the way they had come.

"What the hell was that all about?" Dean asked with surprise.

"Women," Liam replied with a shake of his head and an annoyed snort, "They're fighting to prove their worth to the women, damned young-bucks. There is a time and a place for that sort of thing, and the middle of the damned hallway while the ship is engaged in operations is not it."

"So," Aya said with a sly smile, "How many times did you get into trouble for doing the same thing when you were their age?"

Liam blushed slightly and mumbled something under his breath, quickening his pace as they resumed their walk towards the hanger bay.

"Um, Aya?" Dean whispered as they followed Liam, "You're not, well, you know... sweet on this guy, are you?"

Aya turned to give Dean a smile and a raised eyebrow and asked "Why, jealous?"

“You know better,” Dean said with a smirk, “You’re my friend and I love you like a sister, but you’re so not my type, and you know it. Too much feisty, not enough geek.”

Ahead of them both where they could not see it, Liam smiled slightly in spite of himself.

“I think he is a good man,” Aya whispered back, “But I’m focused on getting this mess over with and getting back to Ganelon.”

Dean made a mooring noise followed by a sound that approximated defecation to voice his opinion on the truth of Aya’s statements.

The corridor ended in a large airlock hatch that opened as they approached. Once through it, Aya and Dean found themselves in a much smaller hanger than the one they had originally arrived in just hours earlier, but the ship in front of them captured their attention so utterly that they did not notice any other details. The ship held an eerie beauty- sleek, angular, and deadly looking, with slightly swept-forward wings ending in large cannons and an arrowhead-shaped bow. Her hull painted in bands of forest green and dark grey, large engines inset deep in the wings of the craft on either side of a stern cargo hatch, the ship spoke of speed and a predatory grace that made it clear that she was a hunter. Though more closely resembling a wyvern from legend than any fish in the sea, it held for Aya the same grace, sense of stealth, and sense of predatory danger that she had felt from seeing great white sharks as a child.

“I present to you the *Joker’s Wild*,” Liam said with obvious personal pride, “A Dragon Class assault ship and my personal transport.”

“Wait,” Dean said, still unable to tear his eyes from the ship, “That flying wall of sexy hurting is your *ride*?”

“I’m a Laoch of the Confederation Defense Force,” Liam said with a laugh as he led them to the boarding ramp, “I own this ship and another like it, seven fighters, a battlewalker, and four personalized battlesuits. Warriors among our people are more like the mercenary guilds of Freespace or the Corporate Alliance in that we own our equipment. It’s part of what we bring to the table when we bid for contracts with our tribes to take part in operations. Unless it is a state of war, wherein all of our warriors are called to duty, we have to compete for slots in missions, just as I did for this one. I usually win a slot because of my experience and the hardware I bring to the table with me,” Liam said as he pointed at the *Joker’s Wild*.

“Damn,” Dean said as they boarded the ship through the aft cargo bay ramp between the engines, “And here I thought I was cool owning a Conudyne Eagle hoverbike.”

As they entered the cargo bay and the ramp folded up and shut behind them, Oengus bounded down a steep stairwell at the far end.

“We’re at the edge of the Tangiers system and undocking. We’re ready to short-jump to the Freeport station as soon as you’re ready.”

“Jump, but drop in at thirty thousand kilometers, no closer. The freetrader guild who runs this station is notoriously twitchy about combat vessels dropping in too close, and we’re here for a visit, not to take an AP barrage up the ass.”

“Got it,” Oengus laughed as he jumped back up the stairwell, calling back over his shoulder, “Not polite to make our hosts piss themselves, aye!”

Liam shook his head with a smile and guided Aya and Dean up the stairs to the galley of the ship.

“We’ll be there in a few minutes, just have to get clearance from their port authority to

dock.”

“Good to know,” Aya said as she opened the door to the private quarters Liam pointed out for her to change in, “We’ll have a couple of hours to kill before the meeting. Would you mind keeping me company?”

“It’d be my honor,” Liam said with a bow.

Dean made gagging noises while mock-strangling himself as he took a seat in a padded booth in the galley.

Li Gao sipped at the steaming-hot cup of tea absentmindedly as he read through his official report. The sounds of ground traffic passing by his table in the outdoor café was a gentle and reassuring sound. Li Gao had always preferred the bustle of a crowded city to the silence of rural communities. It allowed him to sit back and observe the vibrant mass of humanity unnoticed; an amateur experiment in cultural anthropology, so to speak. It was this love of studying people that had led Li Gao to become a diplomat, and now, in this quaint café in downtown Geneva, he was looking forward to a great deal of study. Business first, however. Li Gao re-read his report for the sixth time, checking again for any errors or possible faux pas that the auto-editing system hadn’t caught. The basics were simple: The Australio-Pacific Coalition was engaged in an increasingly heated border dispute with the Naradi Empire, though why the gynarchal Naradi were so intent on incurring into APC-claimed space was still a mystery. The African Federation was petitioning the TAN Colonial Directorate to allow them to expand their colonization efforts in the Kalindra Corridor, and were meeting stiff resistance from both the NAU and his own nation, as both were competing for the rich swath of habitable worlds that lay there. The Khurian Empire laid claim to the whole of the Kalindra Corridor, and while no one recognized such an arrogant claim, it was being used as the basis for the roadblocks in the Directorate. The representative from Johannesburg had been quite animated in their meeting, even inventing a few new Afrikaans curse words. The European Union and the Russian Federation were both angry at the Vajiyannagar Empire, claiming that Indian saboteurs had caused the malfunction of a critical hyperspace navigational beacon in a section of space claimed by all three nations. The representative from New Delhi had, of course, denied such allegations. The Americans were still laying claim to their former colonies in the Free Systems Alliance, and the FSA representative rather bluntly reminded Li Gao that his people had ‘put foot to ass’ for their freedom, and did not recognize the NAU’s claims. Most of these were old disputes, with only the sudden tensions between the Europeans, Russians, and Indians and the events regarding the Ahruga being new developments.

Li Gao read over his report on his meeting with Árd Ríghan Siobhán. The Ahruga seemed to be gearing up for a decisive strike against the Byntai, and seemed unconcerned with the possible consequences of destabilizing the region. They had pulled all of their forces from Lagrange, returning them to their patrol, except for one vessel that was reportedly heading for Freeport Casablanca. The NAU feigned a lack of concern in the matter, but back-channel information had revealed that they were very nervous, and there was an inordinate amount of interest in the hostages rescued

from Lagrange. The rest of the nations seemed completely ignorant of the entire affair, and back-channel chatter confirmed this. A thorough, if ambiguous report indeed.

“Good afternoon, Chancellor.” A pleasant man’s voice said from Li Gao’s side. Li Gao looked up from his report and saw the handsome features of Mr. James, his contact, smiling down at him.

“Good afternoon to you as well, Mr. James,” Li Gao replied, “My report is finished, I was just about to send it to you.”

“Not necessary,” Mr. James replied, “I prefer to deal with such matters face-to-face, much more pleasant that way. May I join you?”

“Of course,” Li Gao replied, motioning Mr. James to a seat across from him. His contact took the proffered seat and folded his hands on the table, smiling.

“Were you able to talk to all of the ambassadors, Chancellor?”

“No,” Li Gao replied, handing the flexipad across the table to Mr. James, “But I did speak to the key ones you mentioned. I must say, I am curious as to the interest in these matters. There’s nothing here of great importance, certainly not great enough to garner the interest of the Emperor himself. I was commanded to discover this information and provide it to you, but I was not told why.”

“We prefer to keep such matters.....private.” Mr. James replied, glancing up from the flexi to give Li Gao a sharp look.

“Ah yes, about that,” Li Gao replied, ignoring the dangerous glance, “Who did you say you worked for again?”

Li Gao was not new to the political game, he knew that whatever parties Mr. James represented must be powerful indeed to have garnered the assistance of the Emperor in gathering this intelligence. It was the nature of the intelligence that had made him suspicious, for it was, for the most part, readily-available information, meaningless and unconnected. He knew he was playing a dangerous game, for if he pushed his contact too hard, there could be political repercussions that could cost Li Gao his position. He was sure he wasn’t in any real personal danger, as the information was too trivial to silence him permanently, but he was concerned that a complaint by Mr. James’ backers to the right ears in the Imperial court could cause trouble for Li Gao. Better to pretend to be naïve and curious, possibly convincing Mr. James that Li Gao was, in fact, gullible and easily swayed. He felt the need to know who was behind the man, and playing stupidly-innocent had always worked before for disarming someone into revealing too much as they sought to manipulate the seemingly gullible chancellor.

Mr. James looked up and put the flexi in his jacket pocket. For the first time, Li Gao grew concerned that his contact might not be so easily fooled. Mr. James’ angular face looked hard, his perfect black hair took on the appearance of a menacing halo and his brown eyes seeming to burn right into Li Gao’s. He suddenly laughed and smiled, though the smile did not spread to his eyes.

“Such conversations are not for public ears, Chancellor,” He said, standing, “We should adjourn to a more private location”

“As you wish,” Li Gao replied, relieved that his ruse had been successful. Mr. James would probably brag about how he represented “powerful interests” or similar, as was generally the case. Li Gao would act awed and amazed, feeding the ego of his contact, who would then reveal some ambiguous details in a conspiratorial fashion to

woo the apparently-sycophantic chancellor into providing him with some information or promise of a future favor. Such was the way of things, and Li Gao had played this game many times.

The men exited the café, Li Gao following Mr. James, and headed along the walkway. Passing the storefronts of Geneva that had not changed in nearly four centuries, Li Gao was beginning to grow somewhat uncomfortable at Mr. James' apparent calm. There was none of the eagerness, none of the knowing smiles or winks. Just an air of confidence and an iron calm. As he followed Mr. James down an alley between a brewery and night club, he grew concerned that Mr. James might represent some organization that preferred to remain in the shadows rather than a corporation or other above-board power-player. Yakuza? Syndicates? Terrorists? He would have to be very careful.

Li Gao's line of thought was interrupted as he heard the slight hum of an energy pistol powering up. His eyes went wide as Mr. James turned, a small pulse pistol leveled at Li Gao's chest. For all of Li Gao's cunning and skill at diplomacy and negotiations, he was somewhat naïve when it came to street smarts, and never really believed that his questioning would get him killed. Thus, when the flash of light and searing pain in his lower chest registered, the only thing he could think was ...*Why?*

Then, all was darkness.

