



Dark Discovery

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Chapter 1

Up, down, bank right, watch for that asteroid, down, little more. The Triikor-class interceptor moved along at cruise speed, followed by another, flying through the "channel" provided by a thin belt of asteroids, almost reminiscent of the Turanic Raider asteroid belt race. Pirates that were pilots. Heh.

Wing Commander Qu'jet was flying in the first fighter, painted in the yellow and red of the Taiidan imperialists; the vibrant fresh colors indicated this was a well-cared for and maintained craft. Several little icons of fighters were under the cockpit.

Two Taiidan Republican Defenders; and four Kushan Blade Interceptors. Below that were several other craft of various makes and types...Ferrn Aggregate Attackers, and other alien fighters...he was not as proud as others would be of his various kills.

Was pride a sin?

To him it was...he tried to not show off his kills, knowing that each kill was not a game. It was earned. Usually he would let the pilot eject and be rescued...professional courtesy. He'd been on the receiving end of being shot out of the sky, having once executed a death dive against Taiidan republican defenders in a heavy corvette...only barely surviving with a vacuum breach, but knocking out a pair of defenders in the process.

'jet shrugged indifferently in the cockpit.

This was his home. He felt at ease in space, in his interceptor, a odd trait, considering that you could die in less then a second, and that only a ½-inch or so of thin metal protected him from the sucking vacuum of space.

Like cold tendrils the vacuum pulled at your skin, chilling it cold, freezing you down to your bone, as one vainly struggled to break away from the coldness of space. Like an extremely strong invisible force it'd pull at you until it plucked you out.

He'd had the semi unlucky privilege of serving in a 2 seater, a Heavy Corvette.

That'd happened to the rear gunner, against 5 Taiidan republic defenders. After nearly getting killed, he'd been pounced by Kushans...2 multigun corvettes, and one interceptor, barely making it back to the carrier before it hyper-ed out.

Kushans...He remembered the fight against the Kushans, those worthless scum. But they were deadly enough. The propaganda made them out as inferior; to him they were good pilots. To him they were prey. They gave him a type of joy when facing them in battle. They'd won though. That was the thing. Captured Kushans didn't look all that different, and weren't all that different. The one's he'd met weren't all that bad...just that they had extremely tanned skin...Kharak the desert world.

The world we burned. The world I helped burn.

I've seen everything, he mused...I saw Kharak. I destroyed the scaffold. I helped murder nearly 300 million. And they got their vengeance. The gods did it. They took my home world and gave it to them.

He disposed of his thoughts...Why! He'd been daydreaming /too/ much now. This was a volunteer mission, this raid. Testing Hiigaras defenses, seeing what new cards they had. He'd volunteered, just for old times sakes. He hated watching the Kushans take over like they were gods, and burning their freight ships wasn't fun. It was too easy. He wanted the thrill of the hunt.

Again he was dreaming...a red glare from his dashboard indicator. Enemy unit! Yes!

What kind of vessel...Kushan, Ion Cannon Frigate. Range: 500 meters.

He looked to the recorder mounted on his vessel, on the side, pressing the detach button, sending it twirling away into space, pressing the transmit button. All the information on Hiigaras defenses that he could acquire, on its way to TIF (Taiidan Imperial Forces, ((TIF acronym created previously by "Ben Tusi"))).

The Taiidan carrier Immolator pounced from hyperspace.

A cruise missile, a relic from the wars of ages past, loaded with explosives slammed into the Ion Frigate. He jumped slightly out of his seat, restrained by the seat belt and sent back into his semi plush seat. The frigate turned, and subsequently began to burn.

Now! He hit the trigger button his joystick, the whole craft shuddering, the giant light energy cannon mounted on his left wing, and underneath him on the fuselage fired in alternating sequence, little red spheres flying and impacting into the target. Hull readings were critical. Time to fly.

He pulled up and switched to evasive, putting on speed as his wing mate strafed the ion cannon frigate. Both pulled away as the explosion illuminated their ships against the darkness of space. Out of nowhere ships began pouring out of hyperspace gates.

Soon...quite soon.

The Taiidan carrier R'shokk stood alone, seven Firelances making their way towards the carrier, spelling doom with a capital "D".

They already had acquired a reputation for destruction. But they did have one weakness. Fighters. Unfortunately this was the forte of a carrier.

The Taiidan carrier launched a full wing of 12 attack bombers and 3 interceptors, which sallied forth from the front hangar bay to meet the ion frigates, the interceptors weaving past the beams with agility and grace, the slower attack bombers closing in to 600 meters, going to evasive, and firing, plasma spheres launched and scoring hits against the ion frigates, causing scoring and burn marks, one cocky attack bomber pilot fires a plasma sphere into the ion cannon projector itself, exploding within the bowels of the frigate and sending it and its crew to the next world to be at peace, for all eternity.

'Jet sighed and quickly brought his interceptor around, barely missing the recently hyper spaced Kushan carrier. The thing reminded him of a Hiigaran leech-worm in a way. Eerie. Like a little flea biting a elephant he fired the energy cannons, speeding far ahead of the carrier, which began launching fighters. Turning he heads off towards a Destroyer, firing his weak energy cannons at the destroyer, doing nothing, but getting the attention of one of the projectile cannons, which clips part of a wing off. He emits a angry cry of rage, and accelerates, buzzing past the bridge of the destroyer, quickly whirling around 180, out of the destroyers firing arc, to deliver in on vengeance, firing several shots into the plasma vent thrust drive, inertia still propelling his craft backwards, flying backwards...he does not accelerate his craft, yet, waiting and waiting as the Kushan carrier launches its defenders towards another group of Taiidan interceptors, while sending a squadron of attack bombers out at the sole heavy cruiser.

Suddenly a flash, and a quantum waveform appears...*what on...what the-who!* He thought. Already the battlefield was getting crowded

He flicks on the comm and listens in, the decrypters working efficiently and giving him the complete message:

"This is the Kiith Somtaaw mining vessel Kuun-Lan, calling Kiith Nabaal carrier Veer-rak."

He cuts the connection and speeds his trusty Triikor up, joined up by 6 other interceptors in delta, plotting a intercept course to the Kuun-Lan.

Damned Nabaal bastards. They had managed to squeeze of a distress call. 2 minutes to intercept...this..Somtaaw, whoever the hell they were, would pay, dearly. He wanted a shot at the Mother ship Station, that cheap boomerang somewhere in orbit, alas, no time...this was a /raid/, not a full-blown assault.

Suddenly out of nowhere a fighter blazes past him, shredding his left wingman into bits of metal and flesh, his scream but a little sound in the void.

Damn, he thought...how the...

"All craft, switch to evasive and engage! Split into twos and engage hostiles!"

Finishing his statement he locks onto one of the craft, a weird looking thing with a dish on front, calmly depressing the trigger, just as the fighter begins maneuvers, his craft making a mechanical whirling sound as he follows, trying to get a lock before sending pulses of energy flying left and right, this new toy of the Somtaaw was incredibly maneuverable! Prey! Prey of the best...

Hehehe...now...soon.

Back on a Ryzil IV, his squadron's base, he had a specially modified interceptor, a Triikor Mk2 Custom; dual energy cannons mounted left and right, a enlarged light corvette size chassis, and a fuselage mounted "specialty".

But this was not Ryzil. Oh well...suddenly he pulls up and leave the new craft, but soon comes back down in a death dive, strafing and strafing before one of the energy spheres hits the cockpit, killing the pilot and destroying the weird looking toy.

He'd wasted enough time with this inferior machine. Onto the dual gunned craft with a tail.

No! They were attacking the attack bombers. No..

The nimble craft changed course and moved off to intercept, soon arriving and catching the attention of a Acolyte pilot by shooting to his right, then moving away, baiting the pilot.

When the pilot came he picked up speed and wove through the other Acolytes, using speed to pick off one Acolyte (to him unlucky, he thought), 3 more breaking off to pursue him. No way could he win again THREE.

What'd he done now? Idiot! You proud arrogant prig! NOW YOU WILL DIE BECAUSE OF YOUR PRIDE! He thought...novel way to die.

He looked over at the capital ships, pummeling each other in piles of scrap metal, giant cannons shuddering with each shot, the leviathans pounding away at each like something out of ancient naval history.

There was no thrill in capital ship battles. In the end it was a gun battle. In fighters, the best could pilot a decent fighter, and take out a top-of-the-line craft. Very much like his situation at this time.

He tried shaking the acolytes, no such luck. These pilots were good...quite. Kushans did not have /these/ kind of pilots from training crèches...a veteran perhaps.

Pulling right he headed off towards a pre-set rally point, and proceeding to fire on a proximity sensor. Out of nowhere 5 multi gun corvettes took care of the acolyte problem.

His sensors began reading that the third Taiidan carrier had arrived and began mining resources. It had sent a flanking strike force and would take out one part of the sensor grid around Hiigara...already the sensor defense force had been snuffed out and reduced to ashes.

Looking over to the multi gunners he gave a thumbs up, and brought his fighter around, a quick high-g turn, and he was on his way.

No way in hell...the imperial fleet lay burning, the heavy cruiser spiraling, a eerie ly beautiful dance of death, plasma spumes materializing along the sides of the heavy armored

leviathan, now burning from the numerous beatings the vessel was getting, from the Kushan fleet that moved around it, swarming the vessel, the ruby beams of its ion cannons dancing and waving back and forth, fires licking and burning away at the Kushan enemy, a Kushan destroyers rail guns rip through the giant craft amidst...all power failing, the vessel turning dark, the yellow-red ship's paint job ruined, the shiny surface pockmarked by scorches and hull breaches, fires left and right. They had lost. It was time to go. The fleet would hyperspace with or without them.

It's time...he thought. Even the most experienced, the best, the strongest, of all even they must experience defeat, for loss strengthens one just as victory. A defeat brings new learning, just like victory, so with each loss now, means less later. He picked up the comm.

"All strike craft, evasive and head back. They're going to leave with or without us; I don't want anybody left behind! Move! Move!"

The last carrier, the TIN Immortal Emperor had collected its resources, turned about and began heading away, the Kushan fleet satisfied with beating the last fighting essence from the heavy cruiser. Within a few minutes, one by one the Fiirkans, Triikors, and miscellany craft docked, landing on individual landing pads, maglevs moving them to the sides and clamping in place.

'Jet pulled off his mask, slightly damp and sweaty. Opening the cockpit he emerged, legs slightly shaky, the rush just beginning to fade, climbing out from the ladder off the left side, his foot touching the hard metal deck, looking out into space from the cavernous craft bay, the trademark sound of the hyper drive, and the "blue square"...

A white flash. And that was all.

Interlude:

It'd been several days since the raid against Hiigara. Nothing new...some rest and things, myriad other boring things. The carrier had been detached from its force group, just when things had become rather interesting.

TIF Intel and Turanic raider clans had reported the Sontaaw command vessel, Kuun-Lan, had succumbed to unknown contagion. One of the clans had sent in a heavy cruiser and several arrays, of which had never reported back in.. Ever again.

The carrier would break away from the rest of the fleet with destroyer escort, taking with it several thousand RUs, 3 collectors and a controller. Its objective would be to investigate what happened to the raider fleet, report in, and if necessary either establish contact, or destroy "it", whatever "it" was.

After a long boring technical briefing, again all the pilots ended up in the bar, drinking watered down spirits, 'jet refusing to indulge, and for now merely gazing out the porthole into space. Everyone thought of him as...strange, but as one of the best pilots left other the Elite Guard pilots. Many were taking bets 'jet would be inducted into the Elite Guard sooner or later...he didn't care. Maybe he could work with more professional, efficient, elite persons, who were as good as he, or maybe better. He was sick and tired of shooting freighters and small-fry work...yes...he'd shot enough of every and anything out of the sky, piloted pretty much any and everything that fit into a carrier bay.

Life, war. Had become...Monotonous. Boring.

When did this all change? Why? There was no thrill left from the hunt. War had become boring. A game. Almost like play. He'd been desensitized to the most violent of its aspects, it did not bother or disturb him, and the death screams he heard. He did not cry at their deaths, nor did he laugh. They simply were...unlucky, in a way. Now what was there to do? There were few foes that could match him, and he hadn't met them in person yet...The Somtaaw acolytes possessed a weakness against capital ships, that and they were not designed to take punishment. The energy cannons now being made standard on all ships would make sure of that. Soon there would be no prey left. What had become of his morals? His superego? Perhaps now repressed as his ego lashed out in anger, projecting itself in the form of shooting out enemy strike craft.

Suddenly ; a time dilation. They were phasing back into hyperspace. A blue light above the door flickered...it was time to go. War beckoned. And he would heed.

Chapter 2: Lucifer Rising

The carrier jumped out of hyperspace, and then came the escort, a heavy cruiser, 3 destroyers, 2 missile destroyers, and a myriad of assault and ion frigates, one by one the strike craft taxied off the deck and were catapulted by twin mag-rails into space.

A distress beacon went off. Taiidan Republican signal.

Perfect! A chance to pounce them while attacked...or something. Fleet Intel would love this. "All craft, new orders are to proceed to the distress beacon, it's a republican signature. See if there's anything worth taking or burning."

With that he engaged thrusters and headed off, grimly he looked around and began talking to his wingman in a stoic manner:

"Today we will reap another tally of kills. We will kill our traitor brethren, those that turned from the Emperor's light."

His wing mate replied:

"In the next world the emperor will forgive 'em."

He smirked in the cockpit, looking around and putting his helmet on, flipping down the dark black blast shield. A probe whizzed by and stopped near the origin of the distress beacon.

What the probe relayed to all vessels sent everyone into a shock, and made his jaw drop.

Oh my god...what the hell...is...

A giant fleet was swarming the Taiidan republicans, two carriers, one burning and about to be destroyed and 3 damaged heavy cruisers, and burning vessels left and right, wrecks trailing plasma, debris, and...bodies. Whatever was left of the republican fleet was fighting it out with Turanic and Somtaaw craft, which included as capital vessels, a Turanic Lord class carrier, plus ion array frigates and what looked like part of a Explorer Class command ship. Sellouts! Those Turanics were working with the enemy! He watched two Somtaaw acolytes fly together, one acolyte gracefully turning over, and in mid-space, in under 10 seconds, linking with the other.

Wow. Interesting...wait...what the...

They did not look Somtaaw. They did not broadcast any recognition codes. None of the attacking craft had any codes. They had weird...red...growths. All the craft had massive bio-readings...as if they were...alive!

Don't panic...don't panic...

One of the carriers exploded, damaging the other. Its armor cracked and became blackened, the pure white and turquoise blackened and charred, the once graceful craft pitted with breaches. The craft's guns fell silent, power going out onboard. Suddenly The Turanic Carrier moved closer, raking the Taiidan carrier with twin ion beams, followed by a reddish pinkish beam.

Suddenly his comm was filled with screams, the chilling screams of the dead and dying.

The computer turned down the volume; yet the scream was still heard...the screams of dying, screams of

"BLOW US UP! BLOW US UP! KILL US NOWWWWWWWWWWWWW! I DUN WAANNA DII!"

And then silence.

The carrier had changed. Red growths began appearing...the carrier flight deck lights were snuffed out, then turned red. The carrier began spiraling, a awesome electrical effect flickering about the carrier, 4 interceptors nearby suddenly stopped, they too caught in some sort of transformation like their carrier.

The cycle completed.

The carrier was red, the flight deck was red, the formerly Taiidan vessel. Desecrated. How?!?!

One by one the other craft followed, the heavy cruisers pounding away until the end, the scars of ion beams suddenly vanishing, under reddish "skin" which began to heal.

And then one by one the ships began turning to face their new threat. The formerly Taiidan carrier began launching fighters, like the vessels around it, they too were deformed into some horrifying hell-thing. A nightmare...from the gates of hell.

What the hell had the Somtaaw done? What was this beast they had awakened? Idiots! Like all Kushans...were they always the ones that brought chaos to order? No time.

Suddenly his Comm came alive.

"Weeeeeee looongggggg thirsssst knowledge weee live ..want.....taiidaaaaaan...."

He flinched and nearly jumped out his seat.

By Sajuuk! What is this thing! It knows what we are!

"All craft, this thing's alive! I repeat, fall back! Admiral, I suggest hyperspace NOW!"

Admiral: 'Negative. You are to engage and destroy this threat. From here it does not look to be threatening. Destroy it or I will do such to you. Command out.'

Around him the destroyers moved into range and fired, quad-energy cannons pummeling through a fighter group, vaporizing and sending on to death a group of monster-Fiirkans...perhaps their souls would find peace in death.

"All squadrons, you heard /the/ man! Power up systems and prepare to go!"

All fighters and corvettes powered up engines and shot off as one, flying towards the enemy, a flickering and ebbing ion trail materializing behind the craft, creating a yellowish colored wake.

The fleets did not return fire. Until the strike craft proceeded to about 10 kilometers...

What followed next would be one of the most horrifying, yet strangely thrilling moments in his life.

Where there was once empty space, was filled with weapons fire, a giant melee between capital vessels creating a maelstrom of weapons fire, death to any fighter pilot who made the wrong mistakes.

Ion beams and energy spheres crisscrossed through space, rail slugs flying left and right, ion trails plainly visible as the imperialist strike craft went into melee, going into evasive, flying past enemy ships, delivering an occasional hit on the enemy craft, occasionally destroying an enemy.

It was the epitome of dog fighting. Slowly the squadrons became whittled down. Kudaark assault frigates scuttled rather than face infection. Destroyers fired away at beast frigates, destroying many in a purifying bath of plasma and positively charged ions.

"No!" he screamed. An ion beam went past his craft and took out his wingman. Bleh, just another loss. Another loyal soul commended to the emperor. He felt alive! Yes! He'd never been so afraid in his life, yet so alive! The thrill! A true adrenaline rush worked through his blood, driving him on, maneuvering his Kaark attack bomber with dexterity and skill, dodging ion cannon beams and flak with ruthless efficiency.

Suddenly the formation of enemy vessels coalesced. While disorganized he got a couple shots in. He was quite...agitated, he'd left his beloved and trusty Triikor behind, to get this sluggish machine. But then, at least he would be able to have /capital ships/ on his kill record. Fresh off the PDA the fighter proved quite responsive, only slightly better than a standard, older Kaark, with a few upgrades and design revisions, but otherwise the same bomber.

