



The Calm of the Void :: 03/15/01 :: DataBob/Helix[DB]

I

Ordin checked his watch for the third time in five minutes. He sat at the small metal table, emersed in the endless traffic of the central area of the spaceport, as he anxiously awaited the appearance of the final member of his crew. Looking for a way to relax, he took a sip of the green fluid suggested to him by the nearby Errern. It had the opposite effect... he swallowed hard and tried to suck the taste out of his mouth.

Slowly, Ordin became aware of a shadow being cast on him from above... He looked up and saw the featureless silhouette of a humanoid, looking down at him. The shadow spoke, shyly. "Uh... Are you...?"

"Edan Ordin, Commander of-"

"Yes, the Alliance Research Ship *Ir Miilas*. I'm Creta Mirin, the replacement copilot." Her smile was only barely visible in the reflected light of the table.

Ordin stood quickly. "Ah, thank Sajuuk. I thought we'd never find you. Let's get to the lock--we have to launch within the next eleven minutes." The two of them scurried off down the crowded corridors to the bay where the ship was waiting. It was a fairly small vessel among all those in the bay, hardly the size of a frigate. With a body of solid silver and a trim of glue and gold, the spacecraft was almost completely streamlined but for its huge engines and a cluster of antennae and sensory equipment jutting out of an opening on the dorsal edge of its long, sleek spinal support. This was by far the nicest research ship either of them had laid eyes on.

The Commander was just beginning to calm himself when he reached the steel ramp and turned to see the woman behind him. His pulse quickened, the blood seemed to drain from his face, he became pale. "You're Taiidan."

Creta was still, taking in the expression of subdued fear on Ordin's face.

"Never mind. I-I'll show you around. Have you been briefed at all?"

She shook her head as she followed him down the tube into the cabin of the ship. "No, not really. I was called here from the capital just a few hours ago... They didn't tell me much, other than that I had to fill in for your copilot."

"Yes, he was injured earlier." the huge, heavily reinforced doors sprang open, revealing a dimly-lit, low-ceiling interior. "Welcome aboard the long-range research vessel *Ir Miilas*, Traveler's hope. This is one of three ships involved in the Galactic Council's Cartographic Rendering Project."

"Sorry, I'm not familiar with it."

"I'm not shocked." Ordin coughed from the smell of freshly-welded metal. "Every fourteen years, ships are launched to three points of view around the galaxy, where they each make detailed scans and record the positions of all visible stars. When all of this data has been properly analyzed, the result is a very reliable model of the galaxy and all objects in it. It is not a very well-known event we're participating in, but it is truly priceless to hyperspacing and navigation."

Another crew member emerged from a door at the edge of the room. He was a short man, with a holographic display suspended over his eyes. He introduced himself. "I am A'Kuul, the hyperspace engineer."

"Hello. I'm..." she started, but the man had disappeared again. She wasn't surprised; she knew that Hyperspace mathematics had the tendency to dull one's life beyond the numbers. Only a few had ever really understood the infinite, fractal patterns of Hyperspace, and those few who did had generally been bordering on insanity. She shrugged it off.

Ordin spoke up. "You probably won't have much work on this mission. All the navigation is done by computers, we just don't like to fly without a full crew."

"Of course." She took a seat at the console at the front of the room, and looked out into the bright yellow-orange nebulosity of the core regions... Endless fields of thousands upon thousands of stars. She smiled, never tiring of that raw beauty, in all her life in the core regions. She'd seen these clouds nearly every day since her first work piloting freighters, and yet their glow never ceased to entertain her. When she was completely relaxed, she decided to see the rest of the ship.

When she stood, however, she froze. The commander was sitting in his chair, his eyes fixed tightly on the same window. But his face was twisted into a look of sheer disgust, or anger. He didn't seem to be aware of her presence... He was drifting, out there, and he was unhappy, almost tortured by what he apparently saw. His eyes remained completely still, cold, not even blinking, locked into the star fields with a hatred that showed in all his tormented features.

Creta slowly, silently, walked away from the scene, through the door behind Ordin's chair. The commander's face still lingering in her mind, she moved forward into an elongated, narrow room with ivory walls. It was hard to see. The deeper she proceeded, the more she saw that these walls were an endless, intricately woven mesh of circuitry, tubes, pipes, relays. She found herself, at the center of a great machine, trapped inside it. Everything was active here, there was live energy flowing through every centimeter of the place... It almost felt claustrophobic.

The lighting in the room was dim, but it seemed to come from everywhere. There were no lights on the ceiling or floor; rather, everything there was giving off a faint and continually fluctuating glow. She left no shadow, and yet she herself appeared as darkness, the only thing there that was not providing its own illumination.

She looked ahead and saw that the room expanded into a circular area, just three meters away. She moved reluctantly onward and made out more detail here... Suddenly her brain seemed to understand the patterns in the world, and she made out the structure of the place. This circle had a higher, slightly domed ceiling, and in the middle of it, a cylindrical column grew from the floor upward. The center of the column seemed to glow even more brightly than the surrounding machinery, and as she came close she realized that it was partially transparent.

And there was not just its appearance... There was more to this room than just what she could see. She heard something... A very quiet, rhythmic sound that seemed to come from inside her rather than around her. Her ears strained to hear it, but it was definitely there... It sounded like music.

Suddenly she was shaken from her thoughts by the sudden motion of a shape nearby. She turned and saw A'Kuul raise himself up from behind a small pyramid-shaped device in the corner. He looked just as preoccupied as ever, with the displays over his eyes printing out endless number sequences, and several bizarre tools in his hands. His face was still blank, but he had paused in his work. Whether he was just thinking about his machines, or taking a moment to study the strange Taiidani copilot that had invaded his workspace, he had stopped for a moment.

Creta shivered inadvertently. "I did not know Kushan technology was so... complex."

A'Kuul tilted his head as if confused, but his face remained solid. "This is not Kushan technology."

The walls took up their pleasing mezzo-soprano voice once again, and gave off a short flash of luminance. Creta stared, questioningly.

"This hyperdrive unit is Bentusi-made, given to us for this ship's use only." he said, in a dark monotone.

Creta looked around, astonished. She recalled her one encounter with a Bentusi trade ship... She'd been flying supply runs for the old empire, before the fall... She had only seen it briefly, streaking across the nebula and disappearing in the bright galactic core, like some mythical creature returning to its nest in the heavens... She had actually questioned herself as to whether or not it had actually ever been there. Certainly her imperial overlords would never have provided any information. The memories of her work in those years provoked a deep shudder. These were experiences she was willing to forget.

She was tense from the sudden and vibrant recollection of her imperial career, but the quiet humming from the singing ship was calming, and she soon felt all her worries and regrets drip from her thoughts. She returned to the present and looked back at the small man. "Why did the Bentusi give you this drive?"

"For the magnitude of this hyperspatial jump, a greater wavefront force generation capability is necessary."

"Hiigaran drives just don't do so well for this kind of work." another voice appeared from behind... Another man standing from behind the column. This room was quite eerie, simply because it seemed one could never be sure how many people were there, hidden.

Creta turned around and saw him, a taller man with the first real smile she'd seen all day.

"I'm Ziir Nabaal, second engineer." he shifted the tool to the other hand and made the Hiigaran sign of greeting.

She nodded and introduced herself.

Ziir started for the console he'd been working at. "It will be good to have a Taiidan in the crew. A sign of friendship between our two cultures, do you agree?"

"Yes, I suppose." Creta answered. The engineer's friendliness lightened her mood.

Just then, the commander leaned in through the hatch. "One minute to launch." His dark voice echoed through the singing room, making the song fall silent. The two engineers secured their equipment and made their way back to the bridge. Creta followed them and took her seat beside the Hiigaran pilot, who looked only momentarily at her and produced nothing more than a forced smile. She tried not to let it get to her... It was all she'd ever received from most of the Hiigarans she'd met. She could almost see their point of view.

The *Ir Miilas* had detached from the lock and had attained a safe distance from the station, far out away from all space dust, debris and other vessels. The silver ship, still reflecting the brilliant orange of the surrounding space, aligned itself with the coordinates of its destination, in final preparation for the transit through hyperspace. When the computer had achieved perfection in the ship's alignment and mathematical algorithms, the Bentusi drive came fully alive.

A golden light became dimly visible, refracting through the sparsely distributed molecules of hydrogen and assorted gasses, like a halo around the craft. The glow moved like a phantom through the surrounding space, then gently dissolved. Now the space began to twist, expanding and contracting, revealing how truly amorphous it was. No more than gelatin, the space around the *Ir Miilas* began melting around the hull. Then the golden light returned, in a square of infinite radiance pulsing with the energies of beyond, materializing at the edge of the ship. The vessel remained absolutely still, as the burning shape moved over the hull, moving the molecules the stars, thousands of light-years in seconds, to the far reaches of the galactic rim and beyond. Into the unknown. The glow gently subsided, the space re-solidified as if nothing had ever been there. *Ir Miilas* was enveloped by the void.

II

The first thing Creta realized as she re-materialized, was the oppressive darkness. Beyond the thin panes of the windows, there was nothing. No stars were visible, only the unending, impenetrable darkness. A long way off, she thought she saw a single point of light, a blur, perhaps the shape of a distant star cluster.

She found herself feeling depressed by this... She knew that *Ir Miilas* was now far out on the rim, or farther... Beyond the edge of the galaxy. There was nothing out here, maybe not even dust. She gulped.

The crew stood, uncoiled, and stretched, feeling uneasy from the phantom gravitational forces of hyperspace. They stumbled to the far viewport, where the view could be appreciated. Ziir appeared truly captivated by what he saw... The spiraling arms of his Galaxy stretched out before him. He could see everything. It was like all the flat screen images he had seen for so many years, but it was real, it was alive. In his eyes, the stars were like a trillion tiny pearls laid out on a black blanket, radiating all the light in the universe. At the center of it all, the core was there as always... The great bulge of matter at the center of the swirl. The inner rim, the cradle of a thousand worlds.

But to Creta, the sight was still dull. She'd never lived a moment out of the core she was looking down at... Now she only felt like an ant being held a mile above the hill. Almost nauseated, she stepped down from the window.

"We are in position... Confirmed alignment. Link established... The other two ships are reporting successful alignment."

"Nabaal, activate sensors on my mark. *Mark!*" The commander gave a few orders from his chair. It seemed strange, but Creta noticed that he seemed happier. He was practically glowing, somehow delighted by the sheer desolation he saw around him. He stood and turned to face his crew. "Telemetry is coming in. Mapping is in progress."

A silent cheer went up from the small crew. They stood at the window for a moment longer before scattering to miscellaneous diagnostic tasks throughout the ship. When the crowd was gone, a few remained: A'Kuul was perched at his own console, returning to work on the endless spatial calculations. Ziir was standing over the sensors readouts, where the galaxy was presented as a hologram. Waves of light swept over it, depositing more stars with each pass. Creta decided to go look at it, in hope that the radiance of the image would help her relax.

"Are you feeling sick?" Ziir asked, noting how pale she had become.

"N-No." she said, automatically.

The Commander approached the console. He seemed to be avoiding the Taiidan with his eyes, but was notably more relaxed nonetheless. "Nabaal. How long do you think the mapping will take to complete?"

"Maybe two hours. We won't have to move to the next set of coordinates for another five, though."

Ordin looked longingly into the void, wishing he could stay longer. "Good." He left, disappearing behind another door.