3

Chapter Three: Vindication

"To the Ahruga, there is no greater ideal than honor. Honor guides us, and it gives us our framework for living. You, young warriors, know honor, for it has been bred into your blood for thousands of years. Dignity, nobility of spirit, strength in spirit and body, all of these are powerful and important ideals as well. Off the battlefield, love, passion, laughter and the pride of bouncing children on your knee shall be your meat and drink. These are all the ways of glory, and they are good. But there is one ideal, one action and pursuit which you will engage in that brings no joy, only closure. For it is in doing that thing that we are not glorious, but a wrath of nature, awe-inspiring and terrible to behold. For when we are wronged, when honor and glory no longer serve our needs, there is only Vengeance!"

-Rí Brandon Mac Aobha, Graduation Speech at the Nua Tara Military Academy, 2315

March 20th, 2318 CE

Near Ahrugan Listening Post on Hesperus

Tuan crept slowly down the corridor, his sensors on full-bore scan. His ECM generator masked his presence to all electronic sensors, even seismic, and his armor's cloaking field shielded him from thermal and optical scans. None of this wonderful technology could stop the good old-fashioned pressure switch on the landmine he had nearly stepped on just inside the doorway, however.

Tuan had informed fleet command of their find, and it had been determined that the tunnel might be an old Byntai facility that they had used before, or an Orion military outpost to be used in the event of an invasion of Terran space. The age of the rocks and the debris outside the door spoke of older origins than the Orions, however, so it was decided that Tuan would do a quick recon mission inside and report back any findings, destroying the facility if it represented a potential threat.

After burning through the door with plasma incendiaries, they had discovered a long rubble-strewn tunnel leading downward at a slight angle. Whoever had built it had been a lot shorter than the Ahruga, forcing them to stoop as they inched down the corridor. Greaghoir's sniper eyes had caught a glint on the floor just before Tuan had stepped on the mine. A subsequent scan detected nearly a hundred traps of various design in the first two hundred feet of corridor alone, so the going was slow. Tuan had just finished disarming a MASER trap that would have fried an unarmored trooper, and they were now on the move again.

"And they say WE are paranoid," Bron chimed in as he stepped over the pressure plate.

"Aye, lad," Greaghoir said, carefully moving up behind Tuan, "But these traps did whoever built this nary a bit o' good, now did they."

Bron's only reply was an angered grunt as he banged his head once again on the roof.

While Greaghoir and Tuan were large by human standards, being six-and-a-half feet tall, they were fairly small and lithe by comparison to their fellow Ahruga. Bron, however, was

enormous. Standing nearly seven and a half feet tall, he was nearly forced to crawl on his hands and knees in the six foot tall corridor. Were it not for the constant danger of traps, the overall situation would have been comical: three invisible Ahruga sneaking down a corridor, punctuated every few minutes by a thunk followed by a stream of curses or a growl over the commlink.

“Tippy tippy pause....tippy tippy pause” Greaghoir said in a faux whisper, earning a short but nevertheless eloquent insult from Bron. Tuan just shook his head and grinned. Several minutes later, they came to a large room that seemed to be some sort of intersection. No visible panels or protrusions were evident, though their scanners were detecting a non-localized energy reading. Tuan scanned the room, but still couldn’t find anything. He opened a private channel to Greaghoir.

“Nada, still nothing registering.”

“Polish Mine Detector time?” Greaghoir asked.

“Looks that way,” Tuan replied, glancing back at Bron, who was trying not to bang his head again, “Think he’ll ever figure out why he goes in first?”

“Not likely,” Greaghoir replied, laughing slightly, “But he can take the hits better than either of us, so in he goes.”

Tuan opened up his tac channel.

“Bron, reconnoiter and report.”

“Aye, sir.”

Tuan took up a position on one side of the entrance, Greaghoir on the other, lying prone. Bron, pulse rifle at the ready, moved slowly into the room. He got to the middle of the room, scanning down the other two corridors that branched off from it. He started towards the one on the left, and suddenly a tremendous explosion ripped through the room and down the corridor. Tuan and Greaghoir were both thrown back, bouncing off of the walls before managing to dig the claws on their gauntlets into the stone walls. A large flaming shape whizzed past them accompanied by a stream of curses over the commlink. Bron bounced twice, then landed hard in a seated position. The flames quickly subsided as whatever had fueled them vented into the nearly-absent atmosphere of the surface, and Tuan looked back at Bron. His armor and faceplate scorched, he looked more puzzled than harmed. Tuan checked his vitals in his HUD and was relieved that Bron was unharmed. Then, he saw where the big warrior had landed.

“Oh shi...” Was all Tuan managed to get out before yet another explosion- this one triggered by the delayed pressure switch of a plasma mine that Bron had come to rest on- ripped through the corridor.

When the plasma flash cleared, the corridor glowed a dull red from the molten stone in a huge bubble around where the mine had been. Bron had landed on top of Tuan this time, minus his left leg.

“Son of a bitch!” Bron snarled, grabbing the blasted stump of his leg, “That was my original damn leg! Ah, DAMMIT! I knew it! Thirty six years without loosing a limb, and now, BOOM! Shit, now I have to sit in the regen tank for who knows how many hours. Where’s the rest of me?”

“Gone,” Greaghoir replied, climbing to his feet, “It took the brunt of the plasma blast and got atomized. Be damn glad your armor sealed over the stump, or you’d have been scrubbed out of that suit like an oyster shelled with a blow torch.”

Tuan examined Bron with a bio-med scanner.

“Well lad,” He said, reading off the results, “Other than the obvious leg-flambé-in-absentia, you have thermal damage to your kidney, bladder, part of your lower intestine, left hand, and severe tissue damage to what remains of your left femoral artery. The rest your nanites can fix, but that leg’s going to need the Tank to grow back.”

“Damn!” Bron said, punctuating the curse by slamming his fist into the wall.

“Sorry, lad,” Tuan said, helping Bron to stand, “You need to head back to base.”

Bron looked resigned, but obeyed. He opened his med kit and removed one of the collapsible crutches and began his long hobble to the surface.

“Look on the bright side,” Greaghoir said with a smile, “The blast scrubbed the corridor free of traps.”

Bron started growling imprecations under his breath as he hobbled along.

“Feeling guilty?” Greaghoir asked Tuan over the private channel.

“Of course, you?”

“Of course not, I’m Greaghoir, I can do no wrong!”

“You’re full of shit, you know that?” Tuan said, smiling in spite of himself.

“Yep!” Greaghoir replied, “Now that I am done cheering you back up, shall we continue? I promise I won’t laugh if you get blown up too.”

“Who said I was next up?” Tuan said with an evil smile as they continued along the corridor, “Remember, I outrank you.”

“Yes,” Greaghoir said, holding a finger up to emphasize his next point, “But I am prettier than you! Thus, I am a valuable asset to the tuath as I am of excellent breeding stock. Women adore me and shall flock from across the galaxy to seduce me into their beds and bear my children. I am, therefore, a natural resource and a military asset as I shall increase the number of warriors we can recruit, and as per the Law of Preservation, article six, sub-section 45a, all natural resources and military assets must be preserved. Hence, you go first.”

Tuan stopped and simply stared blankly at Greaghoir for a moment.

“Did you just think all that shit up on the fly, or do you stay up at nights rehearsing this stuff?”

“I get so little sleep,” Greaghoir replied, feigning woe, “But an artist must work diligently to perfect their craft, and I am no different.”

“Bullshit artist,” Tuan said, kicking Greaghoir in the butt to motivate him forward,

“Now get moving.”

“Thank you!” Greaghoir said with a bow.

Tuan smirked as Greaghoir led them through the room.

The corridor to the left had collapsed in the explosion, leaving them with only one exit route. Tuan’s thermoptic sensors detected the differences in residual heat from the blast. He noticed several perfectly round spots that were slightly warmer than the surrounding rock.

“Plasma mines,” He said, transferring the data to Greaghoir’s HUD, “Mind your step or you’ll end up like Lefty up topside.”

“Ya know,” Greaghoir said, reviewing the Chemical Residue Trace imaging scan in his HUD, “This place is trapped worse than the food stores on the ship. What the hell would warrant all of this?”

“Dunno,” Tuan said, shrugging, “I am detecting disabled nanites- probably defense units- on the ground. Judging from the rate of their molecular breakdown, they’ve

been there for centuries, millennia more likely. Whoever built this place must have been wiped out or moved on long before any race we know of showed up in this sector of space.”

“Let’s see,” Greaghoir said, replacing the CRT Imaging scan with a data file downloaded from their scout ship, “In the past four thousand years that there are any records of this system from any known race, only the Arelli, Garoudans and Cappelans have been here, and the Cappelans were only here long enough to wipe out an Alliance battlegroup and move on. No one recorded any settlements or facilities, and this is definitely not a Cappelan base. They like their organic technology way too much.”

“And this is neither Garoudan nor Arelli technology,” Tuan said as they walked, scanning what appeared to be light fixtures, “Looks similar to Terran tech in some ways, though very different in others. Looks like they use crystals as computer chips and command circuits. Might be remnants of an unknown race, so record everything in all spectrums. Anything up ahead?”

“Yup,” Greaghoir said, scanning further down the corridor. “There’s a door seventy-five feet ahead, same alloy as the one up on the surface.”

“Got it,” Tuan replied, “go slow and careful, and watch out for sensor triggers.”

The two warriors moved with cat-like grace up to the door at the end of the corridor. Greaghoir stopped thirty feet from it and dropped prone, extending the collapsed stock of his pulse rifle and synchronizing his pulse and respirations to the onboard compensator. Tuan moved slowly up to the door, scanning for any errant energy signals that might denote trigger-nodes for more traps. He made it through the gauntlet of mines to the unusual door. It was octagonal in shape, with red lettering in a completely unknown alphabet. To one side was a series of nine crystal buttons arranged in a diamond pattern on a bronze-looking plaque. Tuan scanned them closely and noticed a pattern of almost microscopic wear on three of the buttons.

“Greagh,” Tuan said, punching the three buttons in different sequences, “If this goes south, I want you to know something very important.”

“What’s that?”

“I slept with your sister,” Tuan said as he mashed all three buttons simultaneously.

“You basta....”

The rest was cut off as a sudden blast of air rushed outward, knocking the warriors flat. They both dug in with their armor’s retractable claws and held on as the explosive outrush of air subsided.

“Well shit, that sucked!” Tuan said.

“Actually,” Greaghoir said, rising to his feet, “It blew. Guess the complex wasn’t completely depressurized after all.”