Flying in at an infected Taiidan Ion Frigate he fired a shot into the "bridge", sending up a tower of flame, firing 3 more plasma bombs into the vessel down the super-structure, the already weakened craft spiraling away from the rest of the beast flotilla and exploding, a sphere of plasma energy followed by a minor shock wave, eventually shimmering into a field of nothing and debris, followed by the cheers and "W00T!" of the crews of the imperialist craft.

But it was in vain. Enemy vessels had moved into sphere formation. There were too many. They were everywhere. And all of them seemed to have the "virus beam".

As one many red beams lashed out, their angry hues contrasting to the paint of the imperialist vessels. In a repeat of before, the Heavy Cruiser and remaining escorts slowly became infected; the carrier had lucked out, all infection beams had been exhausted before the carrier could be touched. The "Immortal Emperor" had protected its namesake starship.

Turning his craft around he fired up the afterburners and headed back to the carrier, diverting as much power as he could to the engines. Shutting down the bomb launchers. Diverting power to engines. Lowering life support to 80%. The light-headed feeling and the hard rush sensations were replaced by weak desperation...he'd seen enough. Now he wanted out. He wanted to go home, to see family and friends. All thoughts were replaced by self-preservation.

He didn't look to see his craft crashing into the flight bay, into the safety net and impact-absorbent material at the rear of the carrier.

He heard the hum of the hyperspace engine, the sounds of AA cannons and explosions, and all was well. He slumped forward onto the dashboard and fell into a disturbing, unhappy sleep.

Interlude: The Dreams

He awoke, and walked about the room he woke up in. There were several windows. One labeled Hiigaran, one Republic, one..."Naggarok", and the other window was labeled Somtaaw, all labeled on little signs above them. Each window was black as night, maybe blacked. He stepped towards the one labeled Hiigaran. In the Hiigaran window, he could see The Last Battle, the black shape of the Taiidan Imperial Flagship, burning to ashes over verdant Hiigara, the Elite Guard ships fighting in vain against the onslaught of rebel Taiidani and the Exile Fleet. Hyperspace signatures of the galactic council ships appeared, and he looked away.

In another window, "Republic", he could see a planet, a base. Republic Base Alpha. This used to be one of the biggest imperial bases, in fact the former shipyard-base of the 2nd Elite Guard fleet, the first being based over Hiigara. Most of the 2nd had betrayed the emperor, thanks to a Captain Elson, and had been decimated at Vorshan's Rift by the 2nd's heavy cruiser and carrier complement. In the vast shipyards of base Alpha, he could see a spherical shaped vessel, undergoing construction. Only the frame was there, but he could see the fittings for ion cannon arrays, a command facility in the center...the sphere was quite large, almost like a Moon.

He knew this was a dream, but he could not acknowledge, like most dreams, one knew it was not real but could not force the body to accept, and wake up. He wanted to wake up. But, the only way he knew to wake up, other than be awakened by someone else, or forcing yourself out, was to play the dream to the end.

He looked into the Naggarok. He saw a giant vessel, moving through hyperspace, suddenly consumed like the Imperialist vessels. He saw it come to a stop in a forgotten sector, and launch a beacon...he sensed the despair and resignation by the crew, the fear and cries as they were consumed, their ship lying adrift and derelict.

And finally he backed away, the images repulsing him. Memories of the battle came back to him. This...thing, had infected his friends, his comrades. He realized that these crew did not desire infection...but could not control anything. They were pawns now...and he resolved not to let this happen, to him.

He looked over to the window labeled "Somtaaw". Looking in, divining what this window held.

He saw a pod, and a Somtaaw worker. The Worker latching onto the pod, and bringing it back to Kuun-Lan.

The image faded, and was replaced.

The Kuun-Lan. He watched the entire bottom half detach...the screams and wails. And then this image detached and opened back, like a door, into a bright light...

Chapter 3: Again we go...

The fleet had arrived at the Imperialists mobile star base, which served as a command center, the headquarters anyways. He hadn't reported in his visions. He'd woken up in the infirmary, and cleared out. He'd spent the last four days mulling over what he'd seen, attributing it to hallucinations, fear, stress, and other things.

Looking out the window he could see the command center, basically a Taiidani star base modified to have hyper drives and other equipment.

Next to him lay a near empty bottle of Ryzillian-brewed something, it had a long name and high alcohol content. He'd resorted to drinking himself into a dreamless cow-like stupor. He was afraid to fall asleep now. He was afraid to dream.

After several blackouts he'd awakened, only to go to the bathroom, throw up, think some more, and drink some more, black out...and so forth.

He woke up yet again, feeling the thin carpet under his feet, knocking over the empty bottle, feeling a little less sick today.

Rising to wobbly legs he limped to his cot and fell in, going into a sleep, a dreamless happy sleep. He heard the faint hint of a whisper, but dismissed it as people in the next room over.

4 hours later he ended up on the flight deck, in a line-rank formation with other pilots, all wearing the yellow-red uniform standard for fighter pilots, officers wearing gray and brown, the few pilots from the Elite Guard wearing dark black.

Outside; ships of the TIF milled about left and right, countless vessels, Skaal-Fas and Skaal-Tels, a Qwar or two, and many carriers. The shipyards in orbit began cranking out super-capships, the carriers produced in turn produced assault frigates and strike craft.

It looked like one of the Emperors war fleets from days of old. Such moved him in a big way, but he did not show emotion.

A shuttle landed, Taiidani Marines piling out and moving around the ramp, reading off names of persons who would go aboard. Unusually it was everyone that survived the conflict with the beast.

As he was herded into the shuttle he wondered what was going on. He looked to the others, none of them knew. What was going on?

He sensed inner machinations at work, plans, and perhaps some things that he was never meant to know, was being conducted as of now.

He mouthed a silent "why" to one of the other pilots onboard. The other pilot shrugged.

Why? He thought. What did we do?

We survived. Would that be it? What did we know? We were the strike craft pilots. He remembered they had replaced the gun cameras, and these were being shipped in. Perhaps they would be on site to sate the curiosity of some Imperial think-tank analyst, who would never see and hear the essence of war, and would prefer it in a dry technical report.

The shuttle was passed over by various craft, a Fiirkan flying by and engaging afterburners, igniting the craving within his psyche to go and fly a craft of some sort.

A shadow fell over the tiny craft, a giant heavy cruiser left the shipyards and passed by, meter after meter of giant vessel falling by on the view screens, imparting a sense of awe and admiration from fighter craft pilots. Until one broke the silence, saying: "Killed a republican one of those before."

Everyone turned to look at the pilot, a man in maybe his thirties, black hair, blue eyes, a circular face. He forgot the guys name.. Rochell or something.

There his curiosity of the pilot ended, he looked up to see a giant black shape.

The craft suddenly changed vectors, and he could see the black shape was a elite guard carrier, previously he had come in from a different angle, and could not see the lit flight bay. That, and he noticed the significant absence of nav lights. The flight bay was running on dimmed lights. The comm. channeled crackled and came to life.

"Imperial Shuttle this is IEG carrier Emperor's Retribution. The Council is aboard and wishes to speak with the pilots. Carrier out."

Chapter IV: Conspiracy Theory

Shit, he thought. The Imperial Council of 9, who ruled whatever, was left of the Empire, a puny handful out of 150 star systems.

Now the shuttle landed, marines escorting them into the debriefing rooms.

"As you were saying?"

"I believe, the beast has the capability to adapt itself to weapons and other countermeasures. It has the ability to self-repair, and infect starships."

"Lemme get this straight. You're saying that this thing...infects, as in takes over a entire ship? No salvage crew, no marines, no nothing?"

"Yes, but I would like to point out, this thing is hostile. It does not care about our Emperor. It only cares to infect and expand itself. I saw Somtaaw and Turanic vessels within that fleet. A lord class carrier was not immune to them. Nothing is. They infected a republican carrier, heavy cruisers. Plasma works to a limited extent, and they self repair."

"Self-...repair."

((Scratching of notes of "self-repair, bring council interest Code Blue-9?"))

He took the time to study these notes, looking upside down at the tidy white notepad, the debriefing guy writing some notes, some legible, some not.

"Well, Commander...that'll be all. Have a nice day. You're free to do most anything aboard this carrier. You'll find it better off then your usual Saarkin-Cho. And I must go...I must speak with the council. Thank you for your time."

And with that the short wiry man headed for the door.

Qu'jet rose from his chair.

"Wait...what are you going to tell the Council?"

"Oh, nothing at all! I just have to go and take over some things...we will be planning and plotting...umm...contingencies. Today...so, good day. "

And with that he was gone, the second to last sentence sending a chill through his spine.

What /were/ they planning?

And then the dream returned to him...

"Fllicckkkkeeeeer lifeeee..."

It-binds-us...[garbled speech], WE WILL NOT BE BOUND! [bright light]

"Youuuuu....shaaaalll...perisssh..."

And then he snapped out of his vision.

NOT AGAIN! he thought. These pills dun work. But then, one of the voices, sounded Bentusi. Bentusi...unusual. What did the Bentusi have to do with this? What did they mean, "we will not be bound". Nothing was what it seemed, every question was now unanswered, every question spawned two more.

He felt, ignorant, oblivious. What was going on? It was like a giant chess game; he did not know what move would be next until it was too late for it to matter.

He got up and headed for the door.

Interlude:

In a darkened room, lit only by the weak starlight, 6 figures sat around a table.

"What is your prognosis?"

"This beast is beyond powerful. It is invincible."

Another voice.

Voice 1: "Indeed. It poses a threat."

Another voice. A more hostile sounding voice.

Voice 2: "Really! Dolt! We are not stupid. We must mobilize, this thing is too powerful and must be destroyed."

Another voice...a more...sinister, devious, crafty, voice.

Voice 3: "Gentlemen, why must we plan destruction, when we could...harness?"

First voice.

"You can't be serious! I mean-"

6th voice began to protest but was stopped.

Voice 3: "No, I am not kidding...just...think about it. We could bring back the glory of the emperor, the Kushans would grovel before us, our traitor brethren would beg for the light of greatness. Even the Unbound would flee in fear in their pacifistic ways. We could become...god."

Silence. The meeting ended swiftly. New orders quickly making their way horizontally through the chain of command, then vertically down, filtering down into select vessels. The untouched path would now be trodden.

The room remained dark, cold, empty; suddenly the silence was interrupted as the door opened, throwing a beam of light into the room, immediately illuminating a small table, and in dimly a small bed is visible. The silhouette of a man steps in, the door closing behind him, once more bathing the room in darkness. The figure moves, slowly, deliberately, to the bed, suddenly jumping and landing on the bed, slightly shaking the bed. Saarkin-Chos were small carriers, for their job anyway, which involved production of fighters and frigates, the maintenance of carrier wings, the supporting of the pilots and crews, the immense Phase Dissassembler Arrays, the resource processing units, the resource storage units, infrastructure for commanding entire fleets and quarters and other preparations for command staff and fleet tactical and communications gear. Topping that off was the need to supply, maintain and keep everything above running and on schedule, and to keep the carrier itself, in running condition, there was a vast army of engineers, technicians, commanders, tacticians, PDA-techs, resource-troubleshooters, pilots, trainers, capital ship crews, and other things. Too much into one space...and as such, the expense in living space would be taken out on crew, hence his Spartan living condition.

Leaning on the bed a hand reached for a desk light, lighting up the room. The room appeared to be about 16 square meters, whitewash walls...utilitarian, and simple.

In the other hand he had a manila folder, he opened it and set it on his lap, suddenly sitting up and reviewing the contents.

"New orders are as follows:

You will be transferred out to prototype carrier, TIN Venus Flytrap, Goddess Class. TIN Flytrap will proceed on maiden voyage testing, engaging on patrol of Republic/Imperial border. Hostile force expected. Transfer of Taiidan Elite Guard pilots and skilled regulars is underway. You will be removed from your squadron and reassigned to new mobilized squadron. Timetable for vessel launch 48 hours. Courier shuttle en route for transfer to Flytrap. Ship specifications and pilot/low-level crew manifest included.

Taiidan Imperial Forces

Fleet Command

Force Group 17, Logistics & Support Division.

tif/tif

He paused and let this new information sink into his mind, slowly inserting the contents back into the folder, setting on his table, turning off the lights, and leaning back on his bed,

putting his hands behind his head and looking at the ceiling, turning his head to gaze into the pale starlight...remembering when he was a child, and used to do the same.

Suddenly a pang to see home made itself known. Memories began to re emerge, and he re-acquainted himself with these long forgotten events. It'd been...3 years since he had gone back. Three years. Long time...almost like an eternity.

But he couldn't go now, of all times. Not now. The lives of billions of Imperials, Turanics, Republicans, and...Kushans...were at stake.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to sleep.

The lamp above his head came to life and beamed down a amazingly bright amount of light.

"The time is 7-o'-clock", droned the robotic voice...

Rising he shook his head and headed for the shower.

Carrying a box with him he headed out, the box containing practically everything he owned. Now he would be transferred to another carrier, the Flytrap, a Goddess class super-carrier...the first one that would be completed, the other would be built within several years, but none of this was relevant. He had no time to review the statistics of the carrier, nor had he time to review the manifest. He walked into the flight bay, unnoticed amidst the PA announcements, the engineers skittering back and forth checking fighter craft, about 100 meters away a assault frigate sat, suspended by giant clamps and mag-levs, PDAs mounted on giant servo-arms moving back and forth, materializing from resources decks, carpets, the plasma bomb launching mechanisms, the energy cannons and even a layer of paint. In about 2 hours the vessel would be complete.

Striding over to his interceptor he gently lowered the box onto the metal deck, moving to the back, ducking underneath and pulling a latch, opening the belly cargo compartment.

He went back and got the box, and put it, closing the hatch door and securing it.

Crawling out he looked up at the flight bay, and all around...very sure he'd miss the carrier, if not the people. He'd never had a chance to socialize...believing in his pseudo-arrogance that he was superior to his fellows in many ways.

He resolved to socialize a little more on the Flytrap.

He entered the Triikor through the open canopy and secured it, the black tint protecting from sunlight. Securing himself in his seat he watched the LCDs flicker to life. Before he did anything, he ran a hand across the brown dashboard, sighing.

"It'll be nice to fly again..."

The comm went online.

"Triikor Seven, you are clear to launch, take runway 7 and good luck. Harbor Master out." He flicked a few switches, taxing his craft into position on runway seven, the belly mounted sleds securing themselves on the mag-launcher, the futuristic cousin of the hydraulic catapult.

"Three...two...one!"

He braced as the tiny craft launched from the carrier, the interceptor quickly slowing down, from where he returned the craft to manual control, bringing his craft around to look for the assault transport. He'd dock underneath, and then hyperspace out to the remote shipyard which housed his next home.

Chapter V: To tame the beast

The imperialist carrier TIN Venus' Flytrap flickered back into existence in the real world, exiting from the quantum waveform unscathed, one of the new "Goddess" class carriers, many times larger than a Saarkin-Cho, excepting the addition of 2 belly launch bays, a feature copied from the Emperor. The craft looked like a Emperor-Saarkin hybrid, possessing the bow construct of the Emperor, but putting the bow flight bay underneath the slender bow shape. It more or less resembled a Saarkin Cho grafted between two Emperors and then lengthened., except for the addition of several 8-tube self reloading missile launcher, 4 large ion cannons, and 10 upgraded mass driver turrets, along with 6 energy cannons. The carrier could also build destroyers, missile destroyers, and resource controllers...the designers were confident the vessel could produce heavy cruisers, but advised that it would never be feasible. With only this one in existence, great care had been taken to ensure that these three would last for the next decades or so. Nicknamed "mini-mother ships", designated officially as "super-carriers", they'd do. Plans had been made to accommodate 1 into each of the Imperial Navies 3, extremely large "war fleets", such a ambitious plan would be feasible in a decade or more.

That last fact, to him, was amazing. Heavy Cruisers. then it would be as good as having a mother ship around, for much less the cost, and several times the mobility.

He had spent the last hour sitting in his new, bigger quarters, reading up on the statistics of this new machine. He hadn't noticed the time dilation, or the quantum waveform disorientation.

Exiting hyperspace the super-carrier scanned the system around it. The Bentusi had been defeated, so had Kiith Manaan's task force. The Somtaaw had just retreated. A massive life-sign, dead ahead...the beast.

The carrier had also one extra card against the beast. It wasn't much but it'd do.

Out of nowhere a infected Bandit crashed into the carrier, a electrical charge coursing through the vessel, focused around the bandits crash site. Nothing. No infection. A temporary solution that worked...running an electrical charge through the hull, but no guarantees that it would work against the infection beam.

Above Qu'jet the light above his head changed to a red one, and flickered three times.

All hands stand by, he thought.

Getting up he changed into a pilot's jumpsuit, and grabbed a sidearm. No particular reason, except for psychological. He left the room and headed for the bow flight bay. He'd get a first hand view of anything, and he would be much closer to his post.

The sensor officer watched his monitor, out of nowhere a sensor shadow appeared, then vanished. And another appeared, and another, and another, and another. Soon the alert klaxons went off, sending personnel scurrying about to battle stations. The captain suddenly emerged from his room and headed to his chair, set in the center of the bridge. Signaling to the comm officer he opened a channel on all frequencies.

"This is Admiral Rocaarn Selet of the TIN carrier Flytrap. We know you know who we are Beast."

The lone carrier moved to about 1,000 meters from the Bentusi debris field, and waited for a reply.

"Imperrrrriaals...sstop your madness...or become one of us, like your friendss..."

The admiral did not flinch. He already knew the beast was sentient.

A low-ranking messenger exits the lift and moves towards the admiral, whispering into his ear, before heading back and vanishing, one of many new "scrubs" transferred to this mission, the purpose being to train them in the environment of skilled professionals.

"What is it that you want?"

"Yesssss...want...parent...want...data, also want...parttttssss..."

The super-carrier then launches a probe, flying through the beast fleet, flying by the command ship, getting in a couple dozen shots and sensor readings of the craft, before self destructing.