Creta watched him go. She turned to Ziir, and asked, "Is there something wrong with him?"

"Why do you ask?"

She hesitated. "He really seems to like it out here. It's unhealthy, if you ask me."

Ziir was slow to respond. He sighed, looked down at his galaxy several times before answering. "It is said, his Kiith was once one of many thousands of people. His family was great, rich, on Kharak. But... in the burning..." he stopped for a moment. "He is the only one left. His story is not unique, but Ordin was hit very hard by it. It is said that he tried to take his own life... That is all I know."

Creta glanced back at the door, still darkly curious about the Commander. After a while, she returned to her console, where a number of lights were flashing.

Ordin sat, in his small, empty room, facing the window looking into the void. His legs lay folded, a gray mat lay below him. At his fingers, there was a small control pad, and a holographic display linked into the sensor cluster on the hull of the ship. Before him, a dim image of the galaxy swirled slowly, silently in its unending revolutions. After a while, he spoke to it.

"Quadrant four, sector seventeen... zoom. Zoom..." The stars slowly bled away, leaving smaller clusters that expanded to fill the room. He looked for a moment, into the darker, more desolate regions of the display. He picked out a single star among the hundreds, and looked down on it. He sighed, and spoke again. "Enhance thirteen by twenty six."

The holographic stars vanished. One bright point grew larger until the star was a marble hovering in the center of the room. Just barely visible, Ordin saw a few smaller bits of white, representing planets and moons. Each one was encased in a weak shroud of dust and small asteroid fragments... Amidst all the excess material, his eyes picked out a small bulge of gray circling around the parent star. He stared inward at it for a long time, never taking his eyes off of it. He absorbed the image, not feeling the tears dripping from his face, or the pain in his chest, or the quickening of his heartbeat. He stared, and felt part of him cry out to move closer, to expand that ball of gray into a visible planetary mass.

But he held himself back from it... for he knew that if he did so, he would see the truth. No, things were perfect from here... Here, where the planet was still just a ball of light. Just a perfect sphere, not revealing anything. Perfect, as it had been, Before...

Ordin sank into himself, closed his eyes and made his mind quiet against the storm.

The door behind him jolted open, shattering him. The stars vanished. He remained still, motionless, dead.

"Commander...?" A familiar voice said, "We require your guidance." The voice was quiet, but Ordin recognized it.

"*What is it, Taiidan?*" he shouted, the rage suddenly welling up in him.

Creta stood unmoving in the doorway.

Ordin slowly recovered himself. He wiped the moisture from his face. "I... I'm sorry. I'll be there in a moment."

A few seconds of silence, and then the sound of the hatch whirring shut.

Reluctantly, he took his seat and focused himself. "What is it? What's happening?"

Ziir answered. "Our sensors have found something nearby us... Something very large. A ship, almost mothership class."

Everyone had frozen in place. Disturbed, Ordin stood up. "Out *here*?"

"It's just a faint echo... The ship, if it's here, must be within six thousand kilometers of us. I'm not reading any power signatures... It took our advanced sensors just to know it's here. It could be a derelict..."

"We should approach with caution." A'Kuul spoke up. "I have read of derelict ships... One such vessel was found during the original homeworld war. It was quite dangerous to nearby spacecraft. However, even if it is dangerous, the vessel should be investigated... It might provide an invaluable technological insight."

Ordin nodded. "Can we learn more about it from here?"

Ziir scanned a few controls. "Yes. I'm pointing two scopes at it... There's no haze, so we should be able to get a good view. Hold on..." He typed commands into a number of pads. Finally, a huge screen in the center of the room activated, and displayed the readings.

The derelict ship was dark, almost as dark as the black of space behind it. As the scopes brought in more data, the structure became more apparent. It was rectangular, long, gray, crudely assembled, with a huge engine module. It was indeed old, judging by the corrosion, but it was intact besides that. Only the rim of its hull was really visible, faintly illuminated from beneath by the distant stars of the nebula. It looked just like more junk, but there was something about the shape... something familiar.

Niilan stared, in awe, at the dark object. "Do you recognize it?" he asked, dazed.

"Yes..." Ordin said, the words dripping from his mouth. "It's the *Khar-Toba*."

"The ancient Hiigarans were exiled from the homeworld, three thousand years ago. They traveled over thirty thousand light years in ships like those, generational vessels. After perhaps a century of travel, they landed on Kharak. But *this* one... This ship did not land on Kharak. The technology was unreliable... perhaps, this ship failed in its orbital maneuvers and just skipped out of the atmosphere, with inoperable drives, unable to regain control. Over three millennia, it drifted farther and farther, and ended up out here."

Ziir stumbled around the cabin, trying to rationalize the situation.

A'Kuul looked up, his eyebrows moving for the first time in the whole flight. "My calculations indicate that it would take a Khar-Toba class vessel at least ten thousand years to reach this distance, at the maximum possible velocity gained from a failed entry."

Even now, Ordin was stunned by the man's computational ability. "I suppose you have a good explanation for this?"

"I do not... But the fact that I have no explanation should not cause us to jump to explanations which are mathematically improbable." A'Kuul did more mental calculations.

"More likely, this ship is not a Khar-Toba class, but rather another derelict merely resembling the Khar-Toba."

Everyone seemed disgruntled by this. Creta talked for the first time. "If it is a Khar-Toba class, it has a great deal of importance... It could be the greatest archaeological find of the century, for your people *and* mine. Surely we cannot abandon it..."

Ziir spoke up, worried. "Unfortunately, we will have to abandon it, if we don't think of something. In four hours thirty two minutes, we must hyperspace to the next set of coordinates. Otherwise, the mapping project is lost, and we'll have to start over months from now. It will cost a great deal of time and funds..."

Ordin was disturbed by this. "Can't we just call a salvage team?"

"Unfortunately, no. They'll never find it again... We're so far out from the galaxy now, navigation would be impossible. I doubt if even a ship with *our* sensors could find the way back to this exact spot."

A'Kuul looked upset by this, for he now realized how very improbable their encounter with it was.

"Can we call another ship to come here and secure it before we move on?"

"Doubtful. No one would make it this far out without a drive at least as advanced as ours... And I doubt we can contact the Bentusi in time."

"Can we make it easier to find? By Sajuuk, isn't there *anything* we can do?"

Ziir was intrigued. "Yes, maybe. It might be possible to plant a beacon of some sort on the derelict... I could build such a beacon from the backup parts we're carrying for the transmitter systems. It might work!"

Ordin smiled. "Get started on it. I want it done by the time the mapping here is complete... We'll only have three hours to set it up."

The crew was left, for than time, to further speculate, propose theories, and stare in awe at the thing on the screens.

III

It took years, it felt, for the sensor cluster to conclude its imaging. As soon as it did, Ordin gave the order and the pilot skillfully maneuvered the *Ir Miilas* out of position, toward the ancient transport ship. Only as the derelict loomed ominously over them through the viewports, did they understand its true size. The ship did not rotate, but was tilted almost vertically upward.

Ir Miilas cast some spotlights on the hull. The metal was old, badly decayed, almost dissolved by the relentless bursts of radiation from distant stellar phenomena. The hull was almost completely smooth, however... There had been no micrometeors this far out to hit it. After orbiting it for a few minutes, the ship stopped, all lights focused on a small patch on the hull, a place where the uninterrupted panels split around a square indentation. It was a door.

"We don't have the equipment to lock our beacon into the hull. Someone will have to go aboard to plant it." Ziir said, holding his creation. The device was a huge cylinder with domed edges, hardly any features but for a small control pad with green and blue switches.

Ordin tried to envision it... Being on board a three thousand year old transport ship... All the Hiigaran exiles within had no doubt died long ago. Oxygen leakage, food shortage, life support failure... They would have seen their destination pass below their eyes, and yet never been able to touch it as they drifted away, into the cold voids where no star existed. More likely, they had frozen to death, where absolute zero was not an unattainable goal. He shuddered.

"The Taiidani and the robot-man are the ideal choices, they'll be the least emotionally affected." said the Paktu engineer from behind.

Creta scowled, A'Kuul did not even recognize that he had been insulted. The engineer retreated.

"I'll go." Ordin said.

Ziir looked at him. "Uh... Commander, are you sure you're... Do you really want to go?"

Ordin nodded, showing no hesitation.

Creta thought for a moment. "I'll come."

The room fell silent., but there was no objection.

Ziir spoke. "I'll come, certainly. I need to set up the beacon." He braced himself against his chair as the ship shook from the docking.

Three figures in pressure suits stepped through the airlock, into the impenetrable darkness of the corridors of the relic. Ordin carried the heavy beacon that had just become much lighter in the diminished gravity. Ziir held the beam of a strong flashlight, and a small readout displaying a crude sensor map of the place.

"We'll set it up just up here..." his voice echoed through the intercom. He made his way slowly forward into the ship. The metal here was still shiny, and the beam cast strange shadows between the pipes and dead control panels lining the walls. When he had found the spot he wanted, he knelt down and planted the beacon on the grated floor. His fingers slipped, and the device dropped hard onto the metal, making a loud, unpleasant noise. Ziir was motionless.

"What? What is it?"

Ziir looked up. "There's air in here. If it were a vacuum, we wouldn't be able to hear anything." He examined the readout in his hand, pressed buttons, waved it around him like a fly-swatter. "Oxygen, Nitrogen, trace elements mixture... Pressure, one bar." He was astounded by this. "We should be able to breathe in here."

"What?"

Ziir shrugged and carefully removed his faceplate. He took a few deep breaths and concluded that the air was pure and clean, not even very cold. "I guess these things were well-built."

Even as her own faceplate raised up, and the old air filled her lungs, Creta was incredulous. "This ship maintained pure, heated air for *three thousand years*? How is that possible?"

Ziir started his work on the beacon's transmission program. "The Khar-Toba was a generational ship... It was designed to support the Hiigarans for a hundred years or more. I guess it just kept going. Also remember that it hasn't had anyone breathing here for a few millennia."

It could have been from the low temperatures in these unheated passages, but Ordin shivered. "As long as we can breathe here, maybe we should explore a little. We still have a few hours, and the next time we see this ship, it will be on its way back to Hiigara to be taken apart and studied by an army of historians. We might as well see what we can before that time."

Creta agreed, beginning to see this mission as her chance to be the first to do something, maybe even to earn her five minutes of fame on a galactic news broadcast. Behind all that was simple curiosity.

Ziir smiled noncommittally. "I should stay here and get this thing working. It will probably take half an hour. You go on without me." He handed the commander his mapping scanner. "Don't get lost."

The two of them began their exploration. Their boots made echoes on the floors as they disappeared into the darkness of the labyrinth... Gradually they lost sight of the airlock and entered an enlarged corridor that looked as if it went on for kilometers. They started in the direction of the front of the ship. They became less and less uptight about the place, as they had yet to encounter a corpse.

"This reminds me of my childhood..." Creta said, looking around the walls, like mirrors replicating her image. "My friends and I would play in the abandoned buildings on the edge of the city... The *really* old buildings from when-" she trailed off, and recovered her sentence. "The really old ones. The halls went underground, and there were metal panels... It was like the whole place was made of gold."

They came to the end of the long hallway, feeling that same delight of curiosity that Creta recalled from so long ago. There was a large door, like a freight transport hatch. The manual release was on the wall to its side, beckoning their touch. They paused, looked each other in the eye. Ordin extended his hand to hit the switch, but stopped himself, hearing something. A far-off noise... A distant murmur of what sounded almost like a humanoid voice. Or footsteps being amplified by the refractive plating. It was a sound, and it was not coming from either of the explorers.