“You think?” Tuan said sarcastically as he rose to his feet. Bringing his pulse rifle up, he looked into the room beyond. It appeared to be some sort of command center, though for what purpose, neither Ahruga could immediately determine. The two warriors entered the room with the same caution they had used throughout the rest of the exploration. The “command center” was a relatively small circular room, roughly fifty feet in diameter. Along the walls were a series of monitors and crystalline control panels, with strangely familiar chairs evenly spaced. In the center of the room was a waist-high pillar of smooth white metal with a narrow beam of light emanating from

it and disappearing into a black disk in the ceiling overhead. Hovering in this beam was an elongated diamond-shaped golden crystal.

“Got a stiff,” Greaghoir said, pointing to a dried husk of a body slumped in one of the chairs across the room.

“Make that two,” Tuan said, spotting another on the floor, “No obvious wounds. Unknown race, though they look like a near-human primate species, hard to tell. DNA scan isn’t able to get a positive match, the GTCA sequences have broken down pretty badly with age. Carbon decay and quantum resonance composition indicates.....hoh-lee shit! This can’t be right!”

“What?” Greaghoir asked, instinctively snapping his weapon up and scanning the room.

“According to my scans, these bodies died over a million years ago. That’s impossible, they should be dust by now, not to mention the fact that the mines and such outside were still functioning.”

“Damn,” Greaghoir said, lowering his rifle and grinning, “If that’s true, that would make these guys the oldest remains recovered in an atmospheric environment in history. What should we name them?”

“Do what?” Tuan asked, incredulous.

“I vote for ‘Paddy’ and ‘Lewey’,” Greaghoir said as his grin widened, “They have nice rings to them.”

Tuan could only stare at Greaghoir, mouth agape in stunned silence.

“You seem to disagree,” Greaghoir said with a laugh, “Would you prefer proper names? Pádraigh and Lugh instead?”

“By the Gods,” Tuan said, shaking his head and continuing his scans, “I am in a booby-trapped tunnel under a blasted dead world surrounded by ancient bodies, all alone with a madman.”

“I am NOT mad! I am a Greaghoir!”

“You’re a loony,” Tuan replied, pointing at the crystal hovering over the pillar, “Now get your crazy butt to work and figure out what the hell that thing is, but be careful. There are probably more booby traps here. Record everything, but quickly. We can send an archeology team back here later after we’ve dealt with the Byntai.”

Tuan had no sooner turned his back then an alarm began to sound. A deep warbling thrum accompanied by a lisping voice speaking in a chopped language sounded on the radio band in his helmet. Were there an atmosphere remaining, he was sure he would be hearing the same blast from speakers or the like throughout the complex. No one needed to translate it for Tuan, he knew this was a bad thing. Then he heard Greaghoir-

“Um.....oops?”

“What,” Tuan said, turning around slowly and dreading what he knew he would see,

“The hell do you mean ‘oops’?”

As he turned to look at Greaghoir, his worst fears were confirmed. The sniper was busy trying to put the crystal back into the beam of light from which he had taken it, to no avail. Tuan switched his sensors to full spectrum and detected a massive energy surge somewhere below him that grew in intensity in increasingly frequent pulses. He knew enough about self-destruct systems to recognize one when he saw it.

“Greagh,” Tuan said, in slow, measured words, “We are going to have a loooooong talk when we get out of here. But for now, I need you to do something for me.”

“What’s that boss?” Greaghoir said, attempting an innocent grin.

“I need you to RUN LIKE HELL!!!”

With that, the two warriors began running at incredible speeds through the corridors, opening fire with their pulse rifles at the mines lining the way. The blasts buffeted them, but they managed to keep their fire far enough ahead of them so that they were out of the main blast radius of the mines as they cooked off. In seconds they were back in the intersection room, and turned up the corridor to the surface. Moving at speeds close to seventy kilometers per hour, they blew out of the mouth of the corridor so fast they flew up and out into the crater. Tuan managed to reverse his tumble into a leap back towards his hover bike, landing neatly in the saddle. Greaghoir simply continued running back towards their ships, sending the remote command to have his bike join him.

“Cait!” Tuan yelled over the commlink, “Emergency evac! Repeat, emergency evac! Find Bron if he’s not back and get prepped to run like hell!”

“Affirmative,” Cait replied, “Bron is aboard and in the regen tank. What’s the problem?”

“Self destruct system of some kind, magnitude unknown, but I don’t want to find out. When it blows, this place is going to be crawling with Byntai, and judging from the pattern of the energy spikes, we have less than two minutes. Let the fleet know they need to step on it.”

“Aye! Passing the info, and I am reading a massive antimatter signature three hundred kilometers below us. The Byntai are definitely going to see that, now get your butts back here!”

The two warriors made it back to the assault ships just as the last of the equipment was loaded aboard. Not sparing the time to dismount, they both flew their Vipers right between the engines and into the stern hatchway as the last of the Fianna leaped through the door and sealed it. The two assault ships, identical in make to the *Joker’s Wild*, were already lifting off from the surface as they boarded. Less than a kilometer up, the two ships seemed to shimmer and disappear as they triggered a cloaking field. Thus hidden from Byntai sensors, the pair of ships streaked away from Hesperus. Tuan leaped through the hatchway from the cargo bay to the main deck, and then leaped through the corridor to the hatchway leading to the ops deck. Although the ship was equipped with stairs and ladders, Tuan made use of none as he leaped and bounced his way through the ship to the bridge. More accurately described as a glorified cockpit, with two side-by-side seats for pilot and copilot, there was little room for Tuan and Greaghoir to squeeze into behind the seats. Hanging half over the pilot, he looked out the view port to the left, where Hesperus was a rapidly fading ochre dot.

“Anything Cait?” He asked the pilot.

“Looks like an anti-proton charge bigger than anything I have ever seen is reaching critical mass,” she replied, scanning her sensors, “And when the retention field around it drops, it’s going to turn that moon into confetti.”

“Shit,” Tuan cursed, “No chance of recovering a damned thing, then.”

“Not from the look of it, no. We’ve reached minimum safe distance as best I can guess, but there will be debris flying in all directions, so we’re going to be busy. The fleet is about ready to begin the assault, though, so no matter what, we’re good to go.”

“Well, there’s that much at least.”

A bright flash drew everyone’s attention. Hesperus glowed incandescent for a split second,

then blew apart like an exploding grapefruit.

“My Gods,” Tuan said, watching the small moon disintegrate, “That was bloody close.”

“Ha!” Greaghoir laughed, “You blew up a planet! And you say *I* am the one always breaking things.”

“Kiss my ass,” Tuan growled as he elbowed Greaghoir’s breastplate, “In case you forgot, lunkhead, you pulled the crystal out.”

“Oh yeah,” Greaghoir said with a shrug, “Oh well, still not my fault, for I can do no wrong.”

A moment of silence ensued as Cait, the copilot, and Tuan all stared at Greaghoir with looks that spoke volumes about their disagreement with that statement.

“What?” Greaghoir asked innocently, “It could have been worse.”

Moments later, as if in answer to his comment, several Byntai destroyers suddenly emerged from hyperspace, having short-jumped from their homeworld’s orbit to near Hesperus.

The assault ships, cloaked as they were, were invisible to the Byntai vessels as they feverishly scanned the area. The Byntai ships, familiar with the cloaking abilities of many races, proceeded to fire every particle beam and laser they had in all directions in an attempt to hit the unknown assailant.

“Remind me to shoot you later,” Tuan snarled as he backed out of the bridge and headed for the medical bay to check on Bron.

“Would it help if I bought you flowers?” Greaghoir called out after him with a grin, earning a vitriolic yet eloquent imprecation in return.

“You know,” Cait said as she angled the ship behind a large piece of Hesperus to shield them from the Byntai spread-fire, followed closely by her sister ship, “I think there are only two reasons he *hasn’t* killed you yet- first, because you are one of the best snipers in the entire Confederation Defense Force, and second, because you grew up together, and he is inoculated against your stupid antics.”

“Cait, my lovely, you wound me!” Greaghoir said, clutching his chest in mock agony.

Cait turned in her seat, her bob-cut blond hair rippling like stalks of wheat in a breeze and her blue eyes flashing.

“No,” she said, “Not yet, Chuckles, though when this is all over I plan on it. Now get your dumb ass out of my bridge and get ready to deploy, got new orders coming in.”

“Yes, mother,” Greaghoir said with an exasperated sigh. Cait, being one of Greaghoir’s fifteen sisters, muttered something under her breath about wishing she was adopted.

“Fleet inbound!” The copilot said, pointing to a holo screen showing several hundred jump points opening near the Byntai homeworld.

“It’s on now!” Greaghoir called out with a whoop from down the corridor.

*Sulakul, Capitol City of the Byntai Homeworld Kulyimbe,
Sigma Nine Star System*

Subal-Kaul Nuos leaned back in his gel chair on the balcony of his palatial bedroom suite at the High Command Tower. The Subal-Kaul, a title akin to a hybrid of Prince and CEO, was pleased. His entourage of pampering-slaves, made up of several aesthetically-pleasing and dexterous races, massaged his spindly gray arms and buffed his dull silver finger nails.

He ordered one of them to massage his feet as he turned over onto his stomach. Nuos had achieved the epitome of Byntai perfection- being in command of one of the valuable homeworlds, not having to perform any tasks, no matter how simple, but having a bevy of slaves to order around instead. He was content.

A shrill guttural yowl from the interior announced the arrival of his wife, and the cry of pain she elicited from a serving girl announced that she was in her typical foul mood. Yu'kiul stormed out onto the balcony, a young human woman being dragged along by her dark hair. Nuos' wife stopped in front of him and held the slave girl out to him like a filthy rag she wished disposed of.

"This slave did not bow fast enough," she snarled, "I want this ugly thing sold immediately!"

"Yu'kiul, my dear, I really don't...."

"I said NOW!" Yu'kiul replied, throwing the young woman to the ground.

Nuos looked down at the human female. Tears of pain rimmed her frightened eyes, which mattered not a bit to Nuos, beyond signifying that his wife was damaging valuable property.

"Dear wife," Nuos stated, sitting up and motioning his pampering slaves to leave, "Humans are a rare find for slave-stock. This one is very valuable. She is young, healthy, and has not been fixed yet. She can be a good breeder for more slaves. Would you truly want to toss such an investment away simply because she does not bow fast enough?"

"This thing," his wife replied, hissing as she kicked the human woman, "Disrespected me! She is nothing but an animal, and if she cannot be house-trained, then get rid of her!"

Sensing that he would not be able to convince his wife otherwise, he sighed in resignation.

"I suppose I can sell her to the breeders," He said, "though at a loss."

He stood and ordered the human to her feet. She slowly stood, drawing yet another snarl and a slap from Yu'kiul.