Suddenly, like a beast enraged, the heavy cruisers began powering up weapons, a energy pulse flying several meters past the bridge. Wasting no time, the carrier then hyperspaces out before the beast can react...one super-carrier could not hope to win. The super-carrier was also a extremely important part of the fleet. The Beast must not learn of it or its schematics.

Briefing Room

Around a thin, oval-shaped table, made of fine mahogany wood, convenes the staff, which commands every division of labor inside the giant craft. Now suggestions and logical analysis goes back and forth.

Command: "We know now the Beast is sentient. The beast also has reverse engineered and deployed whole fleets based on Turanic, Somtaaw, and Taiidan technology."

The Intelligence Officer, a pale man with graying hair, once looking out the window to the stars, suddenly brings his chair about.

Intel: "My superiors have told me, that Intelligence has broken and deciphered several encoded transmissions from the Kuun-Lan to Somtaaw Kiith'sa headquarters on Hiigara. Transmissions from outer rim stations of the Somtaaw, Soban, Nabaal and S'jet kiiths reveal of multiple beast attacks. Dozens of war fleets have vanished without a trace. The Manaen carrier deployed to assist the Bentusi at Coruc-Tel, the Caal-Shto, was detected leaving a nebula, with the Kuun-Lan. The beast appears to be executing coordinated assaults against us, testing our defenses. They already have attacked a Imperialist convoy. We captured some samples of the beast, and have them on site at a research station."

Command: "Why didn't you tell us, before we charged right into the hands of the beast? Do you know what kind of risk you nearly put us into?"

Suddenly Qu'jet leaned back on his chair, deathly silent all through the meeting. He hadn't had anything to say, for now this was dealing with tactics, and had nothing to do with the strike wings, so he remained silent. He represented the strike wings, anything from the nimble Fiirkans to the heavy corvettes or goliath-killing attack bombers. Nothing here needed his attention, he merely tuned out everything...they wouldn't call on him.

Chapter 6: Convoy in Distress

"This is a Republican convoy, I repeat, we are not armed! We are under attack-"

The Flytrap, heeding to the distress call of a fellow Taiidan, hyper spaced out nearby, holding position several hundred kilometers away, launching a cloaked probe towards the fleet.

The fleet of Republican colony ships pattered by, pursued by what looked like...cruise missiles. Same design, but the beast growths were present. This was a morbid cousin, mutated by the beast to some evil purpose...but what, they would see. Nearby the Somtaaw mother ship Kuun-Lan mobilized, along with its own small fleet.

The carrier had moved away from the convoy and the Somtaaw, holding position while the Somtaaw craft moved through the convoy, eliminating the cruise missiles as they came. The hideously ugly Recons and the more graceful Acolytes and ACVs weaved through the convoy, taking out the initial cruise missiles.

Out of nowhere another Somtaaw vessel approached, a new, exotic design of some type. The craft fired dual medium mass drivers at a cruise missile and destroyed it. Suddenly it began launching small objects. Scanners went online and identified the objects as Swarmer-class drones. This new type of ship was a newer class of drone frigate.

From the tinted canopy of his Triikor Qu'jet braced for launch, hurtling from 0 to about 1/4 of kilometer per second in 3, before his craft slowed down enough so that he could regain control.

Around him other Imperialist strike craft moved into formation. They would do nothing...they couldn't. Somtaaw would engage. Being one super-carrier, against a mother ship...the chances would be rather grim against their favor.

Qu'jet looked around in his pilots headgear, grinning but unseen in his helmet. He looked to his wing mate, a Fiirkan painted in the Elite Guard colors. He seemed a little too young, but he had beaten him often in the simulators. A kid to be reckoned with. He checked if the sound was on. What was his name? T'chet...yea.

"Hey 'Chet, if you get infected, I will burn you to death in plasma and send your soul to Sajuuk. Agreed?"

"Hey, I'll do the same, but they'll never get me!". The younger Elite Guard pilot gave a thumbs up and returned to watching and waiting.

Qu'jet chuckled and looked back, watching the battle like some movie. The entire fleet watched from a distance, as one of the ACVs failed in their mission. One of the cruise missiles slammed into a colony ship. He tried to suppress the screams from his mind, but couldn't...maddening! He remembered the Taiidan republic ships.

Just as bad...if not worse...

These were civilians, women and children! They never took up arms and they had never done anything!

Suddenly the colony ship, now plainly infected, turned around and faced its former brethren-ships, and launched a full volley of beast cruise missiles...he shuddered, not wanting to think about what happened to the crew. According to Intel, the beast broke down organic substances and converted it into itself. So the outside growths on that ship /were/ colonists, children...he stopped thinking about that sick thought.

I can't take this anymore...

He couldn't watch as another Taiidan vessel was hit, but this time they were luckier. The escape pods began launching, the giant craft scuttled itself before it could be turned into a launcher. The pods did not appear to be infected. A very lucky thing for them; better then to be one with...whatever the hell it was.

The Somtaaw capital ships began to filter in, the new drone frigate and three others of its type moved along, shooting out anything beast that floated by. A multibeamer began shooting the infected colony before it exploded.

One by one the republican colony ships exited through a slip gate. The Somtaaw vessels began preparations for hyperspace. A small probe deployed and headed for the Kuun-Lan, making scans and relaying them back as the probe scuttled, relaying telemetry data to the main computers, subsequently getting a estimate on the Kuun-Lan's destination. Relaying this to a smaller carrier fleet, the Immortal Emperor's carrier group, ironically the carrier he was formerly assigned to, the Flytrap collected its strike craft and hyper spaced out...but a single part of the giant game, a little child trying to assemble a galaxy-sized puzzle.

Chapter 7: Outbreak

Imperialist Research Base, Gozan IV

Yar'jeem donned the Enviro-suit and strode out of the clean room, looking vaguely like a Marine in power armor.

Wow, she thought, all that college and internship time paid off, and here I am, working in one of the best research facilities to ever exist since the First Kushan Empire.

Striding past the contaminant scanners she walks to a door in the all white and Plexiglas inner room, pressing a few buttons and waiting. After being cleared by Control, the door opens, where she strides in, now in the Anomalous Materials section. In one of the giant vats, a tube begins pumping in "primordial soup", a mix of proteins, glucose, amino acids, adenosine triphosphate (ATP, most of this stuff is from biology courses) simple RNA and DNA sequences, and other biological factors. Now that scanners are online, a small capsule is injected. Coming into contact with the soup the capsule breaks up, revealing beast microbes.

Suddenly the greenish substance begins changing. Slowly the thin soupy solution turns a shade of red, hardening as well, parts begin sticking to the wall and extending root-like structures.

From here she barks a order to one of the techs, to send a electrical charge through the walls of the vat.

The microbes merely slow their growth, and after a few minutes it grows back onto the glass.

Walking over to a control panel he flicks a switch and pumps out oxygen, leaving the beast in hard vacuum.

She paws around for a notepad, moving her gauntleted right hand a bit too far, knocking over her notepad and a Styrofoam cup of water, the water trickling into and mingling with her carefully tabulated notes.

Bending down to pick up the notepad she looks up again, the beast is still fine.

Jotting down a few notes she vents some cyanide gas into the tank. Nothing. Venting methane. Still nothing. Growth continuing.

After pumping in hydrogen's and nebula dust, the beast's growth rate quadruples, overtaking the dozens of electrical charges sent through the structure.

Looking around she panics, and presses the Evac button, waiting before herself evacuating, everybody moving into the HazMat rooms. Removing a key from her pocket she slides it into place and turns the key, pressing the green button, and authorizing high temperature thermite incineration, a emergency procedure in case of microbe or bacterial outbreak. Soon the other room was bathed in heat.

Suddenly several critical mass alarms begin flickering. Door integrity, failing under heat.

And then nothing.

4 hours later

The Flytrap hyper spaced into orbit, new orders to rendezvous with the research station and protect it from a rumored Somtaaw attack. Intel had reported that the other carrier group had engaged the Kuun-Lan. The group reported losing three resource collectors and 2 assault and one ion frigate, but no debris was ever. The gravwell had also vanished, translating into that an entire resourcing convoy had vanished. The resourcer's location beacon had been detected in hyperspace heading towards the station But it was too late, the materializing quantum waveform was plainly visible from kilometers around. The sight that beheld the crew would be...shocking. Damaged wrecks drifted left and right, distress beacons lit everywhere, the screams and pleas for help each overriding the other, into a cacophony of despair.

The research facility registered as beast, an outbreak of some sort. Somehow the beast had broken out of containment. A flight recorder salvaged from a assault frigate revealed the Somtaaw had already been here, and blasted their way through the proxy network. The sensor network had a gaping hole in it, and the recorder also revealed that the resource collectors had made it through the checkpoints to land on the surface, before returning. It was unknown what they had done; the resource collectors had been scrapped before the fleet left. The research station had also been partially overrun, several ground floors had been infected, and anything in the area would have to be destroyed.

Moving into orbit the flytrap prepared a planet-scorcher missile, one of the types used on Kharak. After setting it to minimum, the missile launches, ion trail streaking through the atmosphere, the missile's outer shielding is burned through, the missile lands near the research base and immolates it in a bath of flame reaching 1500 degrees. Everything on the surface in a 10 mile radius...burned to ashes.

Admiral: Deploy salvage and repair teams. Add these vessels to our task group. It's time to report in. Send to command.

"Research station destroyed. Planet possibly contaminated. Dispatching ground team to locate data codex."

Chapter 8: Deploy

The super-carrier moved into orbit, the salvage corvettes patching into the TIFnet computer systems, and then one by one tow back each segment of destroyed or crippled vessel back to the carrier, segments of the same ship are linked together, any battle damage or vaporized segments are patched back together with the 'Green Beam'.

After adding a trio of destroyers and myriad assault and ion cannon frigates to the fleet, the carrier turns its attention to the ground problem. The codex had to be found.

The data codex was basically a giant hard drive, wrapped inside a aero gel/composite crystalline armor impact resistant shell, dropped 50 feet down a underground tube. Containing surveillance tapes and data on experiments and other essentials, it would allow for a backup record in case something were to happen to the base, that would wipe out the mainframes in the complex. The codex would then be used and the data contained could be utilized to find out what had gone wrong...it was the equivalent of a flight data recorder.

The data codex was located somewhere around the compound. There was no evidence that the beast had been sterilized, so the mission objectives would be to:

- 1) Locate the data codex
- 2) If beast present, attempt to sterilize region, or
- 3) If contamination widespread, return uncontaminated vectors back to carrier, and destroy/contain the beast.

Secondary Objectives would be to salvage usable data from the mainframes in the research facility, and/or locate survivors.

Moving through the bowels of the vessel Qu'jet headed to the flight bay, taking the elevator up to the top level, walking down the catwalk. From here he could see the entire breadth of the flight bay, and below he could see the 5 platoons of marines and light vehicles assembled to lead the ground force. He cleared his throat, and spoke up:

"Your objectives have already been given. I am hoping you have perused the mission data distributed to you. This mission, this planet, holds the key to the beast. It -must- be found. Our goal is to destroy it. Fleet Command has ordered us to track down the prime elements of the beast. Our future orders will most likely include destroying this element. If not in self-

preservation, then for the sake of the galaxy, so that others will not have to suffer, and that the others, the...Kushans (spoken scornfully) and the 'Unbound' races will not be turned against us.

Your units will be sent in via modified assault shuttles. The shuttles have been modified to have the anti-beast electrodes.

We don't know what you will encounter either. Mass driver weapons have proven impractical. Strike craft pilots, over there, and there, will provide immediate support over your airspace.

The plan is to breach atmosphere with light corvettes, interceptors and scout elements. They will fan out and cover as much ground as possible over the area, sending you reconnaissance data. Multigun corvettes, heavy corvettes, and our assault transports will breach airspace and execute landings at the LZ' on your maps.

Attack bombers will follow last, and destroy any heavy weapons platforms that may be encountered. I will lead the strike craft groups, and be on site on planet with the command center. Your suits, have already been modified. Your weapons will no longer be the MD-4 mass driver rifles that you have trained for. You will be using the EPC-1s, the energy pulse cannons, the first batch that has been distributed to active force groups. These weapons use the same weapon principle used by your default issue MD-4s. The weapon principle is based on the magnetically contained plasma delivery system used on attack bombers. They come with internal mini cold fusion reactors. There will be no ammunition limits. We also have included the plasma flamethrower. 80mm plasma incendiary mortar shells designed for the standard issue mortars are fresh off the PDAs. All weapons issued have been designed for maximum effectiveness.

He looks down the stairs as Colonel Welles walks up the stairs. He goes down as the colonel goes up. Going down he watches the weapons trollies and grabs a gun off, throwing one to a nearby marine, getting two more off and handing them to two others, the quarter masters then distribute the rest of the guns, the Colonel going over tactics and other dry military policies, the strike craft pilots moving towards their designated fighters; the wing commander heading for his Triikor Mk.2 custom model, a interceptor model vessel enlarged and placed onto a light corvette chassis.

Armed with dual plasma cannons and dual plasma pulse sphere projectors mounted on gun pods, plus the fuselage mounted weapon, painted in fresh imperial colors. Climbing into his craft he closes the hatch and secures it, the inside lights flickering to life and bathing him in a warm red glow, all systems flickering to life and registering as active. He suddenly pauses for a

minute, then blinks and shakes his head, resuming going through the system checkpoints. Around him the ambient hum and throb of engines.

As one cohesive unit the Taiidani marines split off and head into respective shuttles, the infantry, scouts, flamethrowers, heavy infantry, mortars, combat engineers and other support groups. The modified assault shuttles open ramps and begin loading in Taiidani mechanized armored units, mag-lev hover drives making not a sound as the tanks move into the transports and prepare for launch. LAVs are checked and transported as well. Sending about 250 personnel on site would be a interesting proposition. All units were beast shielded to the extent of their knowledge. All systems were go. One by one the strike craft taxied off and were launched, followed by the assault transports and shuttles.

In Military parade formation he looked out to the rest of his squadron, mobilized and recently brought up to strength. 1 Triikor mk.2 custom (his), and 11 other Triikor; designated Avatar squadron, for now. A mix of pilots from AFS (advanced flight school) and Elite Guard pilots, the squadron had yet to be tested working as a coordinated group, everyone in the squadron had proved themselves, working as lone wolves. It was quite likely that once the squadron entered airspace that the squadron would detach itself and its interceptors going wherever needed.

In front of him the Fiirkan Mk.2s shot off and initiated atmospheric re entry procedures, large streaks that gradually faded. And then the Triikor's turn.

The fighter noses into position and prepared for re entry, increasing speed and slowly modifying angle of descent, changing the angle from a straight death-drop, slowly to a leveled descent, inertia and g-forces working merrily on the body of the individual pilots, and their stomachs.

As soon as the first wave had entered the atmosphere, the scouts and interceptors fanned out around the LZ, attached scanner pods looking for beast life signs, finding none, moving on as the light corvettes buzzed around the LZ, a coordinated organized, semi-chaotic landing was being undertaken. Defenders, Defense Fighters, and attack bombers followed the outbound recon elements.

The Light and Heavy Corvettes landed, followed by a single Engineering Corps. Assault Shuttle. After finding no signs of beast infection, the other shuttles begin landing and offloading troops before flying off, the assault transports land and unload mechanized units, these too flying off.

After reconnoitering a 5-mile radius of the LZ most of the outer craft fly back to the carrier, Qu'jet heading to the LZ and landing, sighing as his craft touched down on soil. He felt a little disoriented, as his body had gotten used to incessant moving.

He waited for disorientation to fade and removed his helmet, leaving it inside, and opening the canopy, climbing on top of the custom corvette-class craft, and jumping from the wing to the other wing, and from there lowering himself to the ground.

Wiping sweat off his brow, and straightening out his flight suit he heads off for the field headquarters, not caring to note that the scorched underbrush was not without life, a red beetle picked itself out of the dirt to the surface.

He walked into the tent-like room, ignoring the mechanics and their light "jeeps", and grabbing a headset off a table, and putting it on, then sliding a eyepiece into position a few inches from his left eye. He clears his throat as the connection completes.

Suddenly the eyepiece shows the entire conference room, the admiral and most of the command staff are there.

Admiral: "Commander, you are on site?"

"Affirmative."

He looks around, and then focuses back on the eyepiece.

"All units are on site. Tell the general his plan worked. Nothing went wrong. It looks to be about early Afternoon local time. We are ½ mile away, and we are in the sterilized area. Nothing appears to be alive. The mag-tube transports seem to be working, I believe we should utilize them, we can cut the ETA to the base several-fold. I've ordered the attack bombers and defenders to stick around. The third gun underneath has the standard issue extract-retractor, that works at least. In a few minutes we'll be ready to go...with your permission I'd like to go with the ground teams."

Admiral: "I don't know...very well then. Get a suit and weapon though. You don't want to be infected."

"I won't." He pulls off the headset and places it on the table, and jogs outside.

"Everybody, the mag-tubes are miraculously operational! We can use them and get to the base in just 5 minutes! We can bring our engineering gear and the mech-units with us. Then we can get off this cursed rock."

Acknowledgments float through the air, and somehow Qu'jet feels...worried. Everything is going well. Almost, too well...

4 hours already. How could it have gone by this swiftly?

The ground force had moved in, deployed, and as of late they were looking for the data codex; the engineers moving through the twisted rubble, with giant devices that resembled the mine-sweeping units, scanning for the codex' beacon. One of them suddenly gives a shout, barely audible through his helmet. Nobody was to take off his or her NBC gear. He turned on his comm system and gestured emphatically towards the ground underneath.

From behind, he could hear the scraping of a giant earth worker moving in, the engineers getting out of the way of the giant machine, which began scooping away rubble and depositing it in a neat pile to its right.

With the sound of metal contact the earth worker moves away. The engineers with their hands move aside remaining dirt and uncover the tube where the data codex was located. Pulling a lever mounted on the side, the iris type door opens, a gaping maw of darkness greeting the eye.

With a gloved hand the engineer presses a few buttons and the data codex is propelled up magnetically, Qu'jet jogging over and watching the process, mag-levs bringing the package up to the top. Qu'jet grabs the large device, heavy and bulky in his gloved hands, setting it down on the ground, the automated beacon goes online and transmits a jumble of data to the carrier in orbit.