"What is that?" She asked, her voice hushed to a low whisper.

Ordin strained to hear it again, but the sound was gone. "Just metal fatigue. Nothing." He waited for the sound to return, but it did not, so he firmly grasped the switch and pulled it back. They heard the ancient locks disengage, the great door making a few subdued clicks and hums. Finally, the old, corroded motors went to work and started their rotations. The door pulled itself open with a loud whir and the sound of metal scraping against metal.

The two explorers leapt back, stunned, frightened by what they saw. As the doors opened, a tiny sliver of yellow light flew from beyond and made its way up the walls. The light expanded, stinging their eyes... A wave of sudden warmth washed over them, filling the edges of the helmets with condensation. Creta wanted to run, but her feet were melted into the plating beneath her. Both were forced to remain still as the doors opened fully, blasting them with the warm glow. Just on the other side of the great frame, the corridor was new, completely spotless. The walls were bright, clean, and covered with the illumination of the lights that hung over the halls. The control panels were on, active, alert, displaying a map of the entire ship and the status of all its systems. The hall was alive, new, as if it had never aged. Life support here was functioning, perfectly, completely. But the most stunning image of all was not that of this part of the ship itself, but rather that of a young Hiigaran man standing right there before them, dressed in strange clothes, holding an iron pole and displaying an expression of sheer terror.

The Hiigaran shouted something in a strange dialect and took off running as fast as he could away from them. Creta watched his bare feet on the metal, pounding, her world suddenly reduced to slow-motion. In a trance, overcome by awe, she followed him down the hall, between the golden walls, through one door and then another. And then the boy vanished around a bend, and she could see an even greater, purer light casting his elongated shadow on the floor. Ever so slowly, she turned the corner and found herself looking into the central area of the ship. She stood, her blood suddenly cold, at a small railing, elevated fifty meters above the ground level of the cavernous chamber. Before her, the artificial landscape stretched away...

And every part of it was filled with living, breathing Hiigarans.

IV

A’Kuul stood over his console. A look of perplexity pierced his stone face. "We seem to have lost contact with the other mapping ships. The link is gone."

Niilan assumed control of the ship. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know... It has never happened before. I assume the communications array is defective."

"Uh... Can you fix it?"

"Only if it is defective. I will examine it." A’Kuul and the Paktu engineer disappeared into the equipment room.

Niilan picked up the receiver for the intercom system, thinking of contacting the commander, but he restrained himself. He was not so eager to give up his first command post... Not yet. But the intercom talked first.

"This is Ordin, aboard the derelict--er... There are people in here!"

"Kiith's blood... He's gone completely mad..." Niilan yelled over his shoulder. He composed himself and picked up the transmitter. "Commander. Settle down. What do you mean there are people in there?"

The response was slow, and increasingly distorted by interference, what sounded almost like a lot of voices in the background. "I'm telling you, I'm in the central chamber of the ship, and there are thousands of people here with me. They're Hiigarans, but... They speak a strange language, I can't quite understand it. We, officer Mirin and I, are here with them. I think you ought to get down here too, soon."

Niilan rolled his eyes. The rest of the crew had appeared behind him, listening to the intercom. "*Taii*... I mean, Officer Mirin, bring him back here, quick. He might be dangerous, in this state. We need to sedate him and--"

The voice of the Taiidan interrupted him. "He's sane. I see them too."

Dumbfounded, Niilan stumbled in his speech and tried to rationalize his world. "Uh... Are you saying that you've found Hiigarans there, who have survived in that ship for three thousand years with *nothing*?"

"I don't know... But I think you should all come here. Don't bring any weapons--they're afraid of us enough already. Mirin out."

The acting commander was caught in a mental quandary for some time. He ordered the engineers to stay and try to fix the uplink. Unsurely, the others boarded the derelict and sealed the airlock. Ziir lead them into the central chamber.

The crowd had deposited the two explorers in a small room on the outskirts of the living establishment. The people seemed very reluctant to let them leave... Creta got the impression that they were supposed to wait for someone. They struggled to understand their situation, in the mean time.

Ordin looked out at the young man who was now standing outside as a guard. "Their language is very familiar. I can almost understand it..."

"It is Hiigaran, isn't it?"

"Yes... But very archaic. It's not a form of our language that has been spoken for a very long time." He welled up the courage to try something. He called in clear, slow speech to the guard. "Uh... Can you understand me?"

The Boy seemed to nod.

The commander tried a test. "Can you get us some water? Water?"

The guard nodded, left, and returned with a small bowl filled with the pure, clean life-giving liquid. "I was right..." He offered the water to Creta.

Looking at her semitransparent ghost image on the surface of the bowl, she was deep in contemplation. "Do you think it's even possible that these people survived in this ship for three millennia? Without a planet, without contact, without anything?"

Ordin stood, stretched his legs and unlocked his pressure suit to compensate for the increased heat. "I don't think so... But the protectors of Kadesh... They built their entire fleet starting with a single transport ship like this one. They never had any planet, that we know of. Maybe it *is* possible."

Just then, a number of Hiigarans in strange uniforms appeared at the door. One pointed at Ordin, and the guard came in to lead him away.

"I had better not try to resist... I'll only hope this isn't an execution." he said, without sarcasm.

Creta nodded and watched the commander vanish in the crowds.

Ordin was lead far off, up seemingly endless ramps, stairwells and lifts, farther toward the front of the ship, out of the central chamber, into more corridors with gray walls. After half an hour of walking, the group of Hiigarans brought him into a small room which he guessed to be somewhere near the bridge of the ship. The one he guessed to be their leader sat down at the other side of a desk and looked squarely at him.

The Hiigaran spoke. After a moment, Ordin was able to interpret it as "Who are you, and how did you get here?"

"I... My name is Edan Ordin, and... I came here from my ship."

The Hiigaran seemed distraught, unsure as to how to proceed here and yet knowing that this encounter would be vital to himself and his entire race. "You must help us."

Four more of the crew were thrown into the small room with the anxious Taiidani, a short time later. The newcomers only increased the tension there... No one knew where the Commander was, and Niilan was becoming increasingly worried about meeting the schedule for the next set of mapping coordinates. Somehow, the gravity of the situation never seemed to hit him.

Luckily, the Hiigarans here never thought to remove any of their belongings... Ziir and Creta still had their suit intercoms, which they promptly used to contact the ship.

"Yes, I'm here." A'Kuul's monotone came through the helmet's speaker. "I've found something. The uplink is not malfunctioning."

"What?" Niilan was really getting irritated. "Why can't we contact the other mapping vessels?"

"I don't know. They both vanished from the communications array simultaneously, approximately forty-three seconds after we linked with the Khar-Toba class ship."

The pilot rubbed his forehead. "Ugh..."

"There's more. I attempted to trace the locations of the other ships, with our mapping sensors. When I did so, I noticed that our new maps of the galaxy do not conform to the galaxy's current distribution."

"What does that mean?"

A'Kuul looked for the words. "The galaxy has changed. So far I have noted that sixteen supernova remnants are now final-stage red giant stars, twelve planetary star systems are now planetary nebulae... Three spatial rifts have sealed themselves, two more have formed..."

Ziir looked up, suddenly. "The Galaxy has undone itself."

"*What?*"

"A'Kuul... Do you have a record of older galactic maps on file? Very old maps... say, from around GSY seven thousand?"

He took a moment to look through the database. "Yes."

"Compare those maps with current scans."

"Running comparison..." The five prisoners waited anxiously for the next transmission. Finally it came. "...The old maps correspond, almost perfectly. Galactic drift, stellar phenomena, alignments... All parameters match. Do you realize what this implies?"

Ziir looked around, and then at Niilan, whose face was twisted into a despaired frown.

"Sajuuk help us... *We have moved three thousand years into the past.*"

Ordin returned to the small room where his crew waited for him. Before entering, he had thought that what he had learned in the past moments had been interesting. He heard what they had to say first, thinking he would save the best for last.

When he'd recovered himself from the shock that had followed, he'd managed to remember what he'd wanted to tell them. "The Hiigarans, they explained things to me. I didn't understand everything they said, but I learned a lot."

Ziir returned to consciousness from his silent considerations on time travel, to hear the Commander.

His voice sounded old, rough. The air in the chamber was unusual... It seemed stale. They were all having a certain degree of difficulty breathing it. "This is one of the prison ships that carried the exiles to Kharak, three thousand years ago. Or... Three thousand years ago as of landfall."

"Yes, we guessed."

The commander nodded. "I talked to their elder, their current leader. You see, this is the third generation of Hiigarans on this ship. And it was supposed to be the last. This ship was on its way to Kharak, making one final hyperspace jump that should have taken it into the system. But it failed, somehow. The ship materialized out here, beyond the outer rim. Their drives are inoperable, so for the past six months, their time, they've just been floating here trying to fix the drive and get back on course. The trouble is, they don't know how. None of the original engineers are still alive, and no one can figure out how to repair the core.

"The ship is also wearing out. It was never designed to carry the exiles for this long.. The life support systems are beginning to shut down. Carbon Dioxide is slowly building up in the air. Those few people with any skill are predicting that the atmosphere will become toxic within five years. The elder asked for our help... He wants us to help his people repair the drives."

"With A'Kuul's help, it could probably be done." Ziir stated, coming to grips with the situation. "But, if we really have moved through time, are you sure it's a good idea to do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sure we've all heard theories about this sort of thing... Paradoxes, time loops... You have to remember that our own present is not going to happen for three millennia. Anything we do, or change, or help *right now* will affect the future in ways we can't imagine."

Ordin was disturbed by this, but undaunted. "I myself tend to believe that paradoxes are impossible. We can't know what effect our actions will have, but because we are here now, we can assume that our actions will not change anything in our own present. We cannot defy our own time-stream."

Ziir nodded. "Have you studied these theories before?"

The Commander spoke, darkly. "I've spent the past sixteen years of my life trying to figure out how to change the past."

Silence descended.

Wearily, Ordin raised himself from the ground and moved toward the guard. "Tell Dhir, *we'll help you.*"

They were lead, not by guards but by the elder himself, down the makeshift streets and alleys of the prison ship, in the direction of the drive module. They passed between great tents and crudely-erected structures that had functioned as homes for countless thousands of refugees for three generations... Everywhere here there was decay. Bits of dust from the rusted ceiling of the cavernous chamber littered the ground, and everything else. The thought that people had lived out their entire lives in this ship was utterly unimaginable to them, and yet it was not, at some level, unexpected. For this was the place of dreams and nightmares... It seemed somehow familiar to the crew because it was embedded in their distant memories of generations past... This was where the entire Kushan civilization had held its existence between the stars--and almost become lost forever in the void.

Creta, the only non-Hiigaran there, only felt as if the unconscious scorn from the other crew members had increased. This place was the object of their hatred for her and all Taiidani... The very symbol of the old empire and its evil deeds against the ancient Hiigarans. It was an unending reminder to them, it seemed, that she had once served the Emperor, even as consciously they never would have admitted it.

Luckily for her, the refugees had never seen a Taiidan. Had she arrived on this ship nearer to the time of the original exile, she might have faced the full force of the combined anger of all those who had been forced to abandon their homeworld. At least, right now, everything directed at her was subdued by the veil of politic and self-control.