"Anton," Nuos called out, "Come here."

"Yes master!" replied a young, well-dressed house slave. A black arm band with the Byntai multi-corporate logo denoted this human as a Collaborator, one who willingly served in return for favors. Often acting as spies and saboteurs, Collaborators were one of the few things hated by the human nations more than the Byntai.

"Anton," Nuos said, smiling, "Take this slave, intact mind you, to the Kulatu breeding farm and sell her. Make sure I get a fair price for her, or I will have you castrated.

Understood?"

"Yes master, right away master."

Anton grabbed the human woman and pushed her before him.

"Off to the baby farm you go," He said in a sneering tone, "If you can't serve well, maybe you can breed slaves who will."

The door had scarcely closed behind them when Nuos' com set began to chime. Yu'kiul continued to rant about poorly-trained house-slaves as he entered the entertainment room to answer the call.

"This had better be something of profound importance," he said as he touched the receive button, "Or someone will be facing summary execution!"

A frightened Byntai soldier's face appeared on the screen.

"Milord! They are here! We don't know how they found us, they just appeared! We are

scrambling everything, but th..."

"STOP!" Nuos shouted, holding up a hand and silencing the soldier with his glare,

"Now, start again. Who is here?"

"The Terrans! Ahruga mostly from the look of it!"

"WHAT!?!?!" Nuos' shocked cry silenced his wife's ranting on the balcony.

"Yes, milord, they just emerged from hyperspace and are engaging our defense fleets! But many assault groups penetrated our lines, including ground assault and troop ships!"

Nuos began to shake. Not in a millennium of raiding had they lost a homeworld, and he was not about to allow this one to fall, either. He unceremoniously turned the comm off, and then began dialing the central command.

"Milord," The soldier on the screen began, "We are..."

"Yes, I know!" Nuos shouted, "Begin preparation to phase-shift to alternate dimension 1132! Launch all ships, and prepare for ground assault!"

"Yes milord!"

By the Holy Seas, Nuos thought, Ahruga... if they get into the city, in close quarters... He shuddered at the thought and quickly dressed as he fast-walked to the command center.

The surprise attack by the Ahruga had stunned the Byntai defense fleet. Firing as they emerged from their jump points, hundreds of Ahrugan destroyers swooped in and out of the Byntai formations, leaving blossoms of nuclear devastation in their wake. Moving like sharks raking through schools of fish, the sleek ships of the Éoghanachta and Liatháin tribes exacted a terrible cost from the Byntai on all sides of the planet. The outer wave of the alien defense fleet was in total disarray, but the ships closer to the homeworld had managed to organize as more and more joined them from deeper in the system and from the planet below. The Byntai commanders, knowing the price of failure was death, either at the hands of the Ahruga or their own rulers, had managed to rally their capital ships into formations around the planet and were offering stiff resistance. Dozens of diamond-shaped formations of manta-shaped Byntai ships- each comprised of destroyers and frigates surrounding a battleship and a carrier, clustered tightly together to overlap their shields and present a formidable barrier against the Ahrugan onslaught- took up equidistant positions around the planet. As thousands of fighters sliced out from these formations to engage clouds of Ahrugan fighters and assault ships, missile cruisers moved from behind the Byntai battlegroups to fire off volleys towards the Ahrugan ships. Clouds of green glowing dots streaked from the Byntai vessels towards the onrushing assault fleet, weaving in and out of the Ahrugan antimissile battery fire. This wave of missiles resembled hyper-velocity fireflies until they struck, blooming into enormous fireballs as the antimatter within was unleashed against shields or into the matter of the Ahrugan hulls.

One of the Ahrugan lead vessels, a fast-attack *Dún na nGal* class frigate, was rent along one side as it took the brunt of an antimatter missile volley. Her outer hull breached, she listed and veered to port and relative down. As her crew fought to regain control of the stricken vessel, another volley passed by and slammed into the following ships. Several more frigates and a destroyer were struck, but none as severely as the lead ship had been. Then it

was the Ahruga's turn.

The frigates launched and fired every weapon they had at once, creating a sheet of lasers and a cascading rain of particle cannon fire that illuminated the dark-side of the Byntai homeworld. Intermixed with the energy weapons' fire was the Ahrugan return volley of missiles, each weaving their deadly dance as the Byntai missiles had done. The Byntai missile frigates, not having had time to turn and run for the safety of the carrier groups behind them, fell victim to the withering volleys. One by one, sometimes in simultaneous pairs, they were rent asunder in tremendous explosions; each reduced to ionized gas and debris.

The fleets collided into one another with an almost perceptible crash. At these close quarters, the Byntai quickly found themselves in dire straights. Unable to use their powerful antimatter missiles at such close ranges, the Ahrugan armor and superior short-range firepower pressed the Byntai sorely. Several destroyers closed so hard and fast with the Byntai vessels that they rammed them, more often than not intentionally. The Ahruga built their ships for such assaults, reinforcing their bows and outer hulls with extremely thick armor and structural supports. The Byntai, however, built all of their ships on a similar manta-like design frame differentiated in class only by size, and which, while stealthy and quick in hyperspace, were structurally frail by comparison. They tried to pull away as the Ahrugan vessels closed, but could not escape. Attacking in pairs, the first destroyer would ram the Byntai ship at a shallow angle, then roll and dove away from the ship it had struck. The second Ahrugan ship swept in close behind it and opened up fatal broadsides into the rent hulls of the alien ships, obliterating them.

As the bulk of the Ahrugan vessels ripped into the alien fleet, several massive warships emerged from jump points evenly spaced around the planet. These vessels, *Siorc* class battleships, plowed through the debris field and wreckage of the shattered ships like icebreakers, each seeking out their assigned targets. Almost simultaneously, each battleship maneuvered into a prime firing position and came to bear on a knot of Byntai carrier groups. Like the smaller destroyers and frigates, these battleships were shaped very much like elongated spearheads, with two major differences. The first was size, the *Siorc* class being over five kilometers in length, and the second were the ventral and dorsal ailerons that rose like mirrored shark's fins above and below the fuselage. These ailerons, like much of the vessel, housed an enormous amount of weapons, including four Pinpoint Singularity Projectors. The crackling blue lightning that signaled the powering up of the PSPs danced and leaped across the bow and ailerons of the battleships. From each battleship four crimson beams, two from side-by-side spinal mounts and one from each aileron, lanced out and targeted an equal number of carrier groups. As the guidance beams locked on, the battleships did something the destroyers did not have the power to do: they caused the exotic matter within the PSP to collapse into itself, and exert its force outward along the guidance beams between two simultaneously-existing points separated by thousands of kilometers. Rather than firing the raw material of a collapsing singularity as a single projectile, the *Siorc* class projected it as a stream of super-dense particles, turning them into gravitational beam weapons nicknamed G-Slicers.

The beams swept through the carrier groups, slicing through the escort ships like a knife, punching effortlessly through the shields, hull, and beyond to the other side, sometimes scoring gouges thirty kilometers or deeper into the surface of the planet below. Every ship

they cut through blossomed outward in a series of brilliant explosions of plasma as their engines and weapons detonated. Frigates, destroyers, carriers and battleships all met the same fate as they were sliced apart. The Byntai quickly realized how vulnerable their ships on the fringe of the battle were and pulled them in closer to where the swarm of Ahrugan ships were slugging it out with the diminishing Byntai fleet. Desperately, the Byntai tried to keep the bulk of their enemy fleet between their vessels and the terrible beams of the Ahrugan battleships. This was exactly what the tacticians had planned.

As soon as there was a large enough gap in the Byntai lines, three jump points opened in low orbit, too far away for any of the beleaguered alien vessels to intercept or fire upon and recklessly deep in the gravity well of the planet. Through these jump points came a volley of antimatter missiles, followed by three large troop transports. Beams of cobalt blue energy lanced up to intercept the missiles, planetary defense cannons on the surface below, and swept the sky clear of them. Several more volleys were launched from the transports as they hit the atmosphere seconds later. Most of the missiles were destroyed by the defense cannons, but a handful made it to the ground. The resulting explosions silenced the defense cannons by atomizing an area of the planet's surface the size of Ohio. With the defense cannons down for that sector, the ground assault began.

Once inside the atmosphere, the three transports separated, each headed for a major population center on the primary continent. In the smoke and rain of blast debris from the missile assault, the ships were invisible to the naked eye. These ships were long and sleek like the destroyers, though blockier, with no external ailerons, and obviously thicker ventral armor. The design was, for all intents and purposes, a flying armored wedge full of troops. Within each of these transports, ten thousand Éoghanacht and Liatháin warriors waited for the chance to unleash a little hell on their enemies.

Deep within the bowels of one of the transports headed for the capitol Dougal Ó Riada was briefing his troops. The rank markings on his armor denoted him as an *Aire Échta*, a rank that translated from an ancient dialect of Gaelic to mean "Lord of Slaughter". He looked like the name had been invented for him. Standing well over seven feet tall and almost three-and-a-half feet across at the shoulders, he was massive, even for an Ahruga. Unlike most of his kinsmen, Dougal did not have any hair on his head, preferring to go bald in order to show off the circle knot of zoomorphic hounds surrounding an eagle he had tattooed on the very top of his head. His beard, however, was typical of an Albanach warrior; full and braided. A ragged scar ran across one eye, and several more crossed his cheeks, neck and one bisecting his ear, marks of pride from duels with other warriors that he had allowed to heal naturally to preserve the scarring. Topping off the appearance was the full great-kilt he wore over his armor. He paced back and forth in front of the hundreds of rows of young men and women seated in cushioned harnesses.

"Now listen up!" He shouted loud enough to easily reach the troops at the back of the prep bay, pounding a gauntleted fist into the palm of the other hand to emphasize his point, "Our first an' foremost objective on this 'ere raid is to rescue any and all hostages them gray-skinned walkin' scrotums have taken. Now I want to make one thing abso-friggin-lutely clear," He stopped pacing and leveled a finger at the assembled troops, "I dinna want ANY o' you bastards doin' ANY head-takin' till we get the civilians clear, understood?"

A chorus of “AYE!” was given voice from a thousand throats in response. Dougal continued.

“We have bioscanned the planet and we discovered that there are about half-a-million non-Byntai dirtside in this hemisphere, primarily concentrated in the four major cities. Now, most of those are hostages, but some are probably collaborators. I need not tell you what the penalty for collaboration with the Byntai is.”

“Death!” came the shouted reply, with a few feral snarls mixed in as some of the warriors anticipated the frenzy of hunting of those who would betray their own race. “Now,” Dougal continued, “I want at least an eighty percent survival rate for the hostages. We lost three frigates opening that hole to get us dirtside, make their losses worth it. On your feet!”