Suddenly a weak cry for help can be heard. Pointing and waving his hand towards a twisted wreck he begins shouting orders.

"Get a excavator and the jaws of life! We gotsa survivor I think! Deploy pyros, it may be a trap and we may have to torch it! Get the bombers and defenders an' put them on stand by!"

He runs over to where the location of the survivor is guessed, everybody begins digging frantically, he backs away and hears the cry again. Turning around he hears the tapping of a blunt tool, a wrench perhaps. Stooping, he follows the sound until he reaches a partially demolished shelter complex. He circles it and finds a door, kicking it once, then taking out his sidearm and firing several 10mm rounds into the door, and then kicking it down. A hand reached out, a woman in dirtied and heavily damaged power armor was inside.

"Help...I gotta get up..."

She stumbles to her feet, and then grabs onto a side rail for support. He turns around.

"Need a medic! Found the survivor! Get de-con first and then get her down to a med. tent!"

He watched indifferently, she'd been decontaminated, no signs of beast infection. Apparently based on the ID tag she worked here as a researcher...maybe in her mid-20s...he found his mind drifting to, other aspects; he stopped those thoughts and patiently looked at the tent walls until she awoke. They needed answers.

What had happened here? Could she provide answers? Where was she? Did she see it happen?

A tumulting swarm of questions, again the questions came in large numbers. He looked around and spoke to a medic.

"Patient will be transferred out on the shuttle. There's nothing left. All units will be shuttled out. First the med-shuttle, then everything else."

He nodded and looked away, med-techs putting her on the stretcher and wheeling her onto one shuttle, marked with the red cross.

Piece by piece the ground party was disassembled and sent back up.

Forward Recon Squad 4

A squad of Taiidani Imperialist marines moved through the brush, guns leveled, hunched over, moving silently.

A man walked by. The squad of marines vanished into the brush, and watched. The man was dressed in white lab coat, his face turned away from the marines. Suddenly he turned around...a lecherous growth of beast infection on him. Glaring angrily at the hidden marines, the brush around them turns red. The pyro emits a scream and yells "FOR THE EMPEROR!" and torches the brush, suddenly gunfire erupts as the marines begin shooting the infected man-thing, blowing off a arm and sending a leg flying, a splattering of blood seeps forth from the locations of severed limbs, the squad retreating as fast as possible, turning around and occasionally shooting back...

The squad stumbled into the camp of the Imperials, by now only a platoon remained. The Defenders buzzed around lazily, attack bombers behind them. The squad of dazed sprinting heavily armored marines ran past the checkpoints and stumbled to the ground, one retracting his faceplate and yelling out loud.

"BEAST INFECTEES! I SAW EM WIT' MY OWN EYES! THEY'RE COMING THIS WAY!"

Suddenly the base came alive, Qu'jet heading to the comm.

"I repeat, unconfirmed reports of beast infectees on approach. Confirm."

Comm: "That's affirmative, sensor ops detects several thousand entities approaching your position. The shuttle is en route and will be on site within ten minutes."

He takes off the headset and throws it hard against the wall, breaking it and stalking out, running to his interceptor.

What the fuck! They'd all be dead in ten damn minutes! They'd have to provide distraction, air cover...

"Beast infectees confirmed! Getaway ride comin' in ten minutes! Hold the line until then!"

He turns around and walks backward slowly, looking to the pyros.

"Burn every blade of grass and weed around the base. Burn anything living that looks infected. There are no survivors on the surface. That last person was lucky. Burn everything else. The shuttle will arrive in ten minutes, if we're lucky there will be some of us who can get aboard."

Jumping into the cockpit and closing the canopy he quickly runs through systems checks, activating thrust vents and ascending to ten feet over the base.

"Firm, something's movin' in, it appears to be...beast infected humanoids! My god...infected Taiidani Marines! Stay on guard! Defenders, Bombers, follow my lead. Take out whatever the heck is down there. We must hold them off until the shuttle arrives."

Shouts of "Aff" and "Very well" greet his ears, kicking afterburners he moves in, lowering altitude to 40 feet off the ground, arming dual plasma cannons, dual pod light plasma bomb launchers, and for the finale, a belly mounted automated missile production unit. Able to crank out 2 medium grade missiles per second (cleared to inflict massive/destroying damage on fighters, serious/massive damage to corvette, with a moderate damage clearance for capital vessels) with a initial stockpile of four. The firing rate could never exceed 4-5 per ten seconds. A bigger initial stockpile or more efficient production unit would slow down speed to unacceptable levels. Already his craft had a heavily upgraded heavy corvette engine, giving him a razor-thin edge over the standard interceptor in all engine aspects.

He could see the infected, a squad of marines suddenly aimed into the sky with MD-4 rifles. He did not hesitate and linked all weapons and fired a short burst, pulling up on the joystick gently and raking the ground with death, the launchers making a small, craft-shaking thud when firing, plumes of flame and smoke rise behind him, the glare lighting up the details on his face. Behind him the Defenders rake the ground with rapid-fire guns, attack bombers immolating anything on the ground with high-energy plasma, burning the enemy to ashes and cinders.

He pulled up his craft forward. The small column had been demolished. Enemy fire had damaged part of a tail stabilizer. Looking into the fast approaching dusk he could see what looked like a bunker, and infectees pouring out slowly. It was a subterranean exit, and the

immolation had only vaporized the surface, having been set too low...this meant there could be survivors

Locking onto the bunker he flicked the missile switch and fired 4 missiles, set to proximity detonate, locking on a target inside the bunker, to detonate after entering through the door.

Pulling up his craft grazed a tree, the dull boom and shockwave rattling his craft. Turning his craft around he saw the shuttle land and take people aboard, the infectees had already swarmed the gates, the marines retreating to the shuttle in disciplined manner. Locking onto the cluster of infectees he fired four more missiles, the missiles scattered and detonated in a box around the swarming entities.

Bringing his craft to 20 feet off the ground he flew in for low level strafing, low enough to see the faces of the enemy, grotesquely altered with massive growths. A infected Taiidan marine raised his weapon and quickly died by plasma pulse fire. The last marine loaded aboard the shuttle and was off.

Radioing in the comm, he issued the one order that everybody wanted.

"Let's go home."

He gunned his craft and pulled up, followed by the other craft, radioing in one more time to command.

"Sir, there's a good chance of survivors down there. If the infectees made it maybe there are more survivors."

A unfamiliar voice spoke.

"Negative. We are going to burn this planet to ashes. Get your craft in and we will burn this place to dust."

He spoke up...*what was going on? More people?*

"Admiral, who is this new person?"

"This new person is Councilman Risseau. He is issuing a formal executive order to immolate the planet. My hands are tied."

He closed the channel and banged his fist on the dashboard. *Damn!. There could still be people down there! Why!*

As they breached the atmosphere the super-carrier launched a missile.

Comm: "Missile control, ETD 3...2...1..., we have detonate! Epicenter recorded. Shockwave traveling at 15 miles per second. Surface temperature approaching twenty thousand degrees centigrade. Probability survival ratio of any surface life: 1.27 percent.

Missile detonation successful. Command, third missile ready. Standing by for possible succession launch."

Admiral: "...no, another missile will not be necessary. All rear guard units report boarding. All units report in clean. No infections detected. Engage hyperdrive!"

As he got out of his interceptor, he observed the yellow-black color scheme on a heavy corvette. Imperial Council.

As the rest of the pilots filed out he walked and then ran to the heavy corvette, kicking the mag-sled.

"WHY! WHY! WHY! YOU BASTARD! YOU KILLED MAYBE HUNDREDS OF TAIIDANI! WHYYYYYY!"

Several Taiidani Marines arrived.

"I'm fine...just...I gotta go."

He gets up, wiping some sweat off of his brow...taking a deep breath and walking calmly out, his political statement already made.

Interlude:

The next hour found himself very close to being arrested, but saved by political influence from several notable figures, including the Fleet Admiral of Force Group Alpha, the 2nd and 1st Elite Guard commanders, both of which planned recruiting him.

For now he was safe. But even then it was a limited safety. He was in front of a info kiosk, and typed out a few keys, accessing the tapes of the Burning of Kharak. He hadn't seen the recordings, after all he reasoned that he'd been there and needed not to see it. But today's senselessness...something drew him to the kiosk.

The kiosk was silent, and then began to play the recording.

One probe was visible, the static present began to clear, and then two were visible.

2 Fiirkans moved past the screen.

"Fleet trajectory calculated and locked in."

Suddenly the 47th Frontier Fleet, his former fleet exited hyperspace, the carrier Immortal Emperor clearly visible. The carrier launches fighters.

Scouts, corvettes, attack bombers, a myriad group of mixed craft rush the Scaffold.

"Orbital target acquired."

They'd locked onto the Scaffold and prepared to burn it to cinders...

"What the...?"

The salvettes. He remembered their docility when they approached, moments before blowing them into dust particles.

"Watch the spread pattern... stay sharp."

That was him...Wing Commander Qu'jet. Ironical, to listen to himself...

"Group three moving in... alright now, stay together... ready... SPREAD!"

The fighters had rushed the scaffold and moved through the scaffolds inner workings. The Missile Defense hadn't started yet, having surprised them quite early. They had never expected attack.

"Surface attack group to first positions..."

That was the task force commander. One by one the capital ships moved in like the grim reaper into high Kharak orbit.

"Incoming missiles..."

That was one of the Fiirkan pilots. Missiles launched in huge volleys at the Taiidan fleets and the fighters that came in close.

"Evasive maneuvers!"

The Fiirkan engaged afterburners; eventually a missile slammed into the cockpit and blew it away, another missile hitting a destroyer as it went past.

"We're hit! Damage report!"

That was the destroyer, minor damage he'd been told later on.

"There's another one..."

A Raachok light corvette was destroyed.

'All targets acquired."

The Kaarks had come in close, and readied bomb launchers, firing into the stabilizers and joints of the superstructure, followed by the rail gun slugs of the destroyers, and ion beams.

"Multiple impacts confirmed."

That voice would be Captain Elson, in the Skaal-Tel class destroyer Typhoon...sent in to supervise crew training, transferred from the Kapella. Eventually he would become more famous then he'd ever bargained for...

"Target destroyed."

As the fighters banked off, he could see his own Triikor weaving back and forth away from the burning structure, the Scaffold finally exploding and sending debris and fire in all directions, barely missing a fighter, and sending up clouds of mineral clouds...

"Prepare for immediate surface bombardment!"

The Immortal Emperors commander...his voice ringing loud and clear, preparing to finish the mission.

"Standing by."

The replies of the techs in the flight bay loading the atmospheric deprivation warhead into the cruise missile.

"Commence surface delivery."

Self-explanatory. Warhead launched...

"Delivery confirmed."

"Surface temperature fifteen-twenty-three and climbing..."

"Surface temperature seventeen-forty-two and stable..."

"Estimated immediate casualties: 98 percent."

"Requesting clearance to dock"

"Clearance granted."

"Primary directive achieved."

"Prepare for secondary directive."

"Prepare for hyperspace."

The last seconds had gone by rather quickly; the secondary objective was to destroy the cryo-trays.

The recording ended and the screen went blank.

It was midnight. Nobody was up; the bare minimum crew was up. Nobody would be in the central kiosk. Suddenly he was reminded of the fragility of life. Emotions began reappearing, he sniffed and wiped away a tear, one of countless past, present, and future shed for the inhabitants of that desert world. The Hiigarans had made a memorial of that world...

He got up and walked away, unnoticed, the kiosk turning off by itself.

Chapter 9: Dark Tidings

The super-carrier hyper jumped near the Koreth's Rift sector, close by a debris field. Their raider allies exited hyper space, along with the Somtaaw. The Somtaaw were making a fuss over...Siege Cannon!

The carrier ordered the raiders to move in and secure the cannon. Out of nowhere the Caal-Shto and a small Kiith Manaan fleet exited out of hyperspace.

They were several light years from Koreth's Rift, Somtaaw and Manaan were too far away to lend assistance to one another. The Caal-Shto's commander recoiled at the sight of the huge Taiidan Imperial mothership class vessel...it was...huge. The Caal-Shtos commander hailed the Flytrap.

"This is the Kiith Manaan carrier Caal-Shto. Enemy mother ship, stand down and prepare to be boarded."

Qu'jet was busy, adding polish to the exterior of his Triikor, when the PAs activated.

"This is the Caal-Shto. Imperial craft, surrender! Marine boarding craft are en route. You will comply!"

Admiral: "Negative Kiith Manaan. Prepare to be blasted into oblivion. All units, prepare to engage!"

Taiidan Marine units began setting up checkpoints, anticipating boarding parties. All systems powered up for the giant vessels first confrontation, one vessel against the Kiith Manaan fleet. The vessels salvaged at the Gozan IV research base had been attached to other fleets...

Admiral: "LOCK WEAPONS AND FIRE AT WILL! STRIKE CRAFT, LAUNCH! PREPARE TO ROLL A HEAVY CRUISER OFF THE PDA LINE! Get the collectors and 'trollers movin. Asteroid and dust clouds detected. Harvest. Weapon crews engage all Kushan capital ships...comm out."

Shutting down the comm he begins issuing battle orders, the Flytrap trembling as the vessel begins moving away, suddenly the weapons come to life, several ion beams raking across

the Caal-Shto, which launches fighters en masse, the other Kiith Manaani vessels close in, their ranks including 2 heavy cruisers, 4 destroyers and a pair of missile destroyers. A drone frigate arrives and launches its gun-drones, which fly in and begin peppering the hull with bullet holes.

Entire squadrons, including Avatar are prepped and launched on the numerous launch rails, propelled into space and the midst of the battle, before even regaining control of their craft several multi-gun corvettes flew in looking for choicy targets, suddenly firing a massive hail of bullets at Qu'jets craft, each one suddenly exploding into dust.

Next to him a Koshiir-Ra floats around, bobbing up and down. He fires the plasma pulse cannons at one corvette and explodes, the custom Triikor suddenly darting off into the maelstrom, eventually the rest of Avatar squadron follows, the other squadrons of strike craft break off and begin coordinated assaults on the nearby heavy cruisers.

Qu'jets craft weaves back and forth, taking a moment to open fire on the Avatars ion turret, launching a light plasma bomb which slams into the top turret, overloading several systems while the Manaani begin repairs.

Out of nowhere more hypergates appear, the crews of the vessels cease fire as the hordes of the beast emerge.

Admiral: "All units cease fire, lock onto the beast and engage!"

He turns his craft around and flies off at the beast, firing all weapons at one of the beast carriers, firing a quartet of missiles into the flight bay, then sending plasma bombs into the bridge.

The carrier shudders, he brings his craft around 180, his craft still moving, cruising at ultra-high speeds, his craft rotating directionally and giving him a good shot at the engines. He doesn't hesitate and fires missiles, plasma bombs, pulse launchers; and watches with glee as something goes through the plasma thruster vents and detonates on the fusion reactor, setting off a cataclysmic reaction which consumes the entire beast vessel in a display of flame, the giant vessel now nothing, the green Manaani vessels begin engaging the Beast, the Flytrap rolls a heavy cruiser off the production line, flying past its Kushan counterparts and delivering a broadside to the beast command vessel, the grotesque Somtaaw thing returns fire with energy cannons. Moving into range of its infected counterpart the new heavy cruiser opens fire with all weapons. The Flytrap then turns about to face the beast vessel and powers up engines. Soon the craft moves into the melee with the Beast vessel.

Qu'jet, confident in his dog fighting ability, begins to have visions. He saw...things.

I'm dreaming..he thought.

Giant biological structures, edifices...he saw the Naggarok again...calling, beckoning. He could sense it, inputting mere suggestions of its thoughts and memory. He could detect its association with a Imperial.

Infection? he thought so anyways. Unless the Imperials were working with this thing, which he saw as unlikely. No idiot would sell out to this thing.

Councilman Risseau's VIP quarters.

The robed figure sat in his room, the sounds of battle ringing throughout the bulkheads, the scream of fighters being launched, the dull thud of heavy guns, the characteristic sound of the ion beams.

The Somtaaw had not noticed them, being shielded by a ionic interference anomaly. The Turanics were also keeping them busy.

He opened a private channel, full encryption, to the Beast.

"Beast, I know you hear."

"Iiiii heaaar...parts....baaad...part...angry...why, attack....weee....goodD!"

"Yes...of course."

"Other part off taaidan have weapon. Noomad Moooon...the.....ring peeeople...traderssss...baaad...trader...hellp...parts...hear...song....void....hateeeee...."

"You would want the Bentusi destroyed, along with the Republic?"

"Peeeeeerhapsss....whyyyyy asssssk? WAaaaaaant heeeeeellllp ussssss?"

"...Yes, I will help you. In exchange for ½ the galaxy, one half for your-self, and ½ of us. There will be no 'parts', and no 'traders'. They will be destroyed or part of you."

"Deeeeeeeeeeeaaaal....cccccepttted..."

Admiral: "All craft withdraw! Withdraw!"

The admiral was extremely agitated. The Beast had come, the Manaani were faring badly against the beast, and the councilman had the nerve to order retreat! Insane! What was wrong with him!

Qu'jet shuddered. He felt the beast had done something. He could feel something had changed. The beast stopped attacking the retreating Imperial vessels.

Then it struck him.

What have we done...

The Kiith Manaani fleet watched the Imperials leave, they too realized in despair, they would be destroyed.

The beast vessels charged infection beams and fired.

The Caal-Shto was the first, enough of the crew ejected into the pods, which hyper spaced onto the Angel Moon over Hiigara, close by a recovery team.

The Manaani crew carried grenades and had the dead-mans switches, and detonated themselves into ash or killed themselves, preferring to die in shreds then live with the beast, the unlucky souls screamed in eternal agony as they were bound to the beast.

The rest of the Manaani fleet retreated into hyperspace, the Beast pondering its new toy, or...toys.

Chapter 10

The Goddess class carrier made a trip to the Kyori sectors raider outpost.

The damaged station twirled in orbit, remnants of a fleet drifting by and by, the carrier hailing the station.

Admiral: "What happened?"

The admiral listened in, background chatter of Turanics clearly hearable, including a smattering of Taiidani language.

