



Kadeshi Crusade

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Chapter 1: The Priestess

"They are on the retreat, they are on the retreat!!"

Caught in a crisscross of ion beams, what was once a Beast Ion Array frigate was now an exploding ball of gas with plasma balls flying out in all directions. "YES!!!..." shouted the pilot, looping the Super Acolyte into a victory roll before joining his wing in formation. Below him, a wing of Avengers streaked past a wall of Hammer corvettes and Blade Mk 6 interceptors in a race to finish off the survivors

Adm. Njad Nabaal of the Kushan carrier Kuura'sa could not be more pleased. Years since the defeat of the Great Beast, pockets of its offspring remain, the virus mutating into various forms. A combined Taidan Republic and Kiith Naabal has spent two years tracking down Beast Virus Generation 3 Variant 7 or G3V7 for short. The G3V7 has been among the most violent mutations, and the plague has destroyed at least one colony and two carrier groups. Soon the story of this unholy Beast offspring would come to an end. With it, he would gain a feather in his cap. By the holy god Sajuuk, he will be vindicated; the head of the Beast will be his trophy to show to the great Council of the Daiamid.

A Beast Skaal Tel Destroyer broke up in pieces, sliced by Dervishes and Firelances in concert. To see the Firelance ion beam frigates do their damage, ...yes... it brought back the most precious memories. He started as his career as a crewman in a Firelance back in the Mothership's journey to Hiigara, and in the end, he became