The mass of troops were instantly on their feet at the order. The thrumming of the contragravity engines had changed pitch, warning that they were about to land even before the pilot announced it over the speakers. Each warrior checked his or her weapons and equipment- pulse rifles, sidearms, vibroblades, plasma, disruptor, and nanite grenades, ECM masks, comms gear, heavy weapons, ration packs, and so forth. They knew this battle would probably last a few days, and they would be in the field the entire time, so there was no room for errors or forgetfulness. *Careless warriors make quick corpses* was the mantra their instructors had taught them, and they learned it well.

Dougal’s helmet emerged from the hydrogen catch pockets in the breastplate, flowing over his bald head and solidified in place.

“Get ready,” He said over the tactical comm, “We’re going in hot!”

The warriors lined up in the deployment bay in formation, many with their Velorax companions beside them. These pack-hunters resembled a large brindled hunting cat, roughly the size of a tiger, with a thick ridge of dark fur that ran down their heads and backs. Native to one of the worlds the Ahruga had settled on, they had been adopted by the warriors as animal companions for hunting and war. The Velorax were very intelligent, far more so than any Terran canine or feline, and served a role as trackers and flanking units in battle. Each wore a harness that contained a shield generator that protected the feline animals from weapons fire, and retained breathable atmosphere for them in hostile environments.

Behind the infantry, warriors in heavier powered armor battlesuits fired up their contragravity engines and thrusters. These twelve-foot-tall suits of flying battle armor would skim just above the ground to do precise surgical strikes against enemy emplacements, and many were already hovering just off the bay floor. Behind them was a mixture of heavy war machines ranging from grav tanks to battlewalkers. A slight lurch and shift in the hum of the engines informed the warriors that they had touched down. The massive ramp door of the troop deployment bay dropped quickly to the ground, creating swirls in the cloud of dust and smoke from the landing assault. The bay was dark, to prevent illuminating the troops within, and the sounds that blasted forth would have caused the most advanced sonic targeting system to have a nervous breakdown. The rousing strains of *Sons of Scotland* poured from the bay as the troops marched out. Pipers in armor led the column, the faceplates of their helmets open so they could play their ancient instruments. Much louder, however, were the hulking battlewalkers, who were playing the tune through powerful speakers hidden on the outside of their cockpits. Every

Éoghanacht warrior wore their clann tartan over their armor, and even the battlewalkers and grav tanks had the pattern painted on their sides.

To the right, another transport had landed, this one full of Liatháin tribal troops. As the Éireannach troops emerged, they immediately took to razzing the Albanach warriors about their kilts and pipes, a tradition that dated back centuries.

"For the love of all that's holy," shouted one Liatháin warrior, "Put that poor animal out of it's misery and stop chewing on its tail!"

One of the pipers stopped playing long enough to shout back

"Go pluck yer sissy harps ya tone-deaf Irish bastards!"

The Liatháin warrior laughed while one of his comrades took his Velorax companion's tail and mimicked biting it. The two armies merged into one as their command and control integrated and they moved swiftly towards the nearby city. As soon as the warriors cleared the shields of their transports, they began taking fire. Small arms and heavy weapons fire began burning through their midst accompanied by the sharp beeping of radiological warnings sounding in the soldiers' helmets as mini-nukes began raining down on the battlefield. The pipers slung their instruments and drew their weapons as their faceplates flowed into place. The Velorax formed into packs and scattered, fading to the edge of the conflict in order to slip in from the rear and take down stragglers, enjoying this hunt greatly. The Ahrugan infantry ran headlong into the withering fire, leaping jogs more than a normal run as they streamed towards the enemy defense turrets and fortifications. Several nukes went off in the midst of a formation of Éoghanachta warriors, atomizing several, and sending the others flying through the air in all directions. Most of those thrown got back onto their feet and continued the charge.

As the warriors crested a ridge, firing withering barrages of their own at the enemy emplacements and howling war cries that were broadcast and amplified externally. The music being blasted likewise changed tempo to a much more aggressive beat laced with specific harmonic frequencies and chosen rhythms designed to raise the aggression of the warriors to frothing fever pitch. Dougal leaped up the hill at the head of a team of *Riastarthaes* warriors. These super-heavily armored berserkers were the shock troops of the Ahrugan military, completely animalistic and savage in nature when in their frenzy, and utterly relentless. Dougal watched as an advancing squad of warriors became pinned down by concentrated particle beam fire from three large dome turrets near the city's shield wall.

"Alright," he said, turning to the *Riastarthaes*, who's helmets resembling snarling gargoyles, "Time for you bastards to earn yer keep! See those three turrets? Shut them the fuck up, or don't come back. Understand?"

A chorus of roars answered him as the jaws of the helmets opened to reveal gleaming mini-vibroblade teeth and the *Riastarthaes* raised their weapons overhead. Other than automated shoulder-mounted pulse cannons akin to the regular warriors' A-7 pulse rifles, the *Riastarthaes* carried no ranged weapons. These were the masters of close-quarters combat, chosen from among the ranks of the warriors of their tribes for their ferocity, size, rage, and the warp-frenzy for which they were named. Seen as a gift and a curse given by the war goddess An Mórríghan, the warp-frenzy was legendary among the ancient Gaelic ancestors of the Ahruga for making them fearless, immune to pain, and able to do deeds no mortal man could do. It seemed that the modifications of the Neogenesis program had

made the gene that caused it more prevalent, and now, rather than one or two champions fighting invading armies as in the legends, the Ahruga were able to field entire companies of these savage warriors, and they did so with gusto, both to use their skills in battle to gain an advantage, and to cull their numbers to prevent their savagery from becoming commonplace amongst the whole of the Ahruga.

Dougal sent the Neurolink command to initiate the Frenzy. Immediately, each of the Riastarthaes's armor locked into place, preventing them from moving as their HUDs faded out all other images but the enemy units in and around the turrets. Next, fast-paced music of the individual warrior's choice- ranging from speed-metal to HyperFusion Trance- filled their ears, heightening aggression far beyond that of the general warriors on the field. Lastly, a bio-engineered cocktail of stimulants entered their system, giving them a trigger for their rage. Soon, each of the Riastarthaes was in such a frothing rage inside their armor, made even worse by their inability to move, that they were biting their own tongues in frustration. The taste of their own blood pouring from wounds that healed almost as soon as they were made was the final straw. Dougal stepped out of their way, and sent the command to unlock the armor. With howls of soul-shattering rage, the Riastarthaes shot across the battlefield, forearm blades extending, maws wide open seeking limbs or throats to rend, and vibroaxes and swords slashing about them in anticipation of the kill. The Byntai heard the howls, and knew what was coming their way. They turned and concentrated all of their fire on the incoming berserkers, which gave the surviving pinned-down soldiers the opportunity to clear their position and resume their charge. One Riastarthaes was hit center-mass by a powerful particle beam cannon, his body from the chest down instantly erased. What was left of him fell to the ground with a snarl, where he tried to drag himself towards his enemies for a few moments before even the Frenzy faded as he lost consciousness. Another was hit square in her helmet, and her headless body fell to the ground still trying to run. The rest were too fast, however.

The gunner of the defense turret screamed in terror as a Riastarthaes warrior suddenly landed on the cockpit-like gunnery seat and ripped the canopy off with a roar. With a bestial snarl, the warrior lunged into the cockpit, raking with his clawed gauntlets as he bit and tore with his helmet's shearing jaws. In moments, the gunner was little more than a savaged ribcage and a smear of gore throughout the gunnery seat and across much of the turret. As the other Riastarthaes tore into the assembled Byntai troops- some diving into the trenches and turning them into scenes of charnel horror, and others hacking their way through the doors of bunkers, seeking their prey within- the regular infantry managed to take out the remaining two turrets in that section. Support fire from the troop transport was putting heavy pressure on the shields, and this victory cleared the way for the remaining troops to offload and mass for their entry into the city proper. A brilliant flash to Dougal's right caught his attention. Dozens of fusion and antimatter missiles were streaking in like lightning to hammer another defense turret position several kilometers to the north, and blossomed into side-by-side mushroom clouds as they scoured the ground clean of the enemy emplacement. A delta formation of three Bran Rua fighters, the source of the missiles, roared overhead, banking hard to the south to avoid the city shields. In seconds they were hundreds of kilometers away, engaging Byntai fighters, and were

replaced with another squadron of their comrades. This wave of fighters strafed the battlefield south-to-north, parallel to the city shield wall, their four rapid-fire particle projections cannons and pulse laser turrets wreaking biblical havoc in the trenches and mobile infantry units of the Byntai. Dougal nodded in satisfaction as he waited with his warriors at the base of the shield wall.

The transports' cargo of battle-hardened warriors were not the first troops on the ground, not by a long shot. Long before the transports had touched down, Tuan and his Fianna team were given new orders. They were to slip in and begin disrupting Byntai defenses from the ground. With the chaos of the battle further out in the system, their assault ship had managed to touch down unnoticed inside the capitol. Their assault ship, named *Killin' Time*, and bearing the cigarette-smoking redhead nose art of its World War II bomber namesake, had slipped into the edge of the city before the Byntai had raised their city defense shields. Her sister ship, the *Guinness Girl*, had done the same in another major city on the only other inhabited continent on the world.

Setting down on the roof of a warehouse, Cait turned the ship into an invisible command post for the team as they engaged in their mission. This was one of two command centers on the world that could initiate the dimensional rift into a parallel dimension, and the Fianna from the *Guinness Girl* had already infiltrated and eliminated the command crew of the other. Now, it was this city's turn.

Tuan and Greaghoir had slipped deep into the city with Rruaghu, a young Garoudan male who had taken Bron's place temporarily. Tuan and Rruaghu were cloaked in an alleyway near an enormous tower that had been identified as a command and control center.

Greaghoir was on the roof of a nearby building, his gauss rifle trained on his fellow Fianna in order to cover them.

"Greagh," Tuan said over the tac-comm, "Got a guard with a sensor unit headed this way. Can you drop him as he goes behind that hovercraft?"

"Sure boss," Greaghoir replied. He shifted the rifle's aim slightly, sighting in on the guard. The internal scope and sensors of the sniper rifle locked in on the soldier's heart, synchronized with Greaghoir's breathing and heart rate, and then adjusted for windage. Though the gauss rifle was a hypervelocity weapon that fired a projectile using electromagnetic propulsion at supermach speeds, it was still slightly subjected to windage variables at longer distances. A green light in Greaghoir's HUD showed that the calculations were complete. The soldier passed behind a parked hovercraft, out of sight of anyone on either side. Greaghoir's rifle maintained its lock, and he fired.