Outpost: "Somtaaw come. Take crew. Gone find a Naggarok...our source report as beast command ship.

Our source say beast want find Naggarok. Source has transferred coordinates and sabotaged hyperdrive. Transmitting coordinates."

Suddenly a set of coordinates entered the computers. The Flytrap then launched a pod filled with RUs for the trouble the raiders had gone through, the Flytrap transmitting the information to the force group of TIN Immolator before itself entering hyperspace, this time going off to the coordinates of the Naggarok.

Chapter 11: Naggarok

The giant craft exited hyperspace, getting a view of the unusual vessel nearby, the familiar growths all over the sides. The admiral picks up the PA.

Admiral: "By order of Galactic Councilman Risseau, the Taiidan Imperials have aligned themselves with the beast. We are to repair their derelict vessel and escort it into hyperspace."

The vessel remains dark and silent, suddenly flickering to life.

Qu'jet sleeps silently in the cockpit of his Triikor Custom, the reclining chair set all the way back, suddenly awakened by the comm.

Listening he feels something in the pit of his stomach, a hybrid of fear, anger, and the sense of impending doom.

What have we done...we have allied with this beast, perhaps thrown in our lot to be damned after everything else is destroyed.

He gets up and sets the chair to default alignment.

'Why do you not like me?'

He hears the voice loud and clear within the confines of his mind. Calling...as if familiar.

'Why? WHyyyyyyYYYYY???' the voice hissed in its slurred accent.

The beast. What was wrong with him? Medication did not work. Perhaps reasoning with this beast would work.

"Who are you beast?" he thought.

'I am the Beast. Why do you fear what you do not know?'

'What I do not know? All I know is of the eternal damnation those that bind with you must endure.'

'What is this damnation you speak of?' asked the beast in an inquisitive manner.

'I aaam perfection...order to chaoss...the frailness, the imperfection that you are, like the builders of this ship, I am one with them. They are me and I am theeem...perhaaaaps I shoulld show you?' spoke the beast in a soothing voice, or what it tried to convey in a pittance of a soothing voice. Its voice was hoarse...malicious.

"Umm...NO! I AM NOT GOING INTO THE BOWELS OF YOUR SHIP SO I CAN BE INFECTED!" he replied in defiance. He would not be infected! He was not stupid!

'Who saaaaaays you have choooice? No thiiiink I caaaaannnott do what I want?' ended the beast.

Suddenly Qu'jet felt sick, nauseous. The last statement of the beast struck a chord through his nerves, sending a chill through his spine. He perceived a pulling sensation. First he felt he was pulled in one direction. Then another...suddenly he felt as if he was pulled from one point to another, as if transcending space to be pulled from one spot to another a distance away, then he saw blackness.

And he was falling...

He hit the ground, the crack of bone resounding and echoing it seemed.

He lay on the floor, recollecting himself, feeling the side of his jaw, he felt the thick texture, of blood and wiped it off. Suddenly the wound began to heal itself.

Wiping it off of on his pants he reached into his mouth and plucked out a shattered molar, dropping it onto the floor, blood collecting in his mouth, the salty sanguine taste was slightly repulsing. He spat out the blood and wiped his mouth off and thought no more of it.

Above him a iris opened, a bright light, almost like the light one saw at death; such a light shone down on his features, he looked up and could see but absolute brightness.

'Tttttt isssss I..Beast...' called a voice, the voice echoing through the halls and back.

'....do youuuu not wonder who I am? Or how I came to bee? Or do you not care, and wish to slay me?'

He looked up, looking through the light, seeing he was in a giant, airy, seemingly "public" space.

"YOU INFECT OTHERS AGAINST YOUR OWN WILL! YOU BIND THOSE AROUND YOU! YOU MAKE SLAVES OF THE FREE, BIND THE UNBOUND, AND TWIST THEIR SONG!"

'...I bring perfecccttion...' hissed the voice, sinister and odious.

"YOU ARE NOT PERFECT! YOU ARE A DESTROYER! YOU CAME FROM HYPERSPACE AND SLEW THE INHABITANTS OF THIS SHIP!"

'I DID NOT SLAY THEM!' hissed the beast, in a angry voice. 'I AM THEM! THEY ARE ME! WE ARE ONE!'

He recoiled from the anger of the voice...it was very angry. Maybe...

"Who are you? What did you come from?"

'I aam from outside...I was once a nothing, a non-life, I could not think...I could not say...I could only do as Outside wanteddd...The Progenitors, the origin-parts, built thesee destroyeers, destroyed whole worlds, attacked Outside, my origin-part. I attackedddd the Progenitor-Naggarok, I took one mind...and I saw all. I wantttted to see the liggggggght, I saw the light of perfection, and brought the rest under my fffffoold....I only wish to bring the others underrr the fold of perfeccction...'

Suddenly he understood the driving force. It desired to expand its mind, by taking those of others...by force or not. But why did it spare him? To play with? Maybe...but he had a couple questions first.

"You are not perfect! You kill with no remorse, is that perfection!"

The Beast stopped to consider this.

'All must see the light of perfection...order to chaos...you are in chaos...you are not perfect....you Taiidan fight each other...you have Republic, and Imperial, and Kushan, and Kadeshi. And you call your selves perfect? We are united, as one body, many minds as one, one body, one soul.'

'The little Kiith Somtaaw is weak. Their flicker selves are inferior. They do not understand. Your other-friendselves do under stand. They ally with us. Hence you are with us...do you wonder why you are not infected? Look at your shoe...you have already been touched by my essence...'

Qu'jet looked up with a perplexed expression, then looked down at his shoe, coated with beast nanobots.

"Oh...what the hell?"

'YOU DO SEE!' boomed the beast.

'Now you realize you are different. You always have been different, Qu'jet, descendant of the Dus'rak family line!

He stood shocked. How did the beast know his name, more or less his last name, the name of his family "clan". The beast soon answered its own question.

'How do I know? Because you were me.....'

'The Progenitors tried to leave this ship when it was infected. Hundreds more like this ship everywhere, waiting to be found. This ship, launch people. One people launch to Hiigara. One people-self is your origin part.'

'You are me..your origin-part was partially tainted, but strong..hence we are one, always been one. I know your thoughts. I know you wish to slay me. You cannot. You are a tiny flicker-self. I cannot bind you to me. Only you can bind yourself to me.

But it does not mean I cannot destroy you...'ended the Beast.

Qu'jet looked about, his mind working going through a state of shock.

Was this true? Was he really a alien, a descendant of a ancient race of butchers? Could he trust this beast? Was he telling the truth?

He looked about the confines of the reddened structure...

It said it could not bind me...

He walked across the atrium, the bright light burning before fading, touching the red growth on the wall to no avail. It was mortifying..

No shit, this is weird...

He looked around, and noted a weird thing, that resembled a infected palm tree in the center of the room. He walked towards it, then in another direction.

He heard a faint...scream?

He turned around and looked at the floor and gasped.

What the hell was that thing!!!!

He could see it...a mold, of a life form, humanoid. It reached out towards an unseen object with a outstretched hand, the mouth open in an eternal scream. It looked like the infection had gotten to him before he could get up, his body turned into the sludge around him, the sludge had turned into a mold all around him. It was...disturbing. He could make out a good number of facial expressions, then suddenly backed away in fright.

Help...

He turned around, and looked at the floor. They were everywhere. People in all stages of positions, most fallen on the floor and reaching out to something, all had fallen...growths everywhere. It was scary.

"I'VE SEEN ENOUGH BEAST! LET ME OUT OF HERE! OR I WILL FORCE MYSELF OUT!"

'Fine. Have it your way then.' said the beast in an angry "very-well-then" manner.

And he woke up in his craft.

It was like, like a dream almost. He checked his mouth. No blood...the molar had regrown. His shoe, clean...his hand showed a red glop, which began sizzling and burning...then remaining inert. He scooped off the remnants of that...thing into a empty bottle that formerly held water, then checked the rest of himself for beast nanos or growths.

Nothing. He got up and headed out to the bio-lab. There was someone he needed to see...

Interlude: Answers to Questions, Questions to Answer.

Walking down the corridors of the Flytrap he looked for Bio-Lab 1. Yar'jeem sat in Bio-Lab 1, looking and admiring all the nice shiny toys, genetic resequencer, chromosomal analyzer, electrodes, genetic analysis scanners, and other rich fancy toys.

He walked in on her while she patted a transmission electron microscope, coughing ever so slightly and standing patiently near the door, his thoughts pre occupied.

She turned around, running a hand through her auburn hair and watching him quizzically.

"Yes?"

He took several steps forward.

"You are Scientist Yar'jeem, biogenetist, correct? I have..."

Takes out the bottle and walks towards the TEM, getting out a special vacuum containment petri slide, taking a transfer bag, wrapping it around the bottle, then opening the bottle, and transferring the material to the petri dish, and covering it.

"I have some...anomalous materials that need analysis. You were working on research onto the beast, correct?"

"Yes, I was....what is that in the dish?"

"Look."

She looked into the microscope and gasped, then flicked a few switches, at home with her machines.

The screen next to him flashed, and a simple genome analysis was begun.

The screen displayed a unusual genetic structure, then began cross analysis. It was...unhuman. Most of the genetic tags were "unknown".

A interlaced quadruple helix was displayed, along with countless unknown nucleotides. She hummed to herself and began tapping the keyboard, running some analyses and so forth, Qu'jet tapping his foot...bored to death...so...complex was all this. He decided to leave and return later.

"Uhh...call me when you have an analysis complete."

She nods.

"Wait...where'd you get this sample from? The cells are inert, like they're dead. Yet the genetic material is still present. How is this possible?"

He walks out, not revealing any answers.

He knew from rudimentary biology that life forms and their genetic makeup was contained within DNA, constructed in a double-helix. There were several chemical nucleotides, and nitrogen bases. There was adenine and thymine, guanine and cytosine. These were put in unique orders as per species. But, this organism did not have just these four different chemical components. It had a quadruple interlaced helix...nearly impossible. A few hundred different bases...unthinkable! This was one of the greatest discoveries that could ever be imagined!

*Also one of the deadliest...*he thought.

Walking down the halls he walked up to a lift and went to the bridge.

Emerging he looked about the giant command center, the heart of this giant mothership. Looking around for the Ready Room he spotted it, stopping in his tracks as Councilman Risseau left, his flowing robes moving across the floor, the councilman stepping into the lift and going down.

He enters the ready room to see the Admiral sitting silently.

"Qu'jet, the councilman is quite...adamant. An Imperialist fleet is arriving soon. They will commence repairs on the Naggarok. We are to proceed to a set of coordinates, all the way on the other side of the galaxy. The man's orders..."

Suddenly he walked out angrily, looking about the bridge with the expression of a deranged psycho, looking around and seeing the Councilman's quarters, the door anyways. He runs in and opens the door.

All is silent. Looking around he turns on a light and looks at the desktop comm unit; left on. Perusing the transcripts he listens, the admiral ordering hyperspace to a set of coordinates.

He runs outside...

Chapter 12: Fight the Future

"STOP! DO NOT HYPERSPACE! IT'S A TRAP!"

The bridge crew turned to look at him.

"It's a trap! We are working with the beast, because Councilman Risseau ordered so! His computer is on! They ordered him back...a week ago. The 1st Alpha Elite Guard fleet has left its docks. The Councilman is leaving, right now of all times. An Imperial Fleet is en route...the Beasts attacks have diminished, a Tiamat mothership has been attacked! What does this mean?"

"They want the Unbound. They are using us to help them...to get the Unbound. We are nothing to them...but they want the Bentusi, the Tiamat, the others."

The admiral turned around and yelled.

"You-are-mad!"

He recoiled, suddenly losing resolve, steeling himself, remembering the evidence he had seen.

"Would you like the evidence?"

The Admiral glared at Qu'jet, barking a order for the vessel to move away from the Naggarok, following Qu'jet into the room.

"LOCK DOWN ALL SYSTEMS! GET ME THE COUNCILMAN! LOCK DOWN THE FLIGHT BAYS!"

The bridge is active, Qu'jet heads to one of the lifts and goes to the flight bay.

Risseau walks slowly to the Heavy Corvette. The Flytrap and her crew knew too much. They knew of the Naggarok. The repair fleet was a section of those loyal to him, the 1st Elite. The Flytrap had seen too much. Its firepower had been needed to show force to the beast...now it was expendable; tables were set in motion, plans readied.

The repair fleet emerged from hyperspace and began repairs. Risseau walked to the ramp, followed by two burly Taiidan Elite Guard Commissars in power armor.

Behind them a few hundred meters back a door opened.

Qu'jet walked out, aiming his .50 mass driver pistol

"STOP THAT CORVETTE!"

Other elevators began opening, Taiidan Marines pouring out, firing, shots flying across the flight bay and impacting everywhere.

The Flytrap had moved beyond sensor range of the Naggarok by now...suddenly several hypergates opened, black ships pouring out and opening fire on the Flytrap, rail guns and ion beams raking the hull.

Shit! he thought...

Suddenly he pieced it together. Risseau wanted the glory of the Taiidan Imperium...and recruited the beast. He needed to curry favor, repair the Naggarok. He needed to show that the Taiidan Imperials were powerful allies, the Flytrap and its use. But they were never meant to survive. They were thousands of light years away from home...the repair fleet...most likely Elite Guard. The new ships were elite guard as well.

The marines ducked as the Commissars began firing back, the staccato of automatic weapons fire ringing through the halls, followed by return fire, the Taiidani Marines advancing slowly, firing short bursts from their mass driver rifles before advancing.

He ducked behind a barrel, popping his head up and firing at the robed figure, scoring a shot on his leg, advancing behind cover.

Cover fire over his head forced him down, including the deep voice of "NOBODY HARMS THE EMPEROR!", followed by more weapons fire.

What the hell...the Emperor is dead! I saw it! I saw him burn over Hiigara!

He looked up and fired two more times at Risseau, a shot hits his leg and grazes, blood dripping to the floor as the Commissars haul Risseau into the Corvette, which promptly opens fire, turning and engaging reverse engines, opening fire with all weapons and shredding up the fighters, which lay unprotected in the flight bay.

An Elite Guard carrier then emerged from hyperspace, and fired a cruise missile into the flight bay; the blast rocking throughout the craft, sending marines flying in all directions as the black-brown vessel flies off. The flight bay began to burn, small fires appear left and right, a random explosion, and so forth. The Flytrap began firing at the Elite Guard fleets around it, which hyper spaced out just as quickly as they had gone, the flight bay was charred and wrecked, repair crews running about left and right to put out fires.

Qu'jet crawled out from under debris, walking over to where the heavy corvette had been; looking at the bloodstain, scraping some charred and dried blood off the deck.

The Emperor Riesstiu, the first one, had engineered his blood to be a different color, red with a shade of blue.

He looked at the piece of dried blood, and tilted it in the light.

First red, then a shade of blue.

He got up and kicked a empty barrel.

Damn! How is this possible! How can he live! How! What was going on! He signaled to one of the marines nearby to get a blood sample out to bio-lab, watching the medics moving around and getting the wounded elsewhere.

"We found a set of coordinates in Risseaus comm-unit. We have no evidence of why, but I do not think we were meant to live. I found several remote detonate devices on PDAs, resource storage units, barracks, and the induction module. Apparently we weren't meant to survive" ended the security officer.

Again they were all in the meeting room, having absorbed enough developments. First they had found an alien craft...then Qu'jet had told them about what he had seen, and heard. Then they retold the attack of the Elite Guard fleet, and Risseaus true identity.

"But why would Risseau do this?" asked the Security Officer. "Why would he sabotage this ship? If he is who you say he is, Riesstiu's clone, why would he do this? He isn't that stupid."

Qu'jet snorted once, then looked over to the Security Officer.

"Riesstiu the Fourth, immolated Kharak, burned whole asteroid colonies to ash. And you are wondering why he would ally with the beast. Riesstiu was insane, power-hungry. I guess he had sent out a clone of himself into the Assembly of Lords, during the Homeworld Wars. After his death, we all know whatever was left of the House of Lords became the Imperial Council. But, there are no records of any Risseau before the Hiigaran landing.

The 1st Elite Guard fleet, as you know, was the first to hunt down the rebels and destroy them at Vorshan's Rift. The general public does not know of the 1st alpha fleet. To them, there is only one Elite Guard, the second. Everyone here is above Level 7 clearance, so you all should know what the 1st Alpha fleet was for. It was they who attacked Kharak, painted in standard colors. The Emperor used the 1st as a black ops fleet, a fleet used to do his more covert and politically sensitive work, stuff that he could not trust the raiders with.

Now we have a madman, a fleet, and a monster on our hands. In a sense, we're fucked."

Suddenly the PA went active.

Comm: "Sirs, there's something on the Tel-programs that you should be aware of."

Admiral: "Put it through on the display screen."

On the other side of the room was the giant 30-inch LCD display, which chittered and came to life....

"INN, Imperial News Network! This is Hruk Qubaal, and in today's news, we have been dealt a grievous blow. The Taiidani Imperial Navys newest vessel, the Venus Flytrap, has announced its defection to the Taiidan Republicans.

Radicals have called for "A jihad against the traitors". The Moderate party had no comment on this issue. The Venus Flytrap carrier announced its intention to defect just a few minutes ago, and attacked a Outer Rim frontier fleet. Clearly they are too cowardly to come to us.

"We will hunt them down and destroy them!" Councilman Risseau has quoted.

The scene changed, to that of a gaunt figure sitting on a podium, Councilman Risseau, most likely aboard the Elite Guard carrier, which was Sajuuk knows where.

"I Councilman Risseau, guarantee you that this traitor-ship will be eliminated...their crew will be hunted to the far corners of the galaxy...we will go to even Hiigara to capture them and bring them back to Justice!"

The display turned off, the crew mulled over their new dilemma.

They could not go home. They could not warn home...the Emperor had already done so.

Chapter 13: Awareness of the Bound-self

The Flytrap had engaged hyper drives, transporting itself to the coordinates labeled on the computers.

As the ship flickered into existence, the sensors began to shut down.

Qu'jet sat in his fighter, watching row upon row of lights go out.

He flicked a switch and turned on internal lights, the confines of his own craft are lit dimly by several tiny fluorescents.