They passed through denser residential areas... The ground was a sea of humanity. The refugees lay on an ocean of old blankets, trying to sleep under the eternal artificial lighting of the room. A staggering odor drifted upward but it was masked by the dull taste of the air... Chemical, over-processed. The source was clear... A huge fan jutted from the near wall of the chamber.

"Our old life support systems have been overworked since the beginning..." the voice must have come from Dhir. Creta was already getting used to the strange tongue, beginning to sense the similarities between it and the Hiigaran she already knew. After a while, it just sounded like another accent. "These fans have been turning for the entire voyage. The motors have grown rusty over the years, and the speed of the blades is no longer enough for the air to reach the center of the chamber. That portion is now uninhabitable."

The entire life support system must have been installed in a hurry, for Creta could see most of the filtering mechanisms sitting out, exposed, and somewhat damaged. Some of the tubes were broken, leaking precious oxygen--and not-so-precious coolant-- into the surrounding area. Actually, she could relate the prison ship to transport frigates she herself had flown, and she recognized this massive inner chamber as nothing more than an enlarged cargo hold. This Khar-Toba class ship probably served most of its life hauling freight around the inner rim, with this "cavern" being nothing more than a place to stack crates. Its conversion to a generational humanoid transport vessel had, by the looks of things, been a fast and crude.

"How many of you are there here?" Ordin asked as they ascended a long ramp.

Dhir paused at the hatch, consulting his memories. "I believe there are eleven thousand, within one thousand. I was taught that there were more than thrice this many, in the beginning."

Ordin sighed as the lock opened. At the end of another corridor, they arrived at a larger door, a very shiny one that didn't look as if it had been touched in eons. Dhir stopped, his eyes focused on the floor, as if this place was holy ground, and he was afraid to offend the spirits inhabiting it. Ordin hit the panel, and the door flew open at once.

They were bathed in a faint blue light, and a wave of frigid air flowed away from the opening. Ziir looked in against the wind that stung his eyes and surveyed the scene. There was a narrow walkway running part of the circumference of a large sphere suspended in the middle of the chamber. Pipes and conduits of all shapes and sizes projected from the walls of the sphere and fit into sockets on the circular walls. There were obvious signs of damage here... many of the tubes had split or been torn from their connections. Panels hung loose. There were stains on everything, the last remnants of oily liquids that had dripped out of their containers many years ago. It was a small wonder it didn't work.

Someone swore loudly.

"This thing been giving you trouble?"

"Yes." Dhir forced himself to look at the drive. "For as long as I can remember, I heard the elders talking about it. They said it never went on target, always jumping thousands of kilometers from the intended destination. We had a hard time catching up with the rest of the convoy. And it kept getting worse each year until the last jump, when it took us out here."

Ziir whistled, probing through the ancient machinery. "Was it turbulent... Did the ship shake a lot with the jumps?"

"Yes, very much. My arm was broken in the jump, some time ago. It happens to many of us." He rubbed his left elbow, wincing with the slight pinch of pain.

With a quiet snapping noise, Ziir removed a section of the casing and peered inside.

"Can it be fixed?" asked Ordin, distraught by the mess.

"I think so. It's old, and it's... bad. But I think I might yet be able to get at least another jump out of it. I'll need A'Kuul to look at it."

The commander nodded. "Good. I'll get him." He lead the rest of the crew with him.

Creta remained, her eyes fixed on the dark orb. She spoke the question that had been on her mind for hours. "Ziir... Why did the Bentusi give you the drive unit for the *Ir Miilas*?"

He looked up from the chaos. "Well... You know, our Hiigaran drives wouldn't work well enough out here."

"Why? What's so special about the outer rim?"

He scratched his head. "I don't completely understand it... It's just that hyperspace works differently, when space is so... Empty. Maybe... I heard theories that space is like a plane, curved by gravitational forces. Out here, there's no matter to produce gravity, at all. No stars within ten thousand light-years, no asteroids or nebulae. The plane of space is just... Flat. Perfectly flat, and somehow that interferes with normal hyperspace."

Creta stared at the machine. "And the Bentusi drive somehow compensates for that, I suppose. But why, then, don't they do this mapping mission themselves?"

Ziir shrugged. "Unbound races have never participated. I don't know why." He buried himself in the mesh of cables again. His voice swirled around the machine, combined with its

ever-present drone. "I know what you're thinking, but it's no good. The galactic council has records of mapping missions going back to the day of its establishment, and there has never been any report of anything like *this* happening."

"Maybe it did happen, but they never made it back."

Ziir looked up and gulped.

A'Kuul and two engineers descended the ramp, hauling a small crate of equipment. They met Ordin and the others at the foot of it, exchanging worried glances and uneasy words.

"Are you sure it's wise to proceed like this, Commander?" A'Kuul asked. Even as he spoke, the display on his face seemed to be running models and simulations.

"No." the commander smirked at his own response. "But we're going to do it anyway." He talked into the intercom. "Ziir? Do you copy?"

"Yes. I've just finished surveying the hyperdrive core... I think I can find my way around it. It is, essentially, identical in configuration to the drive unit from the mothership."

"Good. What's your estimate on how long it will take to repair it?"

It took a moment for Ziir to add it up. "Six to twelve hours, depending on how fast we can get it unpeeled. No more than eighteen hours, if all goes well."

The commander nodded to himself. "Get on it. Ordin out." He looked up from the receiver. "Sjet, take command, keep watch over the ship while we're gone. We'll see about changing shifts if needed, but until then I don't want anyone leaving *Ir Miilas*. Agreed?"

"Y-yes." the engineer stuttered and reluctantly pushed himself through the lock.

"We're ready..." Ziir called over the radio. After three hours of exhaustive work with the damaged core, they were ready for the first phase of testing. They would feed power into the drive and align it with a test destination, to see if it could generate a weak wavefront. If the drive passed the test, they could move on to the next phase; if it failed, it would help them localize the problem and hopefully fix it.

The Paktu Engineer was far off in the navigational chamber of the prison ship, with Dhir and the other elders. The control systems were old, sluggish, but still operational. Slowly, the massive ship brought its ancient engines to bear and lumbered forward, aiming itself back toward the galaxy of its origin. Dhir nodded to him, and the engineer reported over the comm circuit, "Ready on this end. Confirmed... We have drive alignment, coordinates locked in. Awaiting your command..."

Ziir nodded to the commander. "Hit it!"

Paktu took a deep breath and punched the console. All through the ship, they heard a deep rumble, like distant thunder. The noise rippled through the walls, washing over the massive crowds of Hiigarans who had gathered around the more stable areas of the cavernous chamber. Each man, woman and child was excited by the noise, as much as frightened... For this was all the hope they had ever had of reaching a home, for a very long time.

A dim blue light began to build up around the hull of the prison ship. The waves expanded and engulfed the vessel, and space began to bend.

"It looks good, commander. Everything is within tolerances... For a three-thousand year old freighter, she's working beautifully." Ziir called, against the roar of the drive.

"This is *Ir Miilas*... There's a problem..." a disturbed voice echoed through the comm circuit. "We're being hit by the gravitational shear. The wavefront isn't wrapping correctly."

Ziir scanned his displays frantically. "Ir Miilas isn't safely within our hyperspatial field... The quantum wavefront is unstable. The ship's being torn between spaces."

Paktu shouted into the intercom. "I'm shutting down the drives."

Ziir heard the sounds die down behind him, but the sensors told him better. "Nothing's happened. The wavefront is still building... It's going to collapse. Ir Miilas has to detach now, or it will be destroyed by the shear."

"Detach! Get clear!" Ordin yelled. He ran quickly to the airlock. He braced himself at the window and watched as the smooth form of the ship removed itself from the hull and floated away... It made it just in time. Just as the ship made safe distance, a turbulent streamer of the blue light swept under it. Had she been closer, *Ir Miilas* would have been destroyed by that streamer.

"The wavefront is dissipating." Ziir called.

Ordin sighed, relieved, but all but lost his breath when *the Ir Miilas*, only thirty meters from the glass, vanished into nothingness. He pressed his face against the cold glass and scanned the dark space beyond for the shape of the vessel, but it was nowhere.

"Ir Miilas! This is Ordin, calling Ir Miilas!"

Only dead static was his answer.

Trapped somewhere in the depths of hyperspace, torn away from reality, the ship was lost. And with it, the six Hiigarans realized, they had lost all hope of return.

VI

The cavernous chamber was not unlike a planet... It's light and heat patterns were locked into continual fluctuations caused by gaps in the power systems. There were times when the electric glow would dim into almost complete darkness, and the moisture in the air would freeze and condense into a thin layer of frost covering everything there. The people would pull their blankets tighter around them, huddling in clusters where possible, and slept, waiting for day to come.

And then the power networks would re-align themselves, the lights and heating elements would reactivate, and the contained world would come alive again. Or, as much as it cared to.

As the energy flowed once more through the endless veins and arteries of the ship, the man saw his metal shell-bowl illuminated before him, with the residual sludge faintly glowing. Wearily, he stood, stumbled away from his sleeping pad and moved off into the shadows.

The man was just another Hiigaran among the masses, no longer distinguishable from the crowds around him. Just another nameless figure hidden under ragged sheets of ancient cloth. And yet, he was not like them, in one crucial detail... He knew that among all of them, he was the only one who was three millennia unborn.

In all his time there, Ordin had grown into the prison ship. From the carbon dioxide content of the air, from the fine metallic dust that had worn into his clothes, or from any of the other elements of this strange place; he had become one of the prisoners. He hardly recognized himself in comparison with his sparse memories of the past anymore--But *they* recognized him.

All the exiles around him looked up momentarily as he passed, nodding from time to time in silent recognition. He must have been physically unidentifiable, and yet they knew who it was, guided by some unknown intuition. It was miraculous at first, but it was easy to understand in hindsight. These prisoners, lying in their vast fields of apparent indolence, were not sleeping but rather meditating. They had been traveling across the stars for a century or more in search of a world, a place for them to live, a home. In that time, the search had become a sort of religion, although Ordin didn't feel right to call it that. It was an idea, a belief, a last hope of these refugees, that when all else rejected them, God would give them life.

Many of them seemed to remain still and almost dead for days at a time, sitting up in a position of perpetual prayer. Toward the center of the central chamber, they would sit in a half-conscious state... Evidently, the low oxygen content gave them visions and acted like a ceremonial drug.

Indeed, the appearance of the small crew must have seemed providential to them... Who else but a divine entity could have produced a means to repair the damaged hyperdrive? So, in all this time, the exiles must have seen Ordin and the others as messengers or servants of that entity... Perhaps they recognized him by the halo that their subconscious minds drew around him.

Regardless of whatever these people thought, Ordin felt anything but godly. For the past innumerable weeks, the pain in his chest had only worsened, aggravated by prolonged exposure to the increasingly poisonous atmosphere.

His diet couldn't have been helping his condition, either.

Ordin reached his destination. The line moved slowly forward, and he reached the two small faucets sticking out of the materials processing plant. One was silver, and dispensed water that was usually clean, the other was iron, and gave out a thick gel that supposedly contained all the nutritional value of any other food and more. The sugar the machines added was the only thing that made the taste bearable. Each day he ate it he felt weaker, as if the substance was stripping the minerals from his body rather than replenishing them.

The pale synthetic glow continued to intensify... Dawn had come.