With a muffled "CHOOMF!" a long metal projectile leaped from the rifle to the soldier at thirty kilometers per second. The sonic boom that would have resulted was nullified with a wave of counter-sonic emissions designed as a form of silencer. A loud thwack was heard as the round went completely through the hovercraft and hit the soldier. The instant it impacted the soldier's body, the retention field inside the round switch off, releasing the tiny amount of antimatter contained within. As the antimatter came in contact with the matter of the projectile's shell, it annihilated an equal amount of matter, resulting in a substantial explosion that turned the Byntai into a cloud of red mist and gore.

“Chunky!” laughed Tuan, “Thanks Greagh, messy as ever!”

“I take pride in my work,” Greaghoir said, “You’re all clear to head in. I’ll drop the guard on the left as you go through, you got the one on the right.”

“Got it,” Tuan replied, readying his pulse rifle, “Rruagh, you ready?”

“Yes,” came the reply. Rruagh preferred to use a translator rather than attempt to speak in a human tongue. English was difficult for a Garoudan, but Gaelic was almost impossible.

They hopped to their feet and rounded the corner, still cloaked. City-wide alarms were sounding, drowning out their footsteps. Very few Byntai were on the streets, most having run for shelters the second the assault started, so they were able to charge straight for the door to the command center. As they ran up the broad steps, one of the guards suddenly raised his rifle, his sensors picking up something closing fast with his position. He never got the shot off. As the guard’s helmet exploded in a spray of blood and brain matter, his partner began to fire blindly in all directions. Tuan opened fire on him, sending several bursts into the soldier before finally blasting through his armor. As the fusion bolts hit the soft liquid-filled abdomen of the Byntai soldier, they caused the moisture to flash-boil and some of the hydrogen added to the fusion, creating a small nuclear reaction inside the soldier’s body. The resulting explosion sent pieces of Byntai and armor flying in all directions. The door immediately opened and more Byntai soldiers began pouring out. Rruagh leaped over the first few, becoming visible in mid-leap. His powerful armored form danced among the soldiers, his vibroblade claws flashing and humming as he tore through them. Tuan danced and spun along the outside of the group slashing away with his twin vibroswords, and Greaghoir took shots at targets of opportunity. Within a matter of seconds, the Byntai all lay dead on the tower steps.

Tuan didn’t risk any further problems from reinforcements by tossing a fusion grenade through the door into the lobby area. The resulting explosion shook the entire tower and blew the doors off of their hinges and into Tuan, bowling him over.

As he got back on his feet, Tuan could tell through the helmet that Rruagh was doing his best imitation of an amused smirk. Greaghoir just laughed over the tac-comm.

“Well,” Tuan said as he entered the gaping opening that had been a doorway moments before, “It worked, didn’t it?”

“Want a squeegee?” Greaghoir asked, still laughing.

“Oh go shoot something! Yeesh! Need I remind you that I blew up a lobby, you blew up a planet.”

“That was NOT my fault! ...and it was only a moon...” Greaghoir retorted.

“Yeah,” Tuan said as he kicked the charred remnants of another Byntai soldier inside,

“And I am a dainty fairy princess!”

“With a tutu?” Greaghoir asked.

“Don’t start,” Tuan growled.

Several muffled shots from Greaghoir’s direction were followed by loud splattering sounds from somewhere outside.

“Popped a few Collaborators around back,” Greaghoir said, “Looked like they were taking advantage of the chaos to try and swipe a jump shuttle.”

“Good,” Tuan said, “Keep me posted.”

Near the back of the blasted and charred lobby area, they found a set of large metallic cylinders. Rruagh scanned them and reported that they were some form of elevator, and

one of them was descending. The two warriors moved to either side of the cylinder door for the descending elevator and took aim. As the elevator car came to a halt at the bottom, they tensed, anticipating the kill. The door opened, and the site that greeted them caused them to pause. A man, nude from the waist down, was on his knees with his back to them, partly hidden by the elevator door. The screams of a woman from within, and torn bits of a dress on the floor made it very clear what was occurring.

Tuan felt rage come over him. His armor liquefied and flowed into the breastplate, exposing his head and arms. He reached into the elevator and grabbed the man by the throat from behind, yanking him off of the pinned woman. He tossed the man across the lobby into Rruagh, who pushed the terrified human to the ground. Tuan looked into the elevator where the woman slowly rolled over and curled up in a ball in the farthest corner of the elevator from the door. He then turned his gaze to the man, who he could tell was a Collaborator from the armband. The look of abject terror in the man's face was mirrored in his trembling speech.

"I..I...I'm A-Anton DeMarden," he stammered, "I a-am a c-c-courier of t-the Feder..."

He was silenced as Tuan let loose a roar that shook the room. As he roared, he dropped into a low crouch, arms spread wide. His fangs glistened, and his claws extended out. The roar ended, and Tuan began to stride forward with murderous purpose in his glowing eyes.

Rruagh leaned down next to Anton and snarled.

"I would run if I were you," he said through his translator.

Anton needed no encouragement, scrambling to his feet and running as fast as he could for the door. He didn't make it far. Rruagh turned away from the carnage as Tuan leaped across the lobby in one jump and pounced his prey; the sight and sound of Anton's gurgled screams struck a primal chord in him that made the lupine alien uncomfortable. His faction of the Garoudan people had been forced into exile by their brethren for refusing to eat other sentient creatures on religious grounds, and had been taken in by the Ahruga. Thus, it was hard watching Tuan, who he respected, tearing Anton's throat out with his teeth.

When he was done and had cleaned off, Tuan returned to the elevator to check on the woman. She sat in the corner staring blankly off into space, hugging her knees to her chest. He stepped in and squatted down next to her. He reached out towards her, and she flinched. Tuan pulled his hand back as she turned to look at him. She trembled and scooted away from the warrior. Thankfully, the glazed look in her eyes was fading, being replaced by fear. While neither flattering nor a desired reaction, it meant that she was at least not going into shock.

"My name is Tuan," he said in accented English, extending his hand towards her in a neutral gesture of friendship, "We're here to rescue you. You're safe now."

She recoiled from the outstretched hand, seeming to be as afraid of him as the Collaborator had been.

"Qui vous est?" She shouted in a shaky voice.

"Crap," Tuan muttered, sending the neural command for his armor's onboard computer to auto-translate.

"Who are you?" the auto-translator said, using the young woman's voice. Linking the system to his neural-net, he repeated his original introduction in French.

"Oh thank god!" she cried, slumping against the wall of the elevator and sobbing uncontrollably.

“What is your name?” Tuan asked, trying to help bring her focus back to the fact that she was being rescued and, hopefully, take her mind off of whatever horrors she had endured. She got a puzzled look on her face, as if she was having to fight to remember.

“Lisette,” she said, “My name was...IS Lisette.”

“Lisette,” Tuan said as he held out a hand to her, “I’m here to help you, but we need to get you out of here, fast. It isn’t safe here.” She tentatively took his hand and he helped her to her feet and linked into the tac-com via his neural-net link.

“Cait,” he said, his synthesized voice being sent to the *Killin’ Time*. He did not want to risk the amplified signal it would take to contact his command directly as it would be easily detected, and thus was using Cait to relay information via the shielded and encrypted signals of the scout ship, “Got a civilian, pretty shook up. She’s been raped, beat from the look of some of her injuries, and is in moderate shock.”

“Damn,” came the whispered reply, “Well, we knew we’d see this sort of thing, that’s why we’re here. I’ll send the Twins in to retrieve her. Wait...” There was a pause, then she continued “Scratch that, orders from fleet: continue on-mission, take her with you if you have to, but find their command staff and eliminate them. They are trying to initiate a dimensional jump from that tower. You’ll just have to keep her safe till you have eliminated their command and control center.”

“Affirmative.” he replied.

“I can carry her,” Rruaghu said, deconstructing his armor to uncover his fur, “The fur and such, well, it might help sooth her. Humans like petting animals when stressed, I guess it might work.” he said, shrugging, seeming almost embarrassed to mention it.

Tuan managed to piece together enough of the torn dress to give Lisette some modesty. Rruaghu gently picked her up, cradling her like a child in his arms. True to his guess, Lisette seemed to take comfort in the alien’s arms and collapsed against him, sobbing into the soft fur of his shoulder. Rruaghu responded by nuzzling her in a comforting fashion with his muzzle.

“Stay back,” Tuan said as he readied his pulse rifle, “And let me take care of any trouble. Keep her covered, and watch our backs.”

“Will do.” Rruaghu replied softly. His instincts as a father were to protect and comfort Lisette as if she were one of his own cubs, so he began rumbling low in his chest, a sound akin to deep-tone purring that Garoudans used to calm panicked cubs.

This “purr” had a soothing affect on Lisette, and soon her sobs had subsided.

The two warriors entered the elevator and headed to the top floor.

Outside, Greaghoir was watching the command tower from his perch when movement to his right drew his attention. A company of Byntai elite shock troops were working their way to the command tower in two-by-two cover formation. Still several blocks away, he knew that they would reach the tower before Tuan and Rruaghu would be able to complete their mission.

“Tuan,” He said into his tac com, “I’ve got a lot of love headed your way, looks to be company strength, heavy armor, and carting one of those damn heavy pulse cannons.”

“Crap,” came the reply, “Do what you need to, we’re going to be a few minutes.

Remember, we have a civilian with us and scans show there's more upstairs."

"Got it," Greaghoir said, slinging his sniper rifle and readying his pulse rifle, "I'll be gentle."

Greaghoir launched a microprobe, sending the pea-sized sensor drone up and out over the approaching troops. He switched his HUD to receive the data from the drone. As the drone came into position several hundred yards above the enemy troops, he switched to ultrasonic scan. Over one hundred and sixty Byntai motion signatures, faint from their armor's dampening countermeasures but still noticeable, showed up on three separate streets. The central column was making a slow but steady direct approach for the tower, while the other two columns were moving to flank the building. He switched to bioscan, and found only Byntai lifesigns in the area. Greaghoir knew that he would have to hit them now before they separated, but the heavy armor they were wearing was going to make this take too long. An idea suddenly came to mind.

"Tuan, get off the elevator for a sec"

"Greagh, why does that worry me?" came the reply.

"No worries, got a plan!" Greaghoir said, ejecting the grenade magazine in his pulse rifle and replacing it with one painted with a large smiley face surrounded by the words 'Mr. Happy.'