Suddenly the comm goes on:

"We are the Bentusi. You have breached our space, violated our confines. You cannot be allowed to live. You may be bound to the Destroyer, and then it would find our home. This cannot come to pass...we shall sing and mourn your lost songs, but your songs must come to pass to allow ours to be heard. Farewell bound ones."

The bridge crew sits there, paralyzed in fear at those words, suddenly power returns to all systems, the recently produced fleet around them begin to bring power back on.

Sensors: Sir, we got ONE GIANT READING! I repeat, We have a type 2 Dyson sphere!

Admiral: On screen!

The screen flickered to life, displaying the image of a Dyson Sphere, a giant "eggshell" around an entire solar system. Thousands if not billions of sensor readings flooded the scanning arrays, ships of exotic designs and power readings were everywhere, giant power spikes that registered off the chart were detected. Surface scans of the sphere showed trillions of structures.

Qu'jet looked out the flight bay, admiring the beauty of order, of harmony, the Bentusi had over their homes.

*Its beautiful...*he thought.

Suddenly Trade ships began circling around on approach pattern. A Ring-ship began approach as well...and another vessel, designed almost like a more...horrifying cousin of the Qwaar-jet heavy cruiser, began approach.

Soon the sensors picked up a giant sphere, moving...slowly...

Admiral: ALL CRAFT! LAUNCH! BATTLE STATIONS! PREPARE FOR HYPE-

Sensor: Inhibitor Field detected!

Comm: Skaal-Tel TF 4 reports range of Bentusi fighters. 'Tel Task Force 4 has engaged.

Aboard a Bentusi Super Acolyte there was silence. Inside was a large stone, a psychic beacon for a mind of the Unbound, to put a small part of his psyche, to focus on piloting this craft. An Unbound had a powerful mind, and could control several dozen of the Acolytes at the same time. Some of the best could control several hundred.

The craft hummed and purred, suddenly a energy pulse flew by.

The craft became angry, its "soul" raging with fiery anger, the Unbound piece-psyche struggling to keep the unruly vessel in line.

Before it broke free.

Suddenly like a swarm of raging bees the Bentusi fighters swarmed over the Skaal-Tels, firing madly, gouging giant holes into the destroyers, which began reversing away.

The missiles of the Skaal-Fas flew left and right, knocking the Unbound's fighter swarms away...suddenly the giant shapes of Trade ships, Ring ships, the Assault Barges, and a Battle Sphere arrive, the Trade ships firing their triple rapid fire ion beams, angry beams ripping through composite like tissue, firing again and again, the weapons of the Unbound shredding through the Imperial fleets, hordes of fighters rushing to do battle with the enemy.

Qu'jets fighter launched into the maelstrom, a Super Acolyte shooting past at break neck speeds, he turns around and gives pursuit, firing several times as the craft performs high-g maneuvers, nearly impossible to mimic.

He closes in on a Trade ship and fires.

Young one...why do you fight the Unbound? asked the Bentusi.

Out loud he yelled.

"YOU GIVE ME NO CHOICE!"

You have a choice...tainted one. We sense the Destroyer within you...come...

He fired the afterburners and flew in for a attack run, flying directly between the two sides of the "horseshoe" and firing his plasma bombs, finding that he could no longer move.

"THIS COMMANDER 'JET, I HAVE LOST CONTROL OF MY FIGH-"

A bright light, and nothing more.

He became acutely aware of his heartbeat.

He awoke in his fighter, looking around, in a white room. He was dimly aware of a battle. Looking into the cockpit window he could see the battle still raging, the Skaal-Fas pouring missiles as the rest of the fleet moved into a battle sphere around the Flytrap, determined to sell themselves dearly.

He opened the canopy and jumped out, his feet hitting the hard floor, the ground feeling...slushy? Hard concrete...slushy?

He could hear whispers.

Indeed, one of the lost Unbound, the Progenitors-

Ah yes what do we do?

He listens...!

But he has no song.

What of? He has potential-

AS ONE OF THEM! screamed the last voice.

His hands found their way around his ears, as if the sounds originated from outside, but no...they originated from within.

"GET OUT OF MY MINDDDDDDD!" he screamed, falling to his knees, a gripping sensation of pain and then blackness.

He woke up and looked around.

It was dark, like the Naggarok...almost...it was humid and hot, though. Very. Maybe 90 degrees Centigrade ; 70 percent humidity.

Getting up he turned around to see his Triikor parked quietly where it once was. He looked out a porthole and watched the battle.

A Skaal-Fa was fending off enemy fighters, and the Battlesphere lurched in, firing dozens and dozens of heavy ion beams, shredding the hull into bits, the ship began to explode-

And suddenly the battle paused.

And he watched the battle play back.

And then a voice called.

He watched the battle pause and turned around, walking forward again, arriving in a giant open space. He was in the front, he could see from one part of the front of the horseshoe to another.

Like a twist on a dark novel, he saw rows upon rows of Bentusi, on countless levels stacked high up beyond counting.

All were hooked up to giant machines, quiet humming machines.

The dampness was nearly unbearable. He wiped some moisture off of his brow and yelled.

"WHY DID YOU BRING ME HERE!"

And almost as promptly the reply.

You are one of the Lost, the Progenitors they called themselves. They were once with us, they lived for science, technology, to analyze data, to bring order to chaos. They were once bound, like you, and became Unbound, transcending the need for politics, for prejudice...for feelings, of hate, and greed...

But their sciences turned to darkness...they destroyed the Bound...attacked their fellow Unbound...they ruled once a great Empire, forged new star systems and universes with their thoughts and dreams, once they were great and mighty...but they became evil. They destroyed the Order around them...and threatened to destroy us...they waged war upon nature itself, Outside...we worked with Outside against one of our own, we engineered the Ultimate Weapon, one that could defeat technology, adapt, assimilate! And destroy our enemy for all time!

He listened...did he believe what he had heard...

"You created the Beast! Didn't you! The Beast! That is why it does not harbor love to you! That is why it wants you! It wants answers!"

Yes...but we cannot. It would bind us to itself, in anger, in quest of perfection. The soul of the Lost lives within the Beast, driving itself to perfection, the bringing of order, to chaos. The galaxy was in chaos. It sought to bring order. In itself it brought what it feared.

We feel and sense your thoughts too...like all Unbound, we are one. We saw that you saw what the Beast had to show you...

The Naggarak was their home...one of many, harboring civilizations within its bowels. It harbored you...as the Beast told.

The Beast has become powerful. It is dangerous...it has warped itself into a twisted being so dark, darkened ever more by the ones it was meant to save us all from! It must be destroyed...it cannot live.

Now do you understand why we fear so?

The Destroyer...it senses...it knows. It comes for us! It comes to bind us, it has found us here! We must flee...

20 Trade ships began powering up hyper drives and leaving.

You must return to your Bound. We have searched your thoughts. You are correct. The Tyrant lives, has bound himself in ally with the Beast. He must be destroyed.

We will summon the Council. We must hold our home. The Beast will be here, any minute, to bind all our souls to its essence.

He looked around the confines of the Tradeship, dark shadows creating a interplay of light and shade throughout the vessel.

He turned around and prepared to leave.

The battle must end. We must not kill each other, and leave ourselves to die and be bound to the Destroyer. We have ceased fire. We know of your situation. The Bentusi will watch for your song through the void.

And suddenly he woke up again, the Triikor drifting away from the Tradeship, which engaged hyper drives and was gone. Turning his craft around he saw the destruction first hand wrought by the Bentusi.

Nearby other Council vessels emerged from hyperspace, the incessant chatter of the Unbound minds pervading and echoing in his thoughts.

He saw the fleet, broken, the Flytrap herself had suffered heavy damage, very few wrecks of the Unbound were present. Only Super Acolytes, and a few bits of armor plate, and that was all. A Assault Barge flew past his craft, resembling the hapless Cargo Barges, but many more times infinitely dangerous.

He flicked on the nav beacon and hailed the Flytrap.

"Flytrap, this is Wing Commander Qu'jet, requesting permission to dock."

"This is Flytrap Harbor-master, Triikor 001 is cleared to dock in Flight Bay 3 on the port side."

He sighs and presses a few buttons, setting the craft to autopilot, sending a private message to the Admirals quarters:

"Admiral, the Beast is on its way here. The Bentusi have agreed to stop firing on us...and I have more answers onto the origins of the beast."

Chapter 14: Who is eviler, the helper of evil or evil itself?

The Admiral sat, reading Qu'jets detailed report and analysis concerning the Beast.

"You mean, to tell me...the Beast is a Unbound creation? That it itself is in a Unbound state? That it was created by the Bentusi? And...here, that it is alive, sentient, and out to assimilate us all in a quest for order to chaos?"

"Yes, sir."

The admiral leaned back on his chair, Qu'jet taking the time to look about the spacious office facility. Beige walls, ceiling, floor, mid 8000's type furniture...

"Now, we have worse situations on our hands. The only sympathizers we have say the Imperium is preparing to hunt us down. We have defensive preparations to make. We will be moving away from this place, seeing that the Beast will be coming, and maybe the Imperial forces as well. Dismissed."

The admiral coughed as Qu'jet left, walking to a lift, he punched the wall as the lift went down.

Damn! We cannot do this. If we leave, then we will die. If we stay, then we will die.

Walking to his quarters he locked the door, patching in his private comm unit into the carrier Immortal Emperor, Bombardier 2nd class Rochell.

Looking into the screen he sees Rochell, in pilots gear, as if ready to go very very soon.

"Hey, Rochell, long time no see...we have a problem out here."

"What the hell? They said you and your ship defected, and was working with the Beast to over throw everybody. They even say the Beast, you and the Unbound are collaborating. Bentusi Tradeships are leaving. We were following one but we were attacked by Tiamat Crabships...our entire battle group, gone. We got lucky. What's going on? Why do you look like you have something on your mind..."

"Rochell, I have bad news. You remember the Emperor? He lives."

Rochell was silent, his face going pale.

"You're not kidding me?"

"Yep. Councilman Risseau is one of the Emperors clones. Bio-lab matched it. It is he who is working with the Beast. When he was aboard he worked out the deal with that...thing. We know too much Rochell. His computer is here, the crew has seen his presence here...we've even seen the main beast vessel. An Imperial fleet is repairing it as we speak. The 1st Elite Guard is gone. They are Sajuuk-knows-where."

Still more silence...

"What can I do then Rochell?"

He sighed...what could anybody do? The Emperor was very thorough, and would leave no holes within any plans.

"Nothing, I guess. Except send an anonymous thing to INN. Transmitting the data we got from Risseaus unit to yours. Get it to INN...it may be our only hope out here."

Fumbling around he plugged a chip into the computer and transmitted the information, the transcripts, plans, official communiques, and so forth. Turning off the unit he headed off to the nearest bar.

Walking down the corridors in standard uniform he took a left and went down the hall, seeing the bar where most of the fighter pilots went, called the "Fiirky-bird", the logo a Fiirkan-class scout blazing across a asteroid belt, with the words "The BIG GREAT FIIRKY!" super imposed on top of it.

Walking in he watched the strike craft pilots, in varying degrees of alcoholic toxicity. He goes to a stool and orders a "Afterburn", a exotic concoction of differently brewed spirits, plus other components. Getting the mug he studies the liquid, a light green. Shaking the mug very

slightly he notes a viscous state, the stuff was rather thick. Another shake revealed it to be almost like nearly-frozen Jelly.

He chuckles and downs the strangely sweet tasting liquid, the alcohol quickly working through his bloodstream, in a matter of seconds he begins hallucinating...and then strangely clearing up before he enters a drunken stupor.

Lowering the nearly finished mug he looks out the porthole again. The stuff was good, he liked it in that it did not give a eternal hangover, which was a good thing...he'd seen pilots drink themselves stupid, only to have to report to battle stations in seconds. It was not fun...but as per se Taiidani Imperial Military Code, the Afterburn had to be formulated as to not induce massive hangovers, or impair vision and judgment.

Sliding the mug away he watches the chatting pilots, most of them talking about this or that girl, this or that porno flick, this or that kill. Perhaps it was too predictable.

He heard the hiss of the door.

A handful of people walked in, the bar was by far empty, and could accommodate about three hundred or so people. Only sixty looked to be present. It was getting quite loud as of now.

Looking around he discreetly snuck out and was gone, the price of the drink deducted from pay, incredibly novel, this new feature was, used in place of bar tabs.

He'd had enough to drink...even though he did not enter stupor-land. He had to make plans. That and the Voices of the Unbound were calling.

Walking with a steady tread he entered his room, turning around and locking the door; as the light turned on he flicked the switch and killed it, preferring to illuminate his room by the natural starlight, in contrast to the oppressively bright halogens that were preferred by others.

Sitting on a reclining chair he leaned back and stared into the ceiling, putting both hands behind his head, bathed in the pale light of distant stars.

Chapter 15

Tranquil, isn't it? he thought.

We listen to the song of the bound ones, the bolero of the suns, the Requiem of the Infinite Void, the haunting call of hyperspace, all beckoning and wailing in a concerto of order...a chillingly beautiful sound. Only one of your Bound-ones has ever heard it...Karan S'jet, of the Kushans.

The world is more than what you can see, taste, smell, or touch. It is more than your politics, your Taiidan or Kushan, or Hiigarans.

It is about the state of nature...it is why we shed our political natures, our planets, our former interstellar empires, to wander free from place to place, to experience the thrill of waking up to a new day or randomness and spontaneity.

The Destroyer does not care of the songs, the calls...it merely seeks these to augment itself. It is why we fear it. We fear it, because it is different, and cannot understand. Yet it tears at us, clawing frantically to us, should any of us be Bound to it we would find an eternity of suffering.

The bound have but a tiny flicker-song, those of the Unbound, our own songs are loud and clear, our thoughts and minds are powerful, the things we hear and create are wondrous and of awesome power and glory.

The Destroyer knows of this. It is why we run. It is why we are here...it is why we will make our last stand, so the rest of our kind may flee.

He blinks, stopping to stretch his arms, this...mind-thing, previously unsettling, was beginning to seem normal.

And then he listened to the call of the stars...it was a eerie song, echoed by each star, echoed and sung in concert by millions of distant spheres, wordless and indescribable. Indeed he found it mystifying, yet weird...the Bentusi was right.

And then he heard the songs of war, the call of the Destroyer, flickering and ebbing, a eerie scream of death echoing, the soul of one of the Progenitors, bound in flesh and mind to this element of awesome power.

And then the klaxons blared, the room bathed in a deep red, the call to arms echoing across the corridors of the carrier, the PA crackling with static.

"Repair crews report repairs complete! Enemy units detected inbound, mines in Grid 14 have begun detonations. Possible strike force on approach from grid 14. Going to battle stations. Task Force strength numbers at 77%. All hands to battle stations. Hyper drive charged. Marine complements readied." He got up and changed into his pilots jumpsuit, hearing the incessant chattering of Tiamat Templars, as giant Crabships flew by the carrier, along with a single Starcraft.

Running down the corridors, Taiidan Marines thumped down the corridors, Engineers yelling about structural integrity fields.

Running into the flight bay he ascended the stairs to the top catwalks, he could see people running to and fro, his bird-eyes view giving him a perfect view of the flight bay.

Suddenly the floor trembled and shook, the entire ship suddenly turning hard on its axis, he gripped both hands and braced his legs, the carrier turning completely around, its pitch altering radically, unbraced items begin falling, the craft quickly righting itself again, a sudden acceleration throwing people to the ground as the giant carrier accelerated, the rest of the Taiidan fleet following.

From the catwalk a bruised hand reached up and grabbed the guide-rail, pulling the rest of himself up Qu'jet looked out the flight bay.

The dark colored ships began approach, only visible as the sun and nearby stellar phenomena reflected light off of its surfaces. The shapes of Skaal-Tel destroyers and Qwaar-jet Heavy Cruisers.

Looking out to the right he could see the fleets of the Unbound. Suddenly a ion beam lashed out, A Elite Guard destroyer firing at a Bentusi Ringship.

All other vessels stopped, the vastly huge Battlesphere moved through, plowing through anything in its path, the Skaal-Tels were crushed against its hull plate, or immolated by ion beams and plasma torpedoes.

Like a reaper the sphere cut a swathe through the black vessels, many reduced to nothing.

The strike craft began launching, PA blaring.

"Squadron-1-2 launch!"

He looked down. 40 Seejurs sat on launch sleds, and suddenly were catapulted out, the Seejurs moving incredibly fast before slowing down, the third belly guns on each craft extracting from their storage bins, the Defenders moving off to battle.

The rest of the Elite Guard fleet retreated and was gone.

Suddenly another set of hyperdrive signatures appeared near the Dyson sphere, the hordes of the beast pouring in.

Bound one, we must go...you are safe. Do what you must. We will do what we must...we must hold them back, buy time for us all.

With that the Unbound vessels turned around and scrambled back to the Dyson sphere, Beast Heavy Cruisers blown away by decloaking orbital structures, which fired exceedingly rapidly, each shot gouging at a ship of the seemingly endless swarm, hundreds of ships of different makes, Frern Aggregates, Taiidan, Kushan, and much to the dismay of the Unbound, Progenitor Doom-Stars and Titans, of which had never been seen by any Taiidan or Kushan for millennia. The Doom-Stars fired their black torpedoes, absorbing nearby light as they hit the orbital stations, releasing anti-photons and gravitons, collapsing the giant orbital platforms, which exploded in flame, sending giant shockwaves through the fleets, no Unbound screamed; nearly everything seemed to be unmanned. So the Bentusi were elsewhere.

He watched the battle..., which seemed to be going for the worst, new ships poured in for all sides, of different makes, each more exotic than the last, employing weapons of radical power, overloading sensors with hundreds of thousands of different readings.

The Flytrap then left, a quantum induction detected by all, and then a flash, and nothing more.

Chapter 16: Contact, Close Aboard...

The Flytrap emerged from hyperspace, in the area of space known as Vorshans Rift, inside Kushan space. Vorshan's Rift was a gap through a giant nebula, the nebula being populated by giant ionic storms, making navigation impossible. Vorshan's Rift was the only way through this nebula, which formed the south-west "barrier" around Hiigara.