Something about the corner of the chamber made it more homely to Ziir. It vaguely reminded him of his home in childhood... A small mud-walled house by the side of one of the greater plateaus walling the banded desert of the forgotten world of Kharak. Perhaps he looked up at the two walls here and saw that shack of his birth... Or perhaps it was simply the needs of his equilibrium to establish a reference point for the place.

The lights were slowly rising around him. Stirring to consciousness, he pulled one of the sheets from the crude framework that had functioned as the foundation of his small tent-home and let the light pierce the space. It reflected into his eyes, bouncing off a shiny plate of bronze metal on the wall. He bent down and peered at it, counting the tally... After a time, he picked up one of his old tools and used it to make another scratch.

"That's seven hundred twenty eight standard days and counting..." he said to himself, perpetuating the tradition he had held for all that time since the permanent departure of the *Ir Miilas*. It had, unfortunately for them all, been a departure too abrupt for him to take the necessary supplies off the ship, to fix the ancient hyperdrive for the prison ship. For nearly all the time he'd been here, he'd been working at the limit of his abilities to construct replacement parts from scraps of metal, to jury-rig connections when he lacked the material, even to re-invent the technology where nothing else could be done. He knew the ancient hyperdrive up and down, and yet there were pieces missing from it that he was unable to synthesize.

No matter... Ziir was not the type to lose confidence, even after so much failure. After taking a sip of old water and clearing his throat, he returned to his makeshift laboratory and contemplated new ways to fix the machine. After all, the day had just begun.

A'Kuul's inability to locate a working computer system on the ship had greatly impeded the speed of his calculations. The display on his head was often ineffective for the more intricate calculations of hyperspace geometry, and so he'd been forced to resort to more unconventional means. Since there were no writing tools on the prison ship, let alone paper, A'Kuul had improvised... He had taken to scratching numbers and mathematical symbols into large sheets of thin, flexible metal, which he was able to gather from the casing of damaged systems. This method of working the equations was almost unbearably slow, but it was all he had.

The sheet before him was almost covered over in his computations... When he had reached the limit of space on the "page", he rolled it up and put it with the rest. All his data was now on sheets like that... There was a stack in the corner of the tent containing all his work from the past year, ten sheets of solid mathematical data and all for one fractal algorithm. He sighed, pulled out a fresh sheet, and went back to work, hoping to identify the perfect wavefront... Hopefully, the one that would carry this ship to its elusive destination.

There was still a lot of work ahead of him.

Creta stumbled awake late that day... The last images of another recurring dream stained her eyes. Looking out at the ceiling of the cavernous chamber again, acrophobia set in. She took a long, strained breath of the thickening air and raised her strength enough for movement.

She found herself in the smaller rooms at the forward portions of the prison ship, small rooms with big windows, originally used as navigational posts or quarters for whatever crew had once inhabited this freighter. The darkness here was, somehow, comforting... Her burned retinas could relax for a time. She felt cold here, and empty, such feelings as extra-galactic space had always induced in her. But the emptiness was a rest from the crowded, wall-less houses of the central chamber.

Her joints seemed to flex like rusty metal when she took a seat at the old, lifeless console. She reached out and grasped the nearby object; the tarnished metal cylinder that formed the casing for the eyepiece of the telescope. Wearily, she adjusted the knobs and positioned the lens with her eye. She pulled it down to an angle with the window and the infinite beyond, and directed the thing at the denser regions of her own distant galaxy. When she had it focused, she relaxed and gazed silently down at the comforting orange glow of the core, just as bright as all her memories of it. The thoughts still hung heavy on her mind, that she was truly trapped on the prison ship forever, and would never see the inner rim again, but she let her worries drip into that eternal void from which they came. Her thoughts became still and calm, and the rich star clusters glimmered before her eyes, and for a moment, memory permitted Creta to return home to that distant origin, and the world that was her home.

She could see it, even as she knew she would never be able to return.

VII

It could have been months later, when Creta nearly collapsed from a sudden fit of coughing. She stumbled away from the old fans, into the more pristine airs of the corridors at the front of the ship. She tried to expel the bad air from her lungs, but it seemed to hang there. She took a few deep breaths and walked around the place to intake more oxygen.

Without thinking, she returned to that same navigation room where she had often come to escape the pains of life in the central chamber. A place, as much as it disturbed her, for her to be alone in the dark. But when she entered, she was not alone.

The black silhouette of the commander was just visible as it he eclipsed the dim nebulae of the outer rim. He was absolutely still and gave no indication that he acknowledged her presence. But then he spoke.

"Hello, officer Mirin." his voice came, more calmed than she'd ever heard it. After more than two years in this confined space, it seemed that Ordin had finally grown accustomed to her presence.

She nodded, as if he could hear.

He sighed deeply, looking out. Creta noticed that he was not looking at the galaxy at all, but into the empty dark of intergalactic space. The same emptiness that was so oppressive to Creta. She found herself asking, "Why do you like it out here, commander?"

There was a moment of silence, almost as still as the nonexistence beyond the pane of the window. Ordin's voice came like the first echoes of thunder from a distant storm. The words came from a throat that sounded old, and young. "When I was a child, on Kharak... We lived far from the cities, in a small settlement... My brothers, my sisters, my cousins and I would spend many nights, outside, in the warm air. We would lie, half-sleeping... On our backs, in the sand, staring straight up into the sky."

Ordin's voice stopped for a moment, his mind caught painfully between his past and his present. Creta swallowed hard, seeing his experiences as her own.

The man spoke up again. "And... And the sky was dark. Only a few stars were there to see. The shape of the galaxy was just a distant shadow, back then. It was so... Clear, so deep, so black." He gulped, tearing himself away from those last perfect memories of his family and all those he had known, in that shining past. "But now... On Hiigara, there is no black. The day is bright, the night is bright. The stars are so close, and so hot, they burn my eyes... There's no rest from the light. There's no night for me, there... There is no darkness."

For a moment, Creta touched his agony, he had kept concealed for so long.

"All those nights in the dark, we felt like we were drifting among the stars. Like we could just float up into space. I think that's what made me join the space program... What made me decide to volunteer for the cryotrays. How ironic..."

And so the man returned to the dark from which his dreams had been born. There was a feeling he seemed to radiate, like happiness, the feeling of being home.

"Where did you grow up, officer Mirin? What were the skies like, on Taiidan?" he asked, after a long while.

"I..." she stumbled in speech. "They were... They were..." She wanted desperately to speak, but trailed off and forced herself to leave the room.

For a moment, it must have troubled Ordin. But before he could consider it, he was immersed in the deep inner peace of oblivion. His mind drifted off, resting once more in the quiet calm of the void.

VIII

The crew had been gathered around a small plasma torch in an uninhabited part of the central chamber, one night. It was a colder area, near the center of the place, where no one else liked to be because of the diminished oxygen content of the air. Ordin had needed a place to set up a meeting, and this seemed to be the best place available.

There had really been no need for anything resembling a normal meeting, for there was nothing happening anywhere in their small universe that was worth talking about after so long. But the commander had called it anyway, just to keep his crew together, in hopes of boosting what little morale remained, and checking to make sure they hadn't gone mad in the past six months since he'd seen them.

Creta, at least, found the meeting reassuring. Again, she had a link to the past, to convince her that this strange world was not the only one she'd ever known. In a way, the meeting helped all of them, by giving them something with which to remember the future.

When five minutes had passed and all small-talk had been exhausted, they turned to the one thing that would never run out: speculation. Ziir began this by restating the theory on flat-space and how it could have made time-travel possible.

"Fascinating..." A'Kuul said. His head twitched slightly, and the others knew that he was thinking all the variables out. "I do not know much about hyperspatial mechanics in relation to gravity forces, curved space... I do not believe it has been studied extensively, at least not by Hiigaran engineers."

"We all assumed that flat, empty space would act just the same for hyperspace as anything else. If anything, we assumed it would work better." Ziir recalled his work studying and reverse-engineering hyperspace modules following landfall. He and thousands of other scientists had been the first to make Hiigaran hyperspace drives meet galactic standards of reliability, efficiency, safety and power output.

"I suppose... If the space out here were absolutely "flat", then a hyperspace jump as powerful as the one made by the *Ir Miilas* might potentially cause a... Wormhole of some kind. Maybe... It still doesn't make any mathematical sense. I wouldn't recommend relying on such conjecture."

"Like we're ever going to have a chance..." Paktu said, from the corner of his mouth. Ordin glared at him, and the engineer quieted himself.

Ziir rubbed his chin. "Flat space might be especially susceptible to spatial distortion, but not that much. Really, I doubt it could have caused this."

"Maybe it was that Bentusi drive." Creta said, remembering the singing walls. "That thing was weird."

Ziir smirked, then shrugged.

As the night grew later, colder, and descended into almost pitch black darkness, the meeting died away. Ziir and A'Kuul wandered away to do calculations on one theory or another, the others fell asleep during the later, more mathematical conversations. The air had become thicker, without the fans to carry their breath away.

Even the light from the plasma torch had now died down to a low glow. All that could have been visible to any waking person were the red-lit edges of the four dormant beings as they slept in a circle around the faint orb of light.

Nothing moved for a long time, until a sudden movement shattered the void.

Creta stirred slowly to life. Her vision was cloudy, but she could make out the familiar shape of the Nabaal pilot. The man sat up instantly, as if caught by a seizure. His face, reflecting in the dim crimson glow, was damp with sweat, and twisted into a look of utter horror and rage.

She leaned upward, about to ask him what was wrong, but before she could open her mouth, Niilan had turned his bulging glare directly upon her. His hand shot out like a striking snake and pointed at her. In his eye was the most terrible malice and contempt she had ever seen.

"It was *you*!"

Ordin stirred into partial consciousness. He looked up, questioningly. "What?"

"You brought us here! You sabotaged the drive on the *Ir Miilas*, you brought the ship back in time *on purpose*!"

"What? Why would I do that?" Creta was shaken by his rage, she could feel it like a searing hot wind on her face.

"It's your plot! You brought us back in time, to this prison ship, so you could make sure it never reaches Kharak, so all the refugees die, and it changes the timeline so that the Kushan never build the mothership, and then Hiigara is never retaken! She's a spy! Servant of the empire! *Taiidan*!"

These words that seemed so heated and volatile, flying from the man's mouth like so many weapons, seemed so powerful. But the response that it triggered in the target came with far more force. Quickly, Creta leapt to her feet and looked down at the man, her eyes blazing like ion beams.

"*Fool*! How very little you understand!"

The sound of her voice was so loud that it froze the fire in the man's eyes. All had fallen silent. Creta's fury exploded again, seeming to exert a real force.

"I'm as *Hiigaran* as you. I've got *seven generations* of family going back on your *precious homeworld*! I lived there all my life, and it was my home, until you came there with your *glorious* war of liberation and took it all away from me, forever. I hated the old empire, maybe as much as you... And now you come to me and accuse me of personally burning Kharak, *just because I am a Taiidan*!"

Niilan was shaken, but only temporarily. Behind his startled face, his madness remained constant. He stepped backward and vanished into the darkness, with that look of hatred still in his eyes. His movements were slow, as if to say that he'd be back.

Creta sank down onto the rag she had been sleeping under, feeling light-headed.

Ordin looked at her from time to time, hesitantly, unable to find his voice. He came close to speech, but stopped, looked back, put his head back down and simply stared into the black ceiling. Creta heard him sigh, and then all was quiet.