"We're off, do whatever you are going to do." Tuan said

Greaghoir took aim at the enemy troops with his pulse rifle, then elevated the rifle up forty-five degrees, pointing the barrel into the air. With a THOOMP! He launched a large grenade. No sooner had the grenade left the barrel than Greaghoir was running at top speed towards the opposite end of the roof. Without stopping, he leaped off, falling twenty floors like a stone. Just before he would have smashed into the street below, he kicked in his armor's Anti-Grav field, slowing his descent to that of a feather falling. As he touched down, the world around him was bathed in a brilliant white light. The building behind him cast an ebony shadow in stark contrast to the searing brightness, but this lasted only a second. Then the blast wave hit. Even sheltered behind the building he had just leaped from, Greaghoir found himself picked up like a leaf and tossed several blocks. He watched from his airborne vantage point as several of the buildings where the enemy company had been were atomized in the rapidly expanding mushroom cloud of plasma, but the command tower resisted the blast, having its own independent energy shields. The sensors on his armor screamed at him of superheated external temperatures, oxygen depletion in the outside environment, radiation at thousands of times the lethal level, and a long list of other complaints typical from a suit of armor being tossed around in a nuclear blast wave. Greaghoir ignored it, he knew the armor could take this and far worse. Besides, this was the most fun he'd had in weeks- Nuke Surfing.

Greaghoir came down with much of the other debris of the nuke blast, skipping like a stone on water for another block before smashing into the side of an overturned ground car.

"GREAGHOIR!!!!" came the shout across the tac com, "Did you just friggin nuke them?!?"

"Well," Greaghoir said as he disentangled himself from the ground car, "You said do what I need to do, didn't you?"

"You....I...why co....ah, dammit, just go kill something!"

"Yes sir!" Greaghoir said with a laugh.

Greaghoir took a step back towards the command tower when he was suddenly thrown into the air once again, this time by the ground beneath him bucking like a horse. His sensors registered another surge in radiation and temperatures, but much lower than those recorded from his own nuke. He heard a low rumble from somewhere to the east.

“Dammit, Greaghoir!” Tuan shouted over the tac com, “That one damn near dropped the building!”

“I didn’t do that, I swear!” Greaghoir replied, getting back on his feet, “Came from somewhere off to the east I think.”

Cait cut into the conversation, sounding like she was doing fifteen things at once from the background whirs and beeps from her console aboard the *Killin’ Time*.

“Gentlemen,” She said, “That was about seven-hundred gigatons of loving dropped on the eastern seaboard. Fleet detected a couple hundred thousand simultaneous small-scale explosions in the city there. The fucking Byntai popped the slave collars and massacred all of the hostages rather than let them be recovered alive. Fleet avenged them, and cut communications off in a big way to keep them from triggering a global kill-signal, but there’s a secondary command node in that building. Move your asses, we need their command personnel eliminated and their city defense shields down ahead of schedule, there’s troop transports on the way.”

“We’re almost there,” Tuan replied, “Greagh, not worried about cover now, can you get to their primary shield generator and kill it?”

“Yep,” Greaghoir replied, “I’m only about three blocks away now.”

“Good, move out. Cait, we’ll be needing a hot evac in a minute, can you arrange it?”

“Way ahead of you boss, we’re on our way.”

“I’ll meet you back at the tower,” Greaghoir said, running at top speed towards the generator, “But if I’m not there, evac without me and I’ll grab a shuttle from the troop ships.”

As he was running through an alley, a gray face poked out through an open door. Greaghoir saw it was a young Byntai, probably no older than fourteen. He ignored the child and kept running. A blast of energy hit him in the back, knocking him forward. He followed through with the momentum, rolling forward into a tumble and coming to his feet facing back the way the shot had come from, his rifle at the ready. The Byntai child stood there, a pulse pistol in his hands trying to get another shot off at the Ahrugan sniper. Without a second’s hesitation, Greaghoir fired. His juvenile would-be assassin disappeared in an explosion of plasma and burning flesh. Greaghoir checked his armor and discovered that his cloaking field and ECM unit had been damaged in the nuke blast, rendering him visible to optics and sensors. Shrugging, he continued his run towards the shield generators.

Tuan readied his weapons as the elevator stopped at the top floor. He was pressed against one side, and Rruaghu pressed against the other, covering Lisette with his now-armored body. The doors opened with a swish, and a torrent of weapons fire erupted from outside, ripping into the interior of the elevator. Lisette started to scream, but was choked off as the atmosphere in the elevator was cooked away. Rruaghu quickly triggered his emergency personal shield, used for armor breaches in deep space, and extended the field to surround

Lisette. He vented his atmospheric reserves into the field, giving the young woman breathable air. Though protected from the soaring temperatures and radiation, the noise of directed energy weapons firing was nearly deafening. Lisette held her hands over her ears and pressed up against Rruaghu's legs.

Tuan sent several bursts down the corridor towards the Byntai soldiers, followed by a thirty second sustained stream of particle weapons fire. The Byntai scored several hits on his arms and shoulder as he did so, blowing small divots out of his armor, but fell back under the withering fire. Tuan's sensors screamed as a grenade was launched his way. In a fluid movement so fast that it was a blur to Lisette's eyes, he flipped his rifle end over end, holding the barrel, and smacked the grenade as it came through the door, sending it back the way it came. It detonated a split second later, knocking Tuan back into the elevator, winded, but unharmed.

"Damn!" Rruaghu said, "That was impressive."

"Third League Hurling champion, seven years running!" Tuan replied, "These guys are amateurs. You should try the Galway team."

He hopped back to his feet as another barrage of fire strafed across his legs and abdomen, leaving more pockmarks in his armor.

"Enough playtime," Tuan said, "Time to get personal!"

He locked his pulse rifle into its cradle on his thigh and reached behind him with both hands. From back sheaths he drew his two short, broad-bladed swords, each with a bronze handle shaped like a stylized human body. Designed after ancient Celtic swords from two millennia previous, they looked to be beautiful but archaic tools of war. These were no anachronisms, however, and on a neural command both blades began humming. The eyes in the pommel-heads of the anthropomorphic handles glowed red, an aesthetic touch, but denoting that the vibroblades were now ready to kill. Vibroblades were the trademark of the Ahrugan warrior, deadly close-quarters weapons that used a variable-frequency harmonic vibration capable of disrupting the cohesive bonds of subatomic particles in an incredibly narrow field. This allowed them to separate the bonds of molecular armor as if it didn't exist, and they were even able to penetrate atomically-bonded armor. It was with two of these weapons that Tuan intended to silence their attackers.

He leaped out of the door into a roll, coming to his feet at a full-tilt run. Between the enhancements of his armor and his genetically-engineered physiology, he was able to clear the distance between the elevator shaft and the enemy soldiers eighty feet away in two quick leaps. He landed between several very surprised Byntai soldiers, and became a whirling tornado of death. Ducking and spinning, he slashed and thrust in rapid-fire strikes that left pieces of Byntai scattered about the hallway. In under ten seconds, he had wiped out the enemy unit.

"All clear, move up." He called out to Rruaghu.

Rruaghu moved very slowly, Lisette in his arms still protected by the energy shield. Tuan moved forward slowly as well to allow them to keep up, his pulse rifle in his right hand, and one of his swords in his left. As he passed a door on his left, it opened and a very shocked looking Byntai commander stopped in his tracks. Without even looking at him, Tuan thrust the blade of his sword into the gut of the Byntai and snapped up, slicing all of the way through the skull and out. Thus did the already unpleasant day of Subal-Kaul Nuos end with an even worse outcome.

"Rruaghu," Tuan said as he moved forward, "Sensors show a half-dozen captives in that

room and one Byntai female. Get the captives, toss the bitch over the railing if she so much as blinks. I'll hold here."

"With pleasure," Rruaghū replied as he entered the door. As they entered Nuos' suite, Rruaghū could smell and sense Lisette rapidly shift through a series of emotions ranging from terror to anger. He set her down at the doorway and set his translator for French.

"Stay here," he said, "I'll deal with this."

"No," she said as she looked down at the mutilated corpse of her former master, "I need to go in... I need this."

"Let her do it," Tuan said from up the corridor, "It's her right."

"Very well, but stay behind me."

"I will."

As they entered the suite, a squalling shrill voice called out something in the Byntai tongue from further inside. A pale-skinned Lebaru female, a near-human alien species from a low-tech world, came around the corner and almost screamed at the sight of the armored Garoudan warrior standing in the foyer. Lisette stepped around Rruaghū and took the Lebaru's hand and dragged her out into the corridor, whispering something and pointing to Nuos' corpse. The Lebaru woman nodded and stayed in the hallway, peering around the corner into the suite intently.

"*Kwabani*," the shrill voice continued, growing closer, "*Melantu latumba kweeda Nuos, lebrina quadu-quadu nichak!*"

Yu'Kiul came around the corner from the next room and stopped suddenly in shock at the sight before her. Rruaghū snarled in English, the trade language that most Byntai seemed to know, through his translator

"Move aside or die!"

Suddenly, with a primal scream of rage, Lisette rushed forward and slammed into Yu'Kiul, bowling her over. Rruaghū let out a curse and holstered his pulse rifle, intent on trying to pull the apparently-insane human off of the Byntai female.

"Let her deal with it," Tuan called in from the corridor, apparently monitoring the situation from his vantage point, "Even if it means her death. Better to die fighting and standing up than be a slave in her heart for the rest of her life."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, trust me on this one."

Rruaghū backed away and drew his pulse rifle again. If Lisette died, he would make sure that the Byntai would not enjoy her victory for long. He needn't have worried, however, for while Yu'Kiul was stronger than the human, her terror and surprise- for no slave had ever stood up to her before- and Lisette's blind rage from nearly a decade as a slave neutralized that advantage. Striking the Byntai woman's face with unskilled but powerful blows, Lisette bloodied her lip, crushed her nose, and struck an eye socket so hard that it was swollen shut in seconds.