The Flytrap went to full stop, the yellow-red vessel contrasting brightly against the blueish-reddish nebula. Inside its crew patiently waited.

Kiith Nabaal Hiigaran Border Patrol Fleet

The Kiith Nabaal fleet sputtered on, one carrier, one heavy cruiser, 5 missile destroyers, 8 destroyers, 5 ion frigates, 9 assault frigates, seven drone frigates and the rest being a giant armada of strike craft.

The Captain of the Nabaal fleet moved near the Sholai nebula, close to Hiigara.

Once before a Turanic Raider fleet had been detected, and launched a surprise attack on the Hiigaran hyper space inhibitor, allowing the Taiidan to slip in and raid Hiigara itself. It would not happen again.

Captain Hruuk Nabaal sat in the captains chair, inside the Avatar heavy cruiser, confident and secure in his own power, on screen the upper dual ion cannon turret was visible. The vessel shuddered underneath his feet, the interplay of ionic "lightning" dancing across the background of the nebula made for a interesting show, a unusual stellar phenomenon. He yawned slightly, putting on a Captains cap, the Nabaalian preferred formality to a great degree.

As the ionic storms cleared a giant vessel was visible, mother ship class, matching nothing in the Kushan databases.

"Scan for rec-codes! Check their recognition codes against the database" ordered the captain.

Taiidan Imperial recognition codes.

All systems were operational. Life signs aboard.

They hadn't been detected yet.

The captain ordered a surprise assault.

3 Taiidan probes were launched, flying towards the Imperial Carrier, each flying in at incredible speeds, and exploding all around the giant craft, followed up by a small incursion, 4 Blade Mk.6s and 2 Arrow class scouts.

Going to yellow alert the Admiral aboard the Flytrap did not notice any capital ships. The AA weapons came to life and began blasting away, yellow flashes lighting up the hull of the craft as it opened fire at its tiny attackers, the behemoth fending off the small hordes that pestered it, the enemy had launched a rather small force, nothing major.

Qu'jet sensed something was amiss, waking up in his bed after a Arrow rudely buzzed by, firing mass driver rounds which were lodged into the composite window material.

Inside the bowels of the carrier was Fleet Intelligence, like most motherships Fleet Intelligence was a given, an included item. The mainframes were working on a Taiidani Imperial Force network transmission (TIFnet).

This included news, statistics, dispatches, and new designs for strike craft.

One such design was for the Imperiums first Missile Corvette, the adding of dual missile packs to a Heavy Corvette chassis. Intelligence also included notes about the Kushans extending their patrol nets to the Sholai nebula, and Vorshans Rift.

Perhaps now would be the time for testing of the new corvette.

As the first missile corvette rolled off the production lines the Nabaal navy struck.

All comm channels went active, the young, "arrogant" voice filling the rooms.

"This is Hruuk Nabaal of the Kushan Navy! SURRENDER IMPERIALS! OR PREPARE TO BE BOARDED! THE REST OF THE NABAAL, MANAAN, AND LIIRHRA FLEET IS EN ROUTE! YOU WILL BE DESTROYED!"

The comm went out just as the capital ships sailed into view, the Nabaal fleet opened fire, ion beams firing and hitting metal, superheating the hull and melting sections.

The Taiidan cloak generators shut down, revealing a equally dangerous armada of Skaal-Tels, Skaal-Fas, Kudaarks, Qwaar-jets, and even three Saarkin-Chos. As one the Taiidan vessels opened fire into the ranks of the Kushan vessels, a interplay of ionic lightning flickering left and right, one hit flickering across the Nabaal carrier.

Aboard the Avatar class vessel Hruuk realized he had made a serious tactical error.

The sensors do not lie! he thought...8 heavy cruisers! EIGHT! Would this be the end? I will be blown into bits, my ashes scattered into the cosmos...

Another Saarkin-Cho carrier, with yellow and brown stripes moved forward. The yellow-brown coloring designated it as a Taiidani Marine carrier.

Qu'jet ran to his Interceptor, left and right Taiidani Marines, Engineers, techs and other fighter pilots ran to their posts, the Flight bay is a humdrum of pure chaos, orders and flight patterns are barked out, last orders are yelled across the room, the powerful roar of fighter engines can be heard, on top of that the screams of the harbor masters and the bang as each craft is launched and hurtled out of the flight bay into the maelstrom, just as the mother ship begins evasive maneuvers, the decks trembling with every move, all power shunted to the engines. Qu'jet runs into his craft and runs through checkpoints, taxing to the mag-sled as the sound level becomes unbearable; and launched with the rest of the fleet. At the center of the battle lay the Flytrap, its fleet was distanced away from the Flytrap by enemy fire, the enemy was sent reeling back by the Flytraps guns.

The Nabaal strike forces moved too close, and were sent back as a medley of ion beams from multiple hard points lashed out at the Nabaal vessels, followed by plasma bomb launchers and heavy-grade missiles, mass driver and plasma pulse cannon shots streak across the stellar expanses, the backdrop is the Sholai nebula.

Once before nearly 2 decades ago the forces of the Taiidani Rebels and the forces of the Emperor fought, under the lightning and sensor interference of the nebula.

All squadrons launched into the maelstrom of the nebula and the battle; Qu'jet leading squadron Manticore, a mix of veterans and newbies in many different craft, including the new Missile Corvettes.

As he moved into the lead, the Missile Destroyers moved in on their position, opening fire with a full spread, Qu'jet executing radical evasive maneuvers, Manticore following, a few of the missiles loose their targets and proximity detonate.

Manticore flew past the battle and at the capital ships, the Sajuuk class Missile Corvettes carving a swathe through the Kushans, volley after volley of missiles slaughtering the Kushan strike wings wholesale.

Suddenly out of nowhere a PPC shot impacted into a Fiirkan, the Fiirkan exploding in a tiny flash, the outline of a cloaked fighter visible.

"We need proxies! Enemy is using cloaks!"

More PPC fire. Taking his craft on evasives he waits, suddenly a proxy goes online, behind him a cloaked fighter waits, a Missile Corvette firing to silence the phantom menace.

"Thanks! I owe ya one! Manticore, form up on my beacon, we are following squadron Hammer, escorting the bombers in...lets move!"

Qu'jet flicks the autopilot button and gradually increases throttle, having strayed too far from the battle, but closing in...and closing in fast.

From here Qu'jet got a good view of the Nabaals forces, recognizing most of their vessels...locating the Puppetters.

He screamed into the comm.

"DRONES INBOUND! RUN!"

He brought his craft into a dive, just as a small swarm of drones flew past and began firing into squadron Manticore.

Evading ionic interference and the detonation of ionic gas in the nebula, along with enemy fire he realized the Bentusi were right...there had to be a way to end this. They would all die here...if not here, then elsewhere.

Bringing his craft around he rendezvous' with squadron Hammer, a missile going by the wing and exploding, momentarily sending his craft on a spiral. He soon found Squadron Hammer and moved into escort position.

"Squadron Hammer this is part of Manticore. Escortin' you inbound, enemy fire is intensifying."

A voice responds.

"That's affirm Manticore, all bombers evasive!"

A Nabaal Missile Destroyer fires, 8 missiles ripping through Hammer squadron.

"AAAGGGGGGGGH!" screams the bomber commander, and all is silent.

He watched the Taiidani Marine Carrier move into point-blank range, on the flanks of the carrier were boarding latches.

As the marine carrier closed in the latches would launch, grappling onto the carrier and enabling for transfer of troops, that is if the enemy vessel did not attempt radical evasive maneuvers and break the latch. Either boarding latches, shuttles, or breach pods would be employed.

Qu'jet noted the hostile on his tail, pulling up and launching a single Skaal-Fa class missile forward, the missile flying ahead before making a tight turn and going back, ramming into the craft behind him, which promptly exploded into a brilliant ball of flame. He turned back to the Nabaal carrier, the Marine carrier launching boarding shuttles and breach pods, the breach pods latched onto the sides of the vessel and drilled, the boarding shuttles were launched from flight bay to flight bay, equipped with several plasma afterburners which would send the shuttle into a carrier's flight deck at high speeds, and then offloading. The weapon had been designed for anti-carrier use.

"THIS IS MANTICORE, FLYTRAP CONTROL REQUESTING NEW ORDERS! MANTICORE ROLL CALL! WHO'S LEFT!"

The calm voice of Comm crackles to life and replies.

"6/12 Manticore lives, scattered throughout area. Missile Corvettes are highly effective. Your mission is to get that Avatar destroyed. Its making things worse. We are attempting to board the vessel. Take it out from outside, distract its guns...we're doing long range board-launchings. If you can distract it, we can move into point blank and seed the sucker. Control out."

The shuttles began launching into the Nabaal carrier, the Avatar heavy cruiser turned back and fired on the marine carrier.

The Taiidani carrier took a hit near the bridge, comm chatter indicating no vital systems damaged. Soon the Avatar began receiving Taiidani boarders for its trouble, Qu'jet turning back and locking onto a Firelance, his favorite prey.

As he moved into the armada, a Vengeance class assault frigate turned and launched a plasma bomb, which detonated several meters to starboard, throwing his craft off alignment, temporarily losing control, gaining control to open fire on the Firelances bridge, energy plasma pulse cannons firing into the bridge, followed by another heavy missile, killing the bridge crew and temporarily disabling the craft.

The Marine carrier moved left and right, launching boarding pods at anything moving. He watched the heavy cruiser's shuttle bay open, catching an opportunity and flying in, firing light plasma bombs in first, scorching and wrecking anything inside.

He eased his interceptor in just as the lights and gravity went out.

Chapter 17: Boarding actions

Qu'jet disengaged the cockpit latch, opening it off and floating out...gravity had been disabled. He was in the shuttle bay.

The Avatar was moving...he could feel it.

Drifting slowly he propelled himself towards a pipe, grabbing it, aligning his feet with the walls and activating mag-clamps, his feet clamping onto the wall. The mag-soles were on. Movement would be a little slow...

Reaching into a side pocket he fished out a Emperor .50 cal mag-driver pistol, pulling back the hammer, listening to the click as a new round was chambered.

He walked down the wall and out the blast doors. Aboard the vessel all that was on was emergency lights.

Suddenly he could hear Kushan Marines, whispering. He closed his eyes and could almost feel their presence. He gripped his gun tightly, waiting.

He fired, one shot at one of the marine's knees, the other he fired a shot into the arm, grabbing the floating gun and knocking out one of them with it, then setting the energy weapon to stun mode and shooting the other.

Waiting like a predatory cat he listened...nothing.

He moved on, crouching, moving silently, occasionally an elevator opened, and he popped someone that came out.

He took one of the elevators to Level 2, below the bridge.

Emerging he looked about the darkened halls, a floating vase smashing against the wall. He turned and saw a shape, he leveled his gun and aimed.

Suddenly the shape spoke in Taiidan.

He blinked..

"Taiidani Marine, name and rank."

"1st Lieutenant Sieg'ra, sir."

"Wing Commander Qu'jet. Stay low, heading to the bridge. Going to have a nice chat with the Nabaal captain."

"Crazy pilot...fine. You go in first and try stealth, capture the captain. If it fucks up, there are the others...there's about 14 marines a few meters back, I'll call them and set everything up."

"You do that." He stalked off again, leveling the rifle and setting it to lethal.

He saw a Kushan marine, in a crouch position aiming down the hall. Suddenly a green flash as a energy bolt hit the wall next to him.

He moved back, and suddenly realized gravity had been restored; as such he disabled his mag-soles and waited, checking the weapon, and finding a burst mode switch, and flicking it.

Quickly he sidesteps and fires a controlled burst, sidestepping back just as quickly. A loud roar of anger, which was followed by more gunfire.

He braced his back against the wall, and with his right hand, fired around the corner, keeping the rest of himself against the wall, spraying the general area before bringing his gun back.

He sidestepped around and leveled the weapon. The marine was dead, his body...well parts of it, were...

He made a sound of disgust and calmly walked past, taking the stairs to the bridge...stopping a few steps away to eavesdrop.

"Bridge power restored sir!"

"Let me hail the Imperial fleet."

"Aye sir."

"THIS IS ADMIRAL HRUUK NABAAL! SURRENDER!"

He turned around to see 7 marines waiting behind him. He guessed like a Taiidani bridge there were two entrances. Hence the 14 were split up, seven to each entrance.

He moved back and stealthily took a look in the bridge coming in from the back. The bridge crew was facing forward and did not see him.

He turned to see the other marines, and nodded, switching to his pistol, setting that to burst mode, and hefting it in his right hand. With his left he held up all five fingers, and counted down.

"5...4...3...2...1..."

And then he ran-jumped into the room, hitting the ground and stumbling, stumbling forward and turning around, firing two shots at a Kushan, which promptly ducked, as he hit the floor he skidded and hit the back of the wall, leveling his weapon and aiming at the captain, the guy with all the formal attire on, whom he guessed was the captain.

It had all happened in less than a second...then he yelled the cliché line.

"FREEZE!"

Half the bridge crew went for their sidearms, as Taiidani Marines poured into the bridge, shots ringing out as Kushans dropped to the ground dead or in surrender.

He got up and watched the Admiral, walking very slowly towards him, before putting the gun square on his forehead.

"Order the fleet to stand down, or you will be missing a head."

He cocked his head to the side.

"Hiigaran fleet command wouldn't want to loose the Nabaal commander...the Diamid would miss you, wouldn't they?"

He studied the commander.

Graying hair..late thirties?

"It's over Commander. That ship over there, it's a Mothership. The Imperium is back, like last time...stand-down. NOW!"

The admiral stared back, coldly, and sneered back.

"Fine then, scum."

The admiral activated the comm.

"ALL NABAAL VESSELS ARE ORDERED TO STAND DOWN!"

Behind him 3 marines aimed their guns, one aiming at the admirals head, the other two aiming at the torso.

Qu'jet looked over to the marines.

"Secure the bridge and prepare to stand down. You two, watch this man. If he moves, shoot him on site."

The two nod, Qu'jet moving to the center seat, finding a console and tapping a few buttons.

"Flytrap, we're in...battles over, I guess we should tell them, shouldn't we?"

"TELL US WHAT!" yelled the Admiral.

Qu'jet turned around.

"I'll get to that. You know what the Beast is, right? Well...lets see...they have their ships, they attacked the Unbound, and as long as we shoot each other we will all die. Is this clear to your Hiigaran Naval Academy Prep-school trained mind, or would like a refresher course on what 'we're all going to die means'?"

The admiral continues staring, the scowl replaced by a grim indifferent expression.

"Hmm. Haven't you heard? The Unbound were fleeing, according to Somtaaw. The Somtaaw are heading off to intercept the beast."

The voice of the beast returns to his mind.

Little Kiith Somtaaw...

"Admiral, go back to your Hiigara. Inform them that the Imperial renegade vessel Venus' Flytrap is right next door. And be sure to tell everyone...I mean...everyone."

With a hand signal he walks out, the marines follow.

Stage two...he thought.

Interlude: The Mad Emperor

Risseau sat in his room, staring into space, watching, his gaze directed to the fleet that followed.

Glory...he thought.

Once again the Taiidan shall arise, we shall send the Kushans back to Kharak, and MAKE SURE THEY ALL DIE! he thought.

"We sit on the verge of success." He said out loud...to no one.

The Flytrap was sent to the Unbound Dyson Sphere. So was his Beast ally.

If the Unbound did not kill the Imperials, the ones they hated so badly, then the Beast would. The Flytrap was taken care of.

The Beast reported defeat, having been driven off by the Bentusi.

Powerful Bentusi...powerful Unbound. Mighty, cowardly Unbound. he thought.

One day you will all be bound...

The world shall be my plaything...I will become...God....like before....and there will be no stopping me!

And he laughed, the dark sinister sound echoing through the confines of the room, the ship...his soul...the emptiness of his soul, echoing...for all eternity...in that dark and truly evil morass of hate...forever...

Chapter 18: Mephistopheles

(Mephistopheles is the name of a demon, whom a scientist/chemist named Faust, sells his soul to, in exchange for knowledge and other things)

The Emperor emerged from his quarters, striding silently to the bow flight deck, watching the Elite Guards go by on daily work, looking into one of the training simulator rooms, decked out with holographic training sims, currently the group was working on boarding tactics.

My Elites...the best of the best...he thought. In training and resolve they are unbested. They are my Immortals...should one fall there will be another to take his place.

The emperor's mind wandered off to the days of before, when he had power over millions, no, billions, and all feared his name and fleets. He could feel it...the day would be so soon. But, the key was secrecy. Nobody must know. The Imperium generally abhorred the Emperor, they abhorred him, for what he'd done. His deeds...but they respected his positive aspects. Now the goal would be to minimize the negatives.

He would use the beast to silence his enemies. Then later...silence the Beast.

He would come out on top, as the "Savior of the Galaxy" for vanquishing the beast. Then he would move in...politically, wrapping the tendrils of manipulation around his assets, like Machiavellian, everything around him would be reduced, for analysis, into "items" of tangible value. Some; more than others. These "lessers" would then be extinguished for a grander scheme.

The Flytrap had been destroyed. Or so he thought...

The Emperor wondered if the Beast knew of his thoughts. So cunning...the Beast would never know.

He arrived in the cavernous hangar bay, watching everything like a child on Christmas day, the dull roar of a Fiirkan being launched caught his attention, the black craft being catapulted off the mag-launcher, joining the patrol of strike craft that made its never-ending vigil of omnipresence, watching for the enemies of the Emperor, should they be seen or unseen.

Onboard the Naggarok, the Beast lay in reflection.

The Naggarok had hyper spaced out to a safe place, shortly after the defeat of its mighty hordes at the Unbound's home.

All that was left was its 5 massive carrier groups.

The Bound ones...fight very so against me...but why? Why do they not like me? What do they hide? thought the Prime-Mind of the Beast.

*We must find out why...*said a second voice.

The Unbound...the Bound will lead to the Unbound...we will bind both to us nonetheless. These Imperials are our pawns, having pledged themselves so eagerly. We will use them as our own pawns. They do not suspect.

They will pay for their stupidity.

It does not matter. They will die too. ended the third voice.

And that discussion was ended.