The plasma torch died into nothingness.

IX

Dhir's son was the boy they had first seen in the outer corridors, and he was a talented artist. He took pieces of old, corroded metal panels and ground them into a fine dust, adding small amounts of water or even food paste, to make a remarkably effective paint. Different metals made different colors for him, and he made canvas out of unused blankets or, more often, the walls near his tent.

It was ideal for anyone here to have a hobby of some kind, for there was not really any work for anyone to do but what little maintenance they knew how to perform. If it were not for the strong ability of the exiles to meditate, most of them would be bored into insanity.

The boy's name was Jalni, he was the only person there who bothered to express happiness in a waking state. He would have been a natural leader, had there been a direction in which to lead anyone. In the past year, Ordin had gotten to know the boy fairly well. Partly, Ordin believed, because Jalni reminded him of his own son, yet another lost in the fabled burning. Beyond his tortured memories, Ordin thought that Jalni was a genuine friend, something that was rare in his life, even in his own millennium.

That day, the commander came to Jalni's wall in the synthetic afternoon. When he got there, the boy was on his ladder against the wall, continuing work on the huge mural that he'd been working on for many months. It was a story, chronicling the past and future of the Kushan people in a gigantic picture. The art was abstract, but when Ordin looked at it, all his experiences unrolled and became clear, as if he could see that it was okay after all, that everything was exactly as it should have been. It was an image that, somehow, made no sense in itself, and yet gave meaning to the entire world around it.

"I've almost finished the first part!" Jalni said, his voice bright. His accent that had once been so alien, was now as clear as any Hiigaran voice, to Ordin.

"It is a long story."

"Older than you and me, traveler." It was a word most of the Hiigarans called him by, though he knew not, exactly, why. Jalni smiled and continued his work on a bright circle, a moon or planet, perhaps.

There was a shape in the completed portions of the mural that looked stunningly similar to the shape of the Kushan mothership, and a blue and green circle that was remarkably reminiscent of Hiigara, nearby. Any resemblance as strong as this was incredible, considering that Ordin had specifically instructed his crew not to tell any of the Hiigarans about the future of their people. Either someone had gone and given very vibrant descriptions in direct violation of his orders, or...

"What inspires you, Jalni? Where do you see these things?"

The boy stopped and turned around. "We all see them, in the trance."

Ordin was fascinated by this, but asked no more questions. He sat back on a mat and looked up at the wall as the boy continued the work.

The power had gone out. Ziir watched all his so carefully constructed mechanisms fold up and deactivate like flowers growing in reverse. Before he could do anything, the entire core

had shut off. The tubes went limp in his hands, and all his work for the past week was undone before his eyes.

His anger had torn a few panels off the walls. When it had passed, he was left filled with utter resentment and despair. He had felt so close to a working hyperdrive, and now he knew all too well that he lacked the resources to fulfill the dream.

He stumbled down the ramps, back into the harsh glare of the central chamber. His face dripped with sweat, his pulsing blood burned his veins... He needed desperately to remove the tension that was filling him now. So he walked around the place, down all the streets, around all the walls, passing his tent more than once. At some point, he became claustrophobic and tired of having walls nearby. So he turned, and began walking toward the center of the chamber. There would be less oxygen there, so he promised himself that if he found the center, he would leave within ten minutes.

And soon he reached the center, and it was nice to be there. It was empty, more than anywhere else on the ship... No blankets, no tents, not even the crowds of people... Just the smooth, blank metal beneath his bare feet, and the ceiling so far above, and the walls, obscured by haze, in the distance. He took a long, deep breath, and wheezed it back out. No, there was not much oxygen here. Ziir savored the view.

But then he noticed that he was not alone. There were a few people nearby, in a small circle... They were covered in cloth that seemed to blend seamlessly with the paneling beneath. The people were still, in a trance-state, it seemed.

Ziir approached them, as quietly as he could. He came very close... The air was still cold from the night, and his breath made clouds in front of him. Then he noticed that the people in the circle were not breathing... he watched them for more than thirty seconds and saw no sign of exhale from a single one of them. At first he thought they were dead, but he could hear something, like a quiet, sustained humming from them. And somehow, he could feel that they were alive, he could feel a heat rising from them. Still, it seemed miraculous that anyone could survive out here for long, with so little breathable air.

And their presence was calming to him, as if their trance was expanding beyond them, into his own mind. He watched them for a moment.

A voice startled him. He turned around to see an old man who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. "Hello, traveler. What brings you here?"

Ziir swallowed. "N-nothing. I'm just..." he sighed. "Trying to relax, I guess. Life has... Just seemed to pointless, recently." his mouth said, not entirely with his permission.

The man took a breath of the stale air, as if it was normal. His ancient voice came, "Life is many things. I do not believe that 'pointless' is one of them. Especially for you."

The words were comforting.

"Come, over here, sit down, and I will see if I can teach you to relax."

Ziir nodded and began walking, but stopped abruptly when the old man did not. Instead, the man leapt into the air and flew through it, ever so slowly, his feet almost two meters above the floor. He came down and landed, ten meters from where he started, not at all shaken by the impact. He turned around and looked at Ziir, wondering why he hadn't followed.

"What was that?"

The man smiled, showing his missing teeth. He seemed to laugh, slightly, or as much as his withered lungs would permit him. "I'm sorry, I had thought you knew." He smiled again. "That is a weakness in the artificial gravity field, I think."

"You think." Ziir croaked. He tried it... He jumped as hard as he could into the air, but his movement was unremarkable. He came back down, having moved no more than a normal distance upwards, and landed with a normal thud. He looked, confused, back at the old man.

"Well, try again. This time, think about it. Don't just expect to fly forward... Try closing your eyes and imagining it happening."

Ziir was skeptical, but tried it. He shut his eyes and jumped forward. He didn't feel anything unusual, but when he opened his eyes, he was flying through the air, gliding slowly down toward the metal ground. He shrieked and landed on his back, with a painful bump. "What in Sajuuk's name was that?"

The man shrugged, simply. "I don't really know. The mind makes it work... Some people have found that they can make things happen when they are here. Like that jump, for example. A few can fly around fairly easily, for short distances, at least."

"*The mind makes it work...* That's a new twist..." he tried it again, and was able to 'think' himself a fair height off the ground. When he reached the peak he became frightened of falling and sank back down... He was puzzled, but decided not to try again for a while, or until his bruises had gone. "There must be a scientific basis for that."

The man smiled slightly. "Probably. Come, sit." He motioned for a small red mat.

Ziir sat down and folded his legs. The man sat facing him, a meter away. His ancient voice moved slowly. "Close your eyes, clear your mind of thought. Breathe gradually."

He did it, and felt his tension begin to subdue itself.

"Let your mind expand... Let yourself float away, away from your head, away from this place... away from this ship... Into space. Fill the void with your mind."

Ziir's thoughts came into clarity... All his awareness of his body and his situation seemed to have left him. He became the void... He was nothing and everything, everywhere and nowhere. It was indeed relaxing. For once in two years, he was completely unconcerned with the prison ship and the fact that he was trapped there.

No wonder, he thought, all the exiles preferred to stay in this trance.

He existed, filling the void in such a way, for a long time. He was happy here, despite all that he knew had happened to him. He'd lost so much in the burning of Kharak, he'd been forced to work off-world for the past ten years just to keep enough money to feed himself, he'd been away from his family for all that time and then he'd become lost in the past with little or no hope of ever returning. Yet he was content with things.

Suddenly, from the void, an image filled his senses... A planet. Sadly, it took him a moment to recognize it as Hiigara. He realized how long he'd been away from it, how much he missed it in life through all his work as an engineer. He'd lived and worked in distant spaceports throughout the galaxy, and the closest he could remember being to the blue planet was on the other side of the transport ship's viewport, the day he'd left. In fact, he his conscious mind had utterly forgotten about Hiigara in all his time on the prison ship.

Now he remembered, and only now did he realize how much he wanted to be home again.

He opened his eyes and saw the withered face of the ancient man staring back at him. The face smiled simply, seeming to have caught a glimpse of the vision. Ziir wondered whether he had ever opened his eyes when the man said, quietly, "Do not worry, Traveler. It is not so far off, anymore."

Ziir looked, questioningly, at the face. He closed his eyes and rubbed them. When he opened them again, it was dark in the cavern, and the man was gone.

A'Kuul came walking toward Ordin's tent a day later. Ziir and the others were there too, even the Nabaal pilot was hovering nearby. They had made it an increasingly popular tradition to have regular meetings at the commander's house. Niilan only came because he thought the others were plotting against him.

A'Kuul seemed happy somehow, which was remarkable considering how little emotion of any kind the man had ever displayed in all the time they'd known him. They knew at once that he had made progress of some kind. He had one of his metal number sheets rolled up under his left arm.

"What is it?" Creta asked, wondering what marvelous thing could possibly have made A'Kuul smile.

"I have just completed the fractal computation I've been working on for the past month, and I have discovered something very interesting."

He took a seat on an old crate that functioned as their bench. The crew listened like expectant children. "I have been thinking a lot about the relation between hyperspatial physics, and warps in time such as the one we appear to have encountered. Although I have not been able to find any way for us to control a hyperspace jump to return us to our own present, I have discovered an interesting possibility." He laid out the sheet, displaying a schematic of some kind, too complex for them to interpret.

"Yes, yes, what is it?"

"The beacon we set up on the ship, to act as a locator, nine hundred eleven days ago... It might be possible to reconfigure it to transmit messages."

Ordin thought for a moment. "What good will it do us to send messages?"

"No, not just normal transmissions... I mean, it may be possible to send messages back through time. I could calculate them within a very short radius of time, and allow us to send a transmission to the Ir Miilas *before* it docked with this ship."

"What good will that do us?" Creta asked, still not understanding the point of it.

A'Kuul struggled to find the words. Evidently, he was annoyed at their inability to comprehend.

Ziir sighed loudly and explained it for him. But his voice was dark and cold. "He is suggesting that we might send a message, warning ourselves not to dock. We would effectively erase this timeline... We would have never left our own century. We'd just finish the galactic map and return home, most likely."

Creta struggled in speech. "But... That's terrible! The hyperdrive here will never be fixed, all these people will be stuck out here. They'll never reach Kharak, if we do that!"

An evil voice came from behind her shoulder. "And of course, *you* would be very worried about *that*." It was Niilan... with the same hatred as before.

Creta scowled as hard as she could, and stood up. Before she could say anything, he interrupted her.

"Commander, I suggest we do it." he said, his voice strangely triumphant.

"What? Why?"

"It's all part of her plan, you see. She only came here to sabotage the prison ship's drive. If we never docked, she'd never have a chance to come aboard and do her mission!"

The paradoxes were making Ziir's head hurt.

"Commander, trust me! Send the message, and stop this madness, *and save our people from this Taiidan agent!*"

Creta closed her fist, hard.

"You're paranoid, Nabaal." Ordin said. "Look, it's understandable... The thick air is getting to all of us. Just go, get some res---"

"No!" Niilan shouted, suddenly, at the top of his lungs. "Ziir, you are of my Kiith. Surely you must understand! Come with me, and help me build the transmitter."

Ziir took a step back. "You're mad."

Niilan seemed to relax, for a moment. His head dropped down a little, his eyes closed, he gave the illusion of being calm. Just when everyone thought he was still, his hand shot into his pocket and returned, just as quickly, holding the cold, black shape of a pulse gun. He radiated an insane glare at Ordin, the barrel extending toward the commander. His sweaty finger seemed to be pressing on the trigger with a force so that the slightest twitch would fire the weapon. "She's gotten to you."

Everyone froze. Ziir held himself absolutely still, as if the man's finger was a frightened animal that would lash out at the slightest vibration. Ordin looked into the eyes of the madman, giving no impression that he was frightened. "Don't do this, Nabaal."

"Too late!" The man gave a battle cry and fired shots at the commander's chest. Luckily, Creta had reacted with adrenaline-infused reflexes, and had been able to grab Niilan's arm at the perfect moment.

Two shimmering balls of plasma whizzed by Ordin's left ear, searing a few hairs but doing no more damage.

After some struggle, Creta was able to pry the weapon from Niilan's damp fingers. He was startled at first, but quickly recovered. He dashed forward, jumped between Ordin and Ziir, grabbed A'Kuul's schematics, and ran as fast as his legs would carry him away from the tent, vanishing somewhere beyond the makeshift towns of cloth.

The commander removed the gun's power cartridge and crushed it under his foot. "I *thought* I ordered you all not to bring any weapons aboard."

"*We* used to think *you* were crazy."

The commander smirked. "We have to find him."

XI

No one had seen Niilan for ten days, which meant he was either heavily disguised, dead, or hiding somewhere deep within the ship, far down in the lifeless corridors beneath the man chamber, where all Ordin's searching could not locate him. The crew was becoming increasingly worried about the possibility that Niilan had somehow managed to correctly interpret the schematics and build the transmitter.

For some time, they had all been fairly certain that the madman was dead, simply because someone had been guarding all the food faucets for more than a week, and still no one had seen him. Unless he had somehow been able to hoard food, there was little hope for him.

No one wanted to look for the body, so the man was almost forgotten for a day.

One morning, however, they realized the worst. One of the food faucets had stopped working, along with the adjacent water pump. This was technically improbable, since they came from different systems. Quickly, Ordin made the inference, that the Nabaal pilot was still roaming the corridors beneath his feet, and was now tapping into the pipes to keep himself alive.

"If we can find the source of these pipes, we might be able to find him more easily." Ziir said, removing a plate from the wall. Behind the panel, two ancient, badly rusted tubes descended into the darkness. A low sound emanated from beyond... The rhythmic pounding of the processing systems, the gas exchangers, the other miscellaneous environmental regulators.

Ordin sighed and hesitated before speaking, not liking the idea of descent into those passages. "We'll have to go down and get him. For his own sake, if not ours."

And so he ordered A'Kuul and the engineer to stay behind and guard the exits, and made preparations for Ziir, Creta and himself to begin another search. When they had gathered three plasma torches and a few other supplies, they went to the descending ramps on the far side of the cavernous chamber. Only a small hatch allowed entry to the depths... Before the Niilan's hand, the lock here hadn't seen any activity in a hundred years.

Ordin pulled on the bar, but the door held. He tried again, leaning hard away from it. But it held shut. "It's jammed."

When nothing else seemed to work, Ziir took a huge metal bar and slammed it against the door until the lock had broken. When it opened, they saw the reason for the difficulty: a number of support beams had been removed from the walls and jammed into place to hold the hatch shut. One of the beams was still there, blocking most of the opening and leaving only a small crawlspace for anyone to fit through.

Ordin shrugged and bent down, forcing himself through the tiny opening. It took a great deal of effort, but he made it through. Ziir and Creta followed, and when all of them had dusted themselves off, Ordin activated his plasma torch.

The place was all too much like a catacomb or a tomb. All the machinery for the ship grew right out of the walls, and most of it had decayed beyond recognition. Some of the cables had melted under the heat of their own activity... Some of the boxes and conduits looked like parts to a conventional freezer system. Obviously, none of this equipment had ever been designed to maintain a breathable, heated, humid atmosphere for a hundred years. Some parts hadn't even been welded in, during construction.

"Dear Sajuuk... This whole place is just thrown together."

Ordin nodded, sourly. He noticed that the structure of the place was based on a simple grid-work of low, narrow corridors about ten meters long. There were a thousand places to hide in this place... It would be no small feat to locate and capture the madman.

"There's a problem, commander..." Ziir inspected his plasma torch. "Look."

Ordin swore under his breath. "You're right. We can't use these. They light up the whole place. He'll see us coming."

Each of them switched their torches off. They could still see, but barely... There was a dim ambient light in this place, from old flood lights in the walls.

Ordin made a subtle, barely audible hiss and motioned for Ziir to follow him down the corridor. When they reached the intersection, they could see for what seemed like kilometers into the space. Possibly, this grid ran a good part of the ship's spine.

Ziir identified a conduit and traced it to part of the processing station. They found their faucet pipes and followed them a few "blocks" until Ziir abruptly froze. "You hear that?" He whispered. There was an odd sound, like a bizarre slurping noise. Instantly, he identified it as the sound of Niilan eating his food goo. It was coming from around the intersection.

"Get ready... Let's go in quietly." Ordin picked up a stray pipe, preparing to defend himself from his madman's attacks. They crawled slowly forward and stopped at the corner. Ordin took a deep breath, and jumped forward.

But there was no one there. They had indeed found the pipe, though. Two tubes running up the wall of the corridor were cracked open. The water pipe unleashed only a small trickle, but the other pipe was split wide open, releasing an endless torrent of food gel that had piled up almost halfway to the ceiling.

Ziir grimaced and turned a knob to stop the flow. Niilan was long gone from the scene... His oily footprints were visible, trailing off into the labyrinth.

Ordin scratched his head. "We'll never find him like this. Split up." He directed Creta to go to what they decided would be called "South". Ordin would go "North" and Ziir would go "East". To avoid getting lost, they were instructed to deviate from assigned direction only to pursue Niilan. If they did see him, they would yell out a high pitched noise to attract the others. It was like some kind of twisted child's game. And it would take a long time to win.

Ziir gradually lost sight of the others as he moved deeper into the maze. He would crawl as carefully and silently forward as possible, and look in both directions at each intersection, looking behind occasionally. The method seemed sound, but Ziir had traveled most of the distance to the far wall and was yet to see or hear anything at all. He moved on, still, awaiting the moving image of a man's shadow, or a trace of stray food gel, or, more likely, the sound of someone else calling him to join the hunt. *Yes*, he thought, amazed--it was a hunt.

There was one point, he thought he heard something. A low, distant squeal. It could have been, he thought in horror, Creta's shouting from the other side of the maze. He turned his head from side to side, hoping to identify the source of the noise.

Everything fell into eerie silence. His pulse raced... He felt like the prey, now. How hard, he wondered, would it be for the madman to hunt them down and systematically eliminate them? Too easy.

The sound came up again, and this time it seemed that it was coming from directly in front of him. He stared forward, expecting something to happen, but nothing moved. The sound vanished again. He hesitated, looked over his shoulder, and crawled slowly forward to the next intersection.

A thick copper pipe fell out of the darkness and hit him hard on the back of his neck. The pain burned his nerves, but nothing felt broken. He fell onto his stomach with a painful thud and managed to turn himself over. He saw the edge of the copper pipe staring down at him like some colossal eye, and a dirty hand holding it.

The madman's face was still in the darkness, but the sound of his breathing was easy to recognize. So was his voice as he whispered, "Come to kill me?"

Ziir winced from the pain and made sure to keep silent.

The madman's face radiated an evil grin. "It's okay. You're too late."

"What does that mean?" Ziir croaked.

The man didn't move or speak for a while. His eyes traced the area around him, his nostrils seemed to expand and contract. "Get up." The copper pipe shook slightly, stressing its existence. "Follow me. Make any wrong move, and you get my pipe with real force this time!"

Ziir did as commanded, being as calm about the situation as possible. He was led a long ways in a meandering course through the maze, arriving in an expanded room in the corridors, with only two exits. It was an ideal place for a lair.

When Ziir had been sufficiently thrown into the corner, the madman sat back momentarily on the opposite side of the room. He took a slow sip from a bowl of water.

Just then, a small blinking light caught Ziir's eye. He turned and saw the familiar pill-shaped beacon sitting innocently at the other side of the room, but with several sections of the casing removed. Several added components were crudely fixed to its structure... Two large metal cylinders extended from the sides of the device. The control pad was just as before, its green and blue switches were blinking in succession, indicating that it was ready to begin transmitting.

"By Sajuuk, he did it..." Ziir said aloud, too stunned to hold back his words. Sure enough, A'Kuul's schematics were neatly rolled up in the corner, with a number of fine tools next to it. The transmitter had been completed... It was awaiting activation. He became aware of how very vulnerable he was. With a push of that glowing green button, this entire reality would disappear.

"That's right, I did." He walked over, pipe in hand, and picked up the beacon. He held it like a child in his arms, for a moment.

"Don't do it, Niilan. Please, don't do it." Ziir would have tried his luck in a strong lunge, but the copper pole was pointing straight at him. All he could do was sit and pray for some kind of divine intervention.

"Why are you worried? You can go home, now. It will be as if you never got stuck here." Niilan's voice was suddenly calmed. If it weren't for short-term memory, Ziir wouldn't even have known that the man was dangerous.

"I *won't* go home." Ziir knew, sadly. Having never come aboard the prison ship, he never would have gone into the trance, never would have had that moment of vibrant realization that he wanted to return to Hiigara. He gulped, suddenly hit by an image of himself, working again on a space scaffold somewhere, knowing that there was something missing from his life but

never being able to know exactly *what*. That was his alternate present, unless he did something to stop it.

The madman disregarded the words. "Cheers!" he said, happily. His finger came down on the switch, and the transmitter hummed to life.

There was a flash of strange light, filling the room.

Reluctantly, the commander took his seat and focused himself. "What is it? What's happening?"

Ziir answered. "Our sensors have found something nearby us... Something very large. A ship, almost mothership class."

Everyone had frozen in place. Disturbed, Ordin stood up. "Out *here*?"

"It's just a faint echo... The ship, if it's here, must be within six thousand kilometers of us. I'm not reading any power signatures... It took our advanced sensors just to know it's here. It could be a derelict..."

"We should approach with caution." A'Kuul spoke up. "I have read of derelict ships... One such vessel was found during the original homeworld war. It was quite dangerous to nearby spacecraft. However, even if it is dangerous, the vessel should be investigated... It might provide an invaluable technological insight."

Ordin nodded. "Can we learn more about it from here?"

Ziir stopped mid-sentence. "Wait... I'm reading a power spike." He winced and re-read the data on his console three times. "Commander, I'm getting some kind of beacon signal coming in. A transmission..."

"Where's it coming from?"

Ziir shook his head. "I don't know! It's not like any signal I've seen... It doesn't seem to have any identifiable source. I just can't localize it."

Ordin rubbed his eyes. "Can you tell what it says?"

The engineer looked over the information. "Yes... It's just a message, it seems, coded in standard Hiigaran binary. It's still coming in, but I can read it... It says: "Warning, do not d---"

"What? Do not d-what?"

"I... I don't know. It just stops." Ziir shrugged.

Ordin was distraught by this. Certainly, in approaching any unknown and potentially dangerous vessel, any warning he got would be appreciated.

"That's all. It just stopped."

The commander felt something in his stomach. He didn't like this, but there was nothing to be done. "It must have been... Some lost, misdirected transmission. Disregard it. Let's point the scopes at that derelict you found."

Ordin's boot hit the beacon hard. It flew across the room, breaking into pieces against the far wall. The man had appeared, just at the moment of activation.

Niilan had foolishly dropped his pole. It took half a moment for Ziir and the commander to grab his arms and pull him to the ground. He put up little fight... He was, in reality, very weak from his time down in the catacombs.

"Thank Sajuuk! I thought the beacon had sent the transmission!"

Ordin shrugged. "We're still here, I guess it didn't work."

Ziir smiled. Now that the madman was subdued, the intercom was safe. "Creta, do you copy?"

"Y-yes... I'm up in the main chamber. Sorry, but I just couldn't see in there. Too dark."

"It's okay. We've got him. We're coming back up now, try and find a good place for a temporary jail."

"Uh... I don't think that will be necessary. You might want to hurry..."

"What? What do you--"

"Ir Miilas just appeared at the airlock."

XII

"For a moment, I thought we'd never find you! We went back to the council and told them what had happened... We have another hyperspatial physicist here to help us out with the calculations. We just needed a signal to lock onto so we could find the ship... Don't ask why. (It's just more hyper-mechanical theory.) Thank Sajuuk, you managed to send a signal..." The bright voice of the acting commander was amazing to hear after so long, but it was somehow unnerving. The tech talked like he was at a party.

"It's a little more complicated than that..." Ordin croaked into the intercom. Somehow, the return of the Ir Miilas was only making him feel uneasy.

Ziir's voice came on as the old crew made its way back up to the forgotten airlocks. "We need some supplies, we're going to fix the prison ship's hyperdrive."

"Yes, of course," the tech squealed with joy. "We have a team on its way now. We have a whole new replacement core. Should be fixed within the hour."

It was all too much to absorb at one time. Creta, Ordin and Ziir, with Niilan in their grip, had just reached the airlock where the bright, happy tech was waiting. When he saw them, however, his smile melted away. "*What happened?*"

Ordin looked over his rag-covered shoulder, dusted himself off, wiped the dirt off his face, looking for some egregious flaw in himself. It never occurred to either of them, that time had not passed equally on both sides. For the tech, it had only been ten hours. For the commander, it had been almost three years.

The commander walked through the lock for the first time in an eternity. The cabin of the ship was like a dream. He'd seen it several times in his nights on the prison ship, but this was the first time that it had been *real*. He took a seat in the smooth, familiar padding of the chair and looked forward at the main viewer. He felt, somehow, like he wasn't supposed to be there.

Creta returned to her station and looked over the shiny controls. She remembered them from those three years ago, and her memory changed her view. To be aboard this ship was like a jolt to her subconscious mind, forcing her to realize that her time on the ancient prison ship was over. She really was going home.

Or, she was going toward it. She swallowed and frowned slightly.

Ziir was smiling. He closed his eyes and filled his lungs with the air. It tasted sweet. His home was only a few hours away, now. His real home. He knew then that he would never work in space again. The moment he set foot on Hiigara, he would lose the ability to tear himself away from it. He would take a job on the homeworld... No matter how little it paid, he promised himself that he would find a way to make a living, if only to bring peace to the yearning within him.

He looked down at the copilot again, and saw her frown. "What is it, officer Mirin?"

"I..." she couldn't at first find any words to answer him. "I want to go home."

"Hiigara," Ziir thought for a moment. "We will go there together."

"No... I..." she rubbed her head. "I can't go back. How will I be accepted there? How will your people greet a *Taiidan*?"

Ziir looked out into the void for a moment, taking in the nothingness. "They won't. But is acceptance what you really want?"

Creta thought.

The new hyperdrive core for the prison ship was successfully installed. The small team of engineers came to the top of the ramp in the central chamber, Ziir leading them.

When he reached the ground floor of the cavern, a small crowd of exiles had assembled. A few cheered in the background, but the old man who stood at the front of the crowd said nothing. He was completely motionless but for the grin that formed on his wrinkled face.

"The drive is repaired. The coordinates of your planet Kharak are locked in and ready... I wish you and your people luck."

The old man nodded.

Suddenly Ziir remembered. "Oh, yes... I must give you something... Something for the future." He had decided earlier that he was going to do something to help the Kushan people through the chaos that he remembered would come to them. But he had not decided what.

The intercom buzzed. A'Kuul's monotone came through the speaker. "We have to leave in about six minutes or our temporal coordinates will be lost." Apparently, he had already learned the basics of calculated time travel.

"Okay, I'm coming.." Ziir stumbled, trying to think of something. One idea came to him, and he took it. He rushed off to one of the tents and came back to the old man with his arms full of A'Kuul's old rolled-up sheets of metal. He handed them to Dhir.

"What are they?" the elder asked, opening one and looking over all the equations.

"They are... I suppose you could call them scrolls. They contain all the key mathematical formulas for a hyperspace wavefront."

The look of confusion that came to Dhir's face was not unexpected.

Ziir restated his words. "One day, they will tell you... How to reach the stars."

Dhir smiled. "How strange... We shall call them the *Star Metal Scrolls*. We'll keep them safe for the day you speak of. I thank you, Ziir Nabaal."

It was not until he was ascending the ramp again that Ziir realized what he had just done.

Ordin, in the final minute before departure, found himself sitting under the great mural again. Part of him was screaming to him to return to the ship before he became trapped in the past for good, but somehow those thoughts sank below the rest. He found his conscious mind empty but for the image before his eyes. Even as he knew that he would have only one chance to leave, he was completely relaxed as he watched that chance float by and vanish into the void.

"Ordin! Get back here! We have to jump in forty seconds!"

"I don't think I'm coming."

The voice on the other end was swearing loudly and angrily. "You can make it if you run! Come on!"

"You don't understand. I've chosen to stay aboard the prison ship. I..." He stopped. The words had frozen in his mouth... A cold tear dripped down his face. "I'm going home."

"Commander, the rift is sealing. If we go, we will *never* be able to come back..."

"Please, go now. This is my own choice."

"Commander!" The voice yelled.

The tech was shouting into the intercom at the top of his lungs as the timer on the console approached twenty seconds. He set the transmitter down and turned to the crew. His face was red, his veins were bulging from his neck. "We're going to stay... We'll have to get him back aboard and figure out a way to get back without the rift--"

"Sir, I don't..."

"Forget it. Launch." Creta said, calmly.

The tech looked like he was about to explode. He looked back and forth between her and the prison ship that was now growing smaller outside the window. His mouth moved but never formed a complete word.

Creta put a hand on the Tech's shoulder... Somehow, all his paralyzed confusion seemed to drip away like melting ice, from the touch of the hand.

The Tech's head dropped.

"Let him go."

The cabin was remarkably silent for a moment. When the timer reached the critical moment, the crew sat down and strapped in.

"Activate the drive." the tech said, sourly.

The *Ir Miilas* was engulfed in the bright yellow waves of energy, pulled across the ages by the soft, strong hand of the Bentusi power core.

The ship materialized in the void, in the time of its origin. It appeared from a burst of bright blue, tearing across the emptiness in the space outside the galaxy.

The prison ship had gone. The space was totally empty now... The void was interrupted only by the *Ir Miilas* and the rounded, familiar outlines of the three Bentusi stations hovering nearby. The trade ships moved slowly, like fish through the depths of an ocean, toward the small vessel.

"*We feel equilibrium. Your movement was successful.*" came the deep voice of the massive vessel.

"Yes," Creta answered.

The reply was dark, serious. "*You will tell no one of what has happened here. Your hyperspace technicians must, regretfully, report to us to have all memory of what they have learned erased. No one may be allowed to retain information of temporal hyperspace dynamics. We apologize.*"

This made Creta uneasy. "Doesn't the council know about this?" she asked the tech who sat, looking out in awe at the great machines.

"No... Just them."

Ziir picked up the comm. "You believe that we, the *bound*, are not yet responsible enough to be allowed time travel?" There was a slight hint of contempt in his voice, but it was mostly due to the fact that he was not eager to have his memories altered.

The Bentusi hesitated. "*Nor are we.*"

He gulped... It sounded as if the Bentusi had learned this lesson the hard way.

Ir Miilas flew silently through the endless night, guided by the automated docking program. It came in and set down in the station's bay.

The three stations entered hyperspace, and the void returned to itself, silent and still.

Epilogue

Creta Mirin, a Taiidan republican, a former freighter pilot for the old empire, found a seat on the first available transport, to the world of her birth. The flight was three hours, but seemed only a short moment, a drop of water in a sea.

The transport landed in New Tiir.

As she stepped off, there were glares and whispers among the crowds. There might have been a thousand eyes focused on her, but she saw none of them. She looked only into the clear blue sky, the lush forests and rolling hills, the turbulent waves of the ocean as the wind roared over the coasts.

She picked up a hovercar on the edge of town and drove it down one of the old roads. She hadn't seen the place in twenty years, but somehow she knew that everything was exactly as it had been before.

At the end of a long, dirt path, she reached her old home, far from the cities, hidden high in the forests of the mountains. The building was just as it had been the day she'd left it... the lights were off, the rooms were empty.

She removed the old metal key from her pocket and put it in the slot.

Ziir Nabaal had never seen his own house for more than an hour, but he remembered where it was and was able to find it.

It was a beautiful place; there was no shortage of housing on Hiigara. It was close to the city, on a high cliff overlooking the beach. The stone walls shone like silver in the light of day... The tree in the huge yard was dropping a few leaves into the ocean below... A small smoke rose from the metal chimney. He walked slowly down the tiled marble path and approached the iron door.

It swung open as if pulled by the wind... Just beyond the barrier, Ziir's wife and two children appeared.

No word was spoken.

The burning sun sent harsh rays down against the world.

A fast, hot wind was sweeping over the dunes, laying more sand into the cracks and seams in the metal walls of the wreck. An insect flew in from the horizon and took shelter in the cool shadow of the man named Ordin. The man looked out over the vast nothingness, reflecting on his memories of the future, and of the past.

Behind him, the exiles huddled under the old panels, unused to the heat. This world was alien to them now, but in time it would become their home.

Somewhere on the fringes of the debris field, Ordin could see one last frozen computer console. It displayed a rough map of the trajectory and the coordinates of this planet Kharak. Bathed in its flickering light, he saw a human figure holding a chisel and a piece of old, black stone.

The journey had only begun.

In time, the sun sank beneath the distant mountains of sand. For a few minutes, the horizon was on fire with the brilliance refracting through it... It danced with more color than any of the exiles or their parents had ever seen. They all gathered to watch it, pray to it, see it and think back on everything.

Soon the sun had vanished completely, and the sky descended into total darkness. Only a handful of stars appeared to defy the uninterrupted void, but those few stars made the sky more beautiful than any image Ordin's eyes had touched in two decades of his life.

He lay awake all night, watching the tiny points of light move across the empty sky, and he cried for each one of them. It was a feeling of relief beyond comprehension or description or understanding... It was the feeling of being home.

Whether it had been his own longing to find his way here that had parted the centuries, or just the immutable physical principals of the void, he realized that this place where he now found himself was what he had wanted all along. For the first time since his own exile from this world, he was at peace.

"This is only the beginning of the story." Jalni said, walking up the dune from the circle of small fires the people had set up.

Ordin made no answer, for he was roaming freely across the cosmos once again, like a bird freed from a cage.

Below him, the deserts stretched out, as vast as the sky above.

The Beginning