Yu'Kiul bucked, throwing the former slave girl off of her and leaped at her with a snarl. Rruaghū tensed, expecting Lisette to be knocked to the ground, but the human jerked to the side just in time, and the Byntai stumbled into the wall. Not one to surrender the advantage, Lisette began pummeling Yu'Kiul in the kidneys. While their physiology was not identical to humans, the placement of certain organs was fairly universal throughout bipedal mammals. However, Byntai kidneys were a great

deal more sensitive, and after a few blows Yu'Kiul had fallen to the ground. With a sudden lunge and surprising strength considering the beating, the Byntai bowled past Lisette and into a suspension grid displaying many of Nuos' trophies and prize treasures he had acquired. As she passed through the suspension field, many of the artifacts fell to the ground. Lisette grabbed one of them, a stone statue of an alien god, roughly the size of a football, and body tackled Yu'Kiul before she could recover. The pair of female combatants fell to the ground, and Lisette rolled to her knees on top of the Byntai. Yu'Kiul's eyes went wide as Lisette raised the statue overhead, rage and hatred burning in her eyes with a ferocity that caused the former mistress of the house to defecate. A choked cry was all that Yu'Kiul managed to gasp as Lisette brought the statue down with a wet crunching noise. She raised it again, and with guttural cries of primal rage brought it down again and again, until she could not lift it anymore and Yu'Kiul's head had been reduced to a mashed pile of gore.

Rruaghú stepped forward and helped Lisette to her feet. Though she was still quiet, there was a solemnity and confidence in her eyes and her scent that comforted the Garoudan. This little human would be alright, he decided. Together they gathered the slaves in the house and went back to the corridor.

"One big happy family, I assume?" Tuan called back from the intersection ahead.

"Yes," Rruaghú replied, "Got six more, all hail and hearty."

"Good to hear. Scanned ahead while you were in there, got a layout for us."

Both warriors moved forward, keeping the former slaves behind them for safety. They both had a map of the floor they were on superimposed in their vision from their HUD. The corridor had several branches and doors, but there were only two rooms that interested them. One was shown by sensors to be full of various races, slaves most likely, and the other was shielded, most likely the command and control center. Without a word, for each knew the drill, Tuan headed for the command center and Rruaghú and his gaggle of wards headed for the rest of the slaves.

Rruaghú kicked the door to the slave room in and did a quick weapons sweep.

Finding it empty of Byntai soldiers, he motioned Lisette and the others to move up to his position and then began checking the people inside for slave collars. Byntai slave collars were nasty devices that could disrupt synaptic flow, thus paralyzing the wearer, and, most importantly to Rruaghú, contained a plasma charge that could be detonated by remote. Each collar was keyed to a specific code that the slave's owner possessed and carefully guarded- competitors and political enemies could cost each other a great deal of money if they got ahold of an adversary's code- but there was an override command possessed by the top ranking members a city's government. This code could be used to disable or kill every slave in that city, and one of the *Killin' Time's* first acts was to upload a very potent scrambler virus into the Byntai city ethereal network to jam any attempts to trigger that code. The *Guinness Girl* had done the same in the other city, but the slaves in the city metroplex on the east coast of the main continent had not been so fortunate, and had died as one in an instant when their collars were triggered. Ahruga had likewise become very adept at removing these collars, as they could still be detonated by remote using the individual codes, and had developed several unique tools to disable and remove the slave collars.

Rruaghú found several of them on the slaves, and began rapidly removing them using a specially designed electronic lock pick, tossing them into a far corner once they were

disabled.

As he removed the last of the collars, he then did a sensor sweep to look for any implants. He detected two audio-enhancement implants typical of a person who has been cured of deafness, each bearing a TAN Med Corps recognized ID signature. He then detected an implant that made him reflexively snarl. A Byntai monitor implant, surgically implanted in Collaborators within the pericardium next to the heart to track their location. He looked at the woman who registered as having it. She did not wear the arm band of the Collaborators, but his nose picked up the scent of fear from her, directed at him. Garoudan senses were like a second language, able to determine emotions and even intent. This woman smelled of fear like the rest, but theirs was directed towards her, and hers was towards him. With a fluid motion, he reached out and grabbed her by the throat lifting her off the ground and bringing her to his face. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you" He snarled.

"I know things! I can lea.."

Her reply was choked off by a gurgle as Rruaghú crushed her throat and spine. He tossed her lifeless corpse into a corner like a filthy rag.

"Not good enough," He said. He turned to the slaves around him and asked "Who wants to go home?"

All of the now-free slaves stood and gathered around Rruaghú, some hugging him, others touching him, wide eyed in awe. Many of them had been raised as slaves, only knowing of freedom from hearing tales told by those who were captured recently. Likewise, many had never seen a Garoudan, much less one in the service of the Ahrugan tribal military.

"How do we get out of here?" A young male lemur-faced Perundi asked, his wide amber eyes seeming to bore into Rruaghú.

"Well," Rruaghú said, "I hope none of you are afraid of heights."

On the other end of the building, Tuan had sliced his way through three more soldiers and made it to the armored door that led into the command center. He leaned against the wall and reviewed aloud an inventory of the gear he had on him.

"Thermite, plasma charges, cobalt limpet mine....where the hell did that come from? Oh well...acid strips, critter bomb...hmm," He said as he pulled out a small cylinder, "This will do the trick!"

He placed the bottom end of the cylinder against the door and pressed a button on the top. The "critter bomb" activated, releasing pre-programmed nanites against the door. These nanites, the "critters" that gave the device it's crude nickname, began re-arranging the atomic and molecular structure of the door, converting the material into cloned nanites who inherited the programming of their creators and began eating away at even more of the surface. In seconds, the nanites had increased their number exponentially, and the outer surface of the door was rapidly disappearing faster and faster. Soon, an area of the door big enough for Tuan to fit through had been thinned down to less than an eighth of an inch thick. Tuan removed the critter bomb and neutralized all of the excess nanites, tossing it back into his pack. He pulled out several acid strips and made a large oval of them on the thinned section of the blast door and stood back. At his command, they began to hiss, and suddenly, a large opening appeared in the door. Tuan smiled as he drew a vibrosword and his pulse rifle and leaped through it.

Greaghoir reached the shield generator just in time to watch a grav-truck set down and offload forty Byntai soldiers. He cursed and hugged the edge of the building he was next to. The shield generator was set apart from the rest of the city by a flat expanse of concrete, located on the edge of town. The large emitter tower rose into the air behind the primary generator building, and in the distance beyond the shield, Greaghoir could see a raging battle, both on the ground and in the air. He checked the schematics from their earlier scan. There were three shield generators placed in triangular positions around the edge of the city. This one, however, was the primary hub, the key to the city, so to speak. Destroy this one, they had determined, and the others will shut down in a cascade effect as the power draw became too much for them to handle, opening the city to the marines who were even now fighting their way through the enemy troops a few kilometers away. As if to remind him of his task, several particle blasts from a troop transport slammed into the shield, creating a flash of rainbow colors and a sharp scent of ozone. A small breach had occurred, but quickly sealed itself. The Byntai cities were climate-controlled, due to their weak immune systems, and a breach in the shields would make it more difficult for the defending troops. Greaghoir wondered if there were any nasty bacteria or viruses left in the desolate environment that covered the rest of this world. He hoped a few made it through that breach.

He scanned the area ahead. With his stealth system and ECM suite out of commission, this was going to be a good-old-fashioned blitz attack. Greaghoir detected sixty Byntai, twenty guarding the reactor building, and forty in the courtyard. Far too many for a protracted fight, but if he could get in, set the charges, and then run like hell, this would work. Better that than call for help. His pride would never let him live that one down. After all, he thought, it's only one platoon. He raised his pulse rifle and checked the ordnance load. He still had the micronuke grenades, and he shuffled the magazine load to include an ECM smoker. Satisfied, he swung around the corner and began firing.

Several grenades streaked towards the Byntai, detonating in low-kiloton yield explosions that sent those Byntai not incinerated flying. Greaghoir anchored his armor using the retractable toe claws built into the boots, but was torn free and tossed back down the alley as the shockwave hit.

"Dammit!" He yelled as he sprang back to his feet and ran towards the generator, "I am starting to feel like a friggin' piñata!"

Several beams of energy lanced out of the smoke towards him as he ran in firing. One scored a hit dead center on his chest, blowing a small divot out of his armor. He responded by firing an ECM smoker into the haze ahead of him. The grenade hit the ground with a dull clank, and then exploded in a cloud of opaque black smoke. Suspended in this smoke were microscopic ECM jamming nanites that scrambled sensors and targeting systems. Temporarily hidden from view and from targeting sensors, Greaghoir hit the ground and rolled several times to his left. A searing barrage of particle beam fire stabbed through the space he had just vacated. Greaghoir was high-crawling towards the generator when the ground beneath him suddenly bucked. A quake shook the area, but this tremor was not caused by any seismic activity. The roar and crackle of a blast wave hitting the city's shields told of a near-hit from an orbital strike, but from which side Greaghoir could not tell.

Greaghoir suddenly found himself face-to-boot with a Byntai soldier. He lashed out and swept the soldier's feet out from under him with his arm and pounced on his chest. The startled soldier didn't even have time to cry out before Greaghoir's claws had ripped through the armored collar and torn the Byntai's throat out.

"You'd think," Greaghoir said as he rolled to his feet, "That they would eventually learn to put better armor around the neck."

The Ahruga had a natural instinct to go for the throat of their opponents in close-quarters combat. Many Byntai had suffered a fate similar to that of the soldier Greaghoir left lying behind him as he ran to the shield generator. The weapons fire had stopped momentarily, and Greaghoir felt more than heard a dull hum. The Byntai were using an EMP device to disable the ECM smoker. The electromagnetic waves hit the microscopic jammers, which were too small to be shielded, and knocked them out of commission. Greaghoir's helmet suddenly resounded with lock-on warning alarms letting him know that the Byntai had found him. He jumped, and engaged his AG field as he did so, extending the already substantial leap into near-flight. Several blasts followed his arc as he headed for the roof of the generator building. Just as he touched down, a beam pierced the armor on his calf, burning through into the flesh beneath. A subdermal armor sheath that was implanted just beneath the surface of the skin took the brunt of the pulse, but he suffered a nasty coin-sized hole burned clean through his leg nevertheless.

"Rat bastard!" Greaghoir yelled as he fired the last micronuke down into the smoke-shrouded square below. He fell flat against the roof as the blast wave tore past him. The generator building was taking serious abuse, but it was designed for it. He had to get inside to the vulnerable reactor core to disable or destroy the thing.

Greaghoir checked his bio-scan and found that the muscle tissue in the calf had been badly damaged, but the bone was intact. His armor's onboard medic system dispensed localized painkillers and sent surgical nanites to the wounded area to repair the damage. He would be limping, but he could still walk. As a precaution, he slapped an armor patch over the hole which melted into the calf-plate as the armor repair nanites used its materials to replace that destroyed by the beam. As the smoke and debris from the last blast cleared, he could see a landing pad on the other end of the roof, and a hatch in the roof next to it. He hobbled in that direction, readying his pulse rifle just in case he met resistance.

End of sample