The ships engines rumbled, the giant craft engaging hyperspace yet again.

Chapter 19: An End to All Things

The TIF Flytrap brazenly executed a ID jump directly into Taiidani Imperial space, directly in front of a Imperial Fleet.

The Admiral began ordering all hands to battle stations, by now a routine procedure which they'd been practicing for days now.

Qu'jet was already in his Triikor. He'd taken to sleeping in it already. Bringing one of the big soft pillows wasn't hard, the seat itself was quite comfortable too. Add internal heaters...and it'd be all right.

Except for the bathroom problem, but that's another story. (which I dun want to delve into).

He woke up and threw the pillow into the back compartment, pulling up the seat, looking at the right-hand mounted LCD on the dashboard.

>>TIF forces detected. They do not look friendly. Transmitting all information to the Imperials. Prepare for possible war.

>>Contingencies ready. Pray to Sajuuk that we will not have to kill our own.

The Taiidani fleet advanced on the Flytrap, charging weapons.

On the bridge of the Flytrap, the Sensors Officer ran a scan of the sector and reported in.

"Admiral, TIF forces, closing in...estimated time to firing range is 30 seconds."

The Admiral looked on the view screen, the armada closing in incredibly fast, unusually eager to close into weapons range.

In the center of the armada lay a Saarkin-Cho, which began launching strike craft.

Sensor Ops: "TIF IN WEAPONS RANGE! WEAPONS ARE CHARGING!"

They are standing down?!"

All around them the TIF vessels had disengaged.

"TIN Flytrap, we receive your transmission. Welcome to the fold."

To their port and starboard quarters the 2nd Elite Guard fleet phased into existence, the Cloak Generators deactivating.

"Anybody miss the Second Fleet? This is Admiral Paoslek, lookin' forward to pounding the Emperor, for what he did to our name. We will avenge the name of the Second Elite Guard."

Behind him the bridge crew shouts in agreement.

The comm goes out.

4 hours later

This is Taiidani Imperial News Network!

I am Hruk Quabaal, and this is today's news.

"The Emperor lives people! He lives...the man we thought had been killed lives. The reason why the Beast does not attack us, is because he allied us with them!"

"Yes...that's..."

sounds of gunfire

"WE ARE THE TAIIDAN! WE LIVE FREE AND SHALL NEVER BEND KNEE TO NO MAN OR BEAST! DEATH TO THE EMPEROR WHO BROUGHT SHAME AND DISGRACE! DEATH TO THE EMPEROR WHO BROUGHT DOWN OUR EMPIRE! DEATH TO THE EMPEROR WHO WILL BRING US DOWN AGAIN!"

comm jam, static silence

Qu'jet watched the screen in satisfaction.

It was over! All of it.

Sitting in the "Firky-bird", the giant bar built for the strike craft pilots he watched the news, along with practically everyone in the Strike Wings. It was the first they'd heard of the situation.

Turning around he saw sets of eyes glued to the static-ed set, and him.

He coughed slightly.

"Now you know...he lives. As of today, we are no longer the rebels, the hunted. The people know now. Now we must take the battle to the Emperor himself. He must be slain, if we are to survive. He will kill us all in his insanity."

Suddenly the TV set is replaced by TIFnet.

TIFnet Intelligence Relay:

-Taaidan Imperium has broken alliance with Beast

-Naggarok destroyed.

-Emperor at large.

static

Watching the set he realizes most of this has come to an end..almost.

Though the Naggarok is gone...the Emperor lives.

The Intercom crackles to life, yet again.

"HYPERJUMP ANOMALIES! ELITE GUARD SIGNATURES! REGISTRY FIRST ELITE GUARDS, ALPHA! ALL HANDS TO HIGH ALERT!"

As silence hits the room there is a mad dash to the hangars, pilots quickly grabbing their helmets off the table and putting them on, masked figures rushing off to assigned fighters, the First Elites moving away from the Quantum Waveform.

"THE EMPEROR! INSANE! TRYING TO GET US ALL KILLED! This is the 1st Elite Guard Destroyer Rupine! BEAST AMBUSH! THE EMPEROR! GONE! HAD TO LEAVE! BEAST! COMING!"

The tattered Elite Guard fleet comes to a stop as more hyper-gates appear, everywhere, up, down, left, right, everywhere...some even inside the fleet.

The organic circuitry comes to life.

Diiiiiiiie....

Another voice is added.

YOU WILL BE BOUND! screams a familiar voice, very familiar, yet raspy in the beast accent.

Qu'jet, in his cockpit, for the first time, was afraid, more then ever. Pure fright.

That voice, was the Emperor.

Chapter 20: Full Circle

"Gquon wrote: There is greater darkness than the one we fight, it is the darkness of the soul that has lost its way. The war we fight is not against powers and principalities, it is against chaos, and despair. Greater than the death of flesh is the death of hope, the death of dreams....The future is all around us...we know only that it is always born in pain."

-G'kar (Babylon 5)

What is vain? he thought.

This was vain...war...hope...The Emperor had become what he had wanted, a twisted immortality as of this date. He had become...power...The Prime-Minds of the Naggarok had been silenced, not destroyed, but snuffed...their voices would be heard, but more silent than the others of the cacophony that formed this feared entity.

And the Emperor appeared to be the second loudest voice. Hence...

The Emperor had transcended beyond his bound self, to become Unbound, one of the most hated and feared souls to ever grace the surface of Hiigara, would live for all eternity! His soul would live through the convoluted existence of the beast. As long as the Beast lived, somewhere so did the Emperor.

These grim thoughts took hold in his mind, carriers and heavy cruisers, the hordes of the Beast pouring forth to do battle, a black Saarkin-Cho waiting a distance from the battle. Suddenly a select few beast voices began to speak.

"We are the Elite Guard, the Alphas, The Omegas. All shall fall before the might of the Emperor, The One, True King..."

Infected Elite Guard vessels emerged from the hyper gates, wasting no time to engage with infection beams, one by one each targeted vessel executed the Naar Directive, flooding sections with drive plasma and venting into space.

The squadrons launched again, sallying against their foes, most likely for their last time.

You will not win! wailed the voices.

Your soul will become of us, we will be Bound...together, little man...you dared defy me. Soon we will be together, for all eternity! Your soul shall rot and suffer for infinity...your mind will fester and suffer...screamed the Emperor within his mind.

Squadrons began rapid-launch, the flight bay emptied in record time, the PDAs humming at overload speed, new pilots brought out of reserves and sent in, hordes of craft pouring out of the Flytrap.

Within the epic battle Qu'jet maneuvered his craft with a nimble hand, remembering and keeping within his mind that if they gave their lives in this day, all would be in vain, their flesh and machine added to the twisted circuit of the beast, only to wreak more destruction. There would be no hope. There could be no hope. The Emperor would live, they would loose.

The reassuring voice of the Bentusi entered his mind.

All that moves is easily heard in the Void. The Destroyer lives. The Unbound mobilize. Our fate is intertwined. The Kushan fleet lays burning over many hundred different worlds, the Republican fleets with them. Only you and your friends stand in the way of the Destroyer...fight well. The Unbound come.

The voice left his mind, ion beams raked across the battlefield, flying past a Beast Carrier he watched a dozen infected Kaarks launch, bringing his craft around and firing a missile at the lead craft, which exploded and spiraled away to dissipate into dust.

Flying past a DFG he notes that the enemy turns to focus, suddenly noticing a infected Kadeshi Needleship appear out of nowhere, and launch Swarms.

Oh...no...he thought.

The infected Swarms dog-piled into the maelstrom, firing at anything moving, Qu'jet scrambling and flying towards the safety of the DFG, which began knocking the mass driver bullets out of the sky.

Turning his craft around he fired a missile at a Advanced Swarmer, which transformed into a small dust cloud.

A Skaal-Fa Mk.2 moves in on battle approaching, utilizing more advanced PDA systems and Quantum-Explosive tipped missile delivery systems. The new vessel also possessed small mass drivers and two energy PPCs.

The enemy swarmers turned to focus on the new Skaal-Fa, suddenly the missile bays warmed up, the now eight missile bays charged up and began launching volley after volley of missiles, the high-speed extra-homing warheads filling the battlefield with new obstacles.

Qu'jet brought his craft around and flew over the Skaal-Fa Mk.2, seeing a Attack Bomber squadron and following it, each one appeared to have slight modifications, each having a rear small mass driver, and carrying something on the belly.

"Bomber Squadron 14, who's your commander?"

The commander replies, his voice suddenly recognizable.

"Hey 'Jet! Glad you can join the party! Cover us! We're carrying some nice stuff to give to the beasties."

Qu'jet brought his craft into escort position, suddenly noting their target, the Attack Bombers suddenly moving from a random formation to claw. They were coming in from the stern, targeting the needleship.

Suddenly the bomber pilots let out a battle cry and moved into line formation, launching plasma bombs along the thin stem of the needleship, flak cannons going offline before responding, suddenly the bombers launching their belly weapons into the main "mushroom head", all impacting into the main structure, sending shudders through the entire craft, hull platings began breaking off as an explosion began ripping through the craft, the bow tearing apart as the bombers broke away, Qu'jet wheeling away as the explosion tore through the rest of the ship, which exploded into a cloud of nebular gas and debris, consuming a group of nearby swarmers.

The Skaal-Tels moved into small formations of 5, supported by a Kudaark spearhead, the formations then plowing straight through the beast lines, the Kudaarks four guns tracking and knocking away corvettes, plasma bombs launching ahead, and knocking away capital ships, as destroyers trained their turrets and fired, giant energy pulses slamming into beast hulls and shearing through armor plate.

The Beast Qwaar-jets began moving in, plowing through debris and other vessels, targeting quad-ion beams against the assault frigates, firing amidships and tearing them into shreds, standard Qwaar-jets moved past and returned fire, covering for numerous attack bombers that launched their deadly cargoes.

The Beast began to retreat to the 5 carriers, the Taiidan fleets closing in for the final kill. The single infected Elite Guard carrier hypered out, the other 4 suddenly opened fire, 20, 30 cruise missiles pouring out of their flight bays, more and more careening through space and proximity detonating everywhere, scattering beast microbes which began infecting hulls. Whole ships lit up and trailed plasma as huge swathes of ships were plasma incinerated and vented.

The beast continued firing and firing, the entire fleet then retreated in sections, falling back slowly.

Qu'jet flew his craft in close, followed by the giant hordes of fighters, the missile-equipped fighters suddenly engaging, firing missiles ahead as the carriers produced them. Covering for the attack bombers the fighters swarmed in, Raachok Altemates, Triikor Mk2s, Sajuuk Missile Corvettes, and standard heavies, moving in an engaging. forming into a wall formation in front of the beast vessels the Seejurs, opening fire and shredding cruise missiles into tatters.

The Flytrap then advanced, launching dozens of salvettes to pick up pilots.

The Flytrap moved in...and readied weapons, at 70 kilometers it engaged, firing modified cruise missiles, each containing high-energy plasma covered with a armored shell. Each would impact through the flight bay, bore into the vessel and detonate inside. Still more were standard conventionals packed with Quantum explosives.

Suddenly dozens of missiles poured out the Mothership class vessel.

Comm: "Missile Contact! Closing...closing...impact! Infectee 1 is taking critical damage!"

Suddenly the fleets turned around and came back, all weapons firing in all directions, torpedoes, cruise missiles and strike craft converging around the carriers, one of the carriers had been shaken badly, shuddering before finally tearing apart into 4 pieces, each twirling away into the cosmos.

One of the carriers suddenly speeds up, ramming into a unwary republican destroyer, the ship decapitated down the middle, drive plasma venting in all directions, the screams as crew die the quick gruesome death of explosive decompression, others from vacuum exposure. The screams...the cries...

I didn't work fast enough...or was it? Perhaps some things are destiny.

His Triikor suddenly buzzed past one of the infected carriers, which targeted it with the infection beam. He brought his craft into a barrel roll as the beam passed by his left wing, he pulls up and rolls right, a few stress indicator lights flicker on, and he goes to the verge of blacking out.

The craft turns around and speeds back, coming in from underneath and firing a missile into the belly, veering off as attack bombers send their ordnance into the front, the vessel shudders from its dual bombardment, the craft begins to turn away, as another missile slams into the flight bay, careening through the craft, its beacon registering as in engineering.

A few seconds later the giant craft engages quantum waveform.

The other carriers are burning and began releasing plasma, this carrier is almost gone, the blue square moving through the craft slowly.

Suddenly the engine compartment explodes; the craft is hurtled through hyperspace as the fusion cores breach.

And then silence.

One by one each craft stood down.

The silence was unbearable.

Did they win?

He listened.

Silence. The Destroyers voices did not call.

Bringing his craft around he saw the fleet, the proud yellow-red of the Imperials, the white-turquoise of the

Republican ships.

Perhaps it would take war to make the politicians realize that unity was victory.

He realized, how close they had come to damnation. How...frighteningly close. If they had remained subservient cows, the Naggarok would have lived. Without the force of the Imperial navy, the Beast would have survived from here. Unity would bring strength, survival.

The insane bureaucracy was fighting a war that did not exist, a war in their minds, in their politics. He respected the Unbound for their ideals, transcending politics and race for their own good. An LCD lit up within his cockpit, casting a green glow over his face. The schematics of the Bentusi's rapid-fire ion pulse array were transmitted to his fighter. It looked to be generally weaker than the one utilized by super acolytes, but it had to be so, to be compatible with their more primitive fusion reactors.

Out here in the depths of space, where many would give their lives in defense of their beliefs, they were all friends, in the face of a common enemy.

The Beast was gone.

And then he heard a distant laugh...a weak, feeble, evil, laugh.

Then he realized that it never ended.

The End.

Appendix of Stuff

Strike Craft

Fiirkan Mk.2

Standard Fiirkan, various engine upgrades, along with a PDA unit to produce new rounds. Upgraded barrels and firepower increases.

Upper spine mounted concealed energy cannon.

(Mounted above and further back from cockpit)

Raachok Mk.2

Standard Raachok, fitted with wing-mounted hard points and a rear turret small mass driver.

Raachok Alternate

Variant of Raachok, equipped with dual "Defender class" mass drivers and central mini-sensor dish.

Triikor Mk.2

Standard Triikor with second cannon addition

Triikor MK.2 Custom (Heavy Variant, Qu'jets fighter)

Triikor chassis enlarged and fitted onto Light Corvette chassis. Fitted w/ miniaturized Heavy Corvette engine. Has belly medium missile pack (launches 4 at a time, stores 8). Two side hardpoints for energy pulse guns. Two additional light plasma bomb launchers. Fuselage mounted small ion pulse beam.

Sajuuk Class Missile corvette.

Standard Taiidani Heavy Corvette, utilizing dual missile packs placed parallel to cockpit. Each pack launches 6 missiles, possesses internal production. (storage for 24 light missiles)

Imperial Navy Vessels

Skaal-Tel Mk.2

Standard Skaal-Tel, instead with four bow mounted ion beams, upgrading of turret mounts to heavy energy cannons. Two plasma bomb launchers, one on top of the other, between quad-set ion cannons.

Kudaark Assault Frigate Mk.2

Addition of medium mount turret between amidships and front bow (medium mount=two gun). Plasma bomb launchers upgraded for faster launch-time. Four turrets upgraded to use mag-lev servos for faster tracking.

Qwaar-jet Heavy Cruiser Mk.2

[Specs not available at this time]

Saarkin-Cho Upgraded

[Specs not available at this time]

Saarkin-Cho Taiidani Marine carrier

Standard Saarkin-Cho, equipped for boarding actions and ground wars. Carries assault shuttles, transports, barracks, ground force PDAs, flank launched breach pods. Also carries salvage corvettes.

Goddess class super-carrier/mother ship

Heavily enlarged Saarkin-Cho chassis sandwiched between two Imperators, the resultant craft is widened out and lengthened. The flight bay is a "mouth", surrounded by bulkheads and corridors. Side hangars as well. Bow flight bay is only way to produce heavy cruisers. Moderate safety hazard for production of heavy cruisers.

Cannot launch strike craft from bow flight bay when heavy cruiser is being launched, moderate safety risks. Plans are to upgrade the flight bay to be wider and allow for launchings, even though it is already possible to launch and recover fighters in battle conditions while producing heavy cruisers.

The Goddess also possesses three shorter "spines" like the Skaal-Tel. Surfaces possess several heavy turret mounts, ion beam mounts, missile bays and AA hardpoints.

Goddesses are insanely expensive, only one has been produced to this date. There are no plans for further production. TIN Venus Flytrap has performed at/beyond standard expectations, plans for revisions and upgrades are already underway.

TIFnet Strike craft upgrades already in mass production. Capital ships upgraded will be fielded a few years later.

Unbound Vessels

Bentusi Battle sphere

Insanely huge version of Nomad Moon. Studded with dozens of super-powerful long range heavy ion cannons, along with many high temperature laser beam weapons.

Bentusi Wheel-Spoke

Can be imaged as a old wheel with spokes. Each intersection of spoke and wheel possesses a weapons hardpoint. Power can be channeled throughout the points of the wheel into the center, where it is discharged directly forward, resulting in a pseudo-siege cannon blast. Power can also be channeled to the top and bottom sections of the wheel (top and bottom if viewed "lying down". As such the top and bottom sections can discharge their energy in a flak cannon-esque way. (See the blue Vree saucer from Babylon 5)

Bentusi Ringship

I'm not gonna go there...

Bentusi Tradeship

Lovable Horseshoe ship.

Tiamat Starfish

You know already!

Tiamat Crabship

Some other guys creation, still won't go there.

Credits

Title by Blackjack

To all the people who posted back, including feedback (relic boards) : crobato, ceejayoz, blackjack, The Langy Mutant Dwarf, Vaarok, Green-3, The Commodore, zDefiant1, Lybra, and Greenstone. (These are in no particular order, and to all the others fanfic people who inspired me to try something new and write this) Thanks to “Ben Tusi” (Relic Forums) for the Goddess class carrier (the concept was for a upgraded version of the Saarkin-Cho, which is Saarkin-Cho mk2. Goddess class I took up a notch and turned into mothership.) Also credited for the concept of the acronym TIF and TIFnet (Taaidani Imperial Forces network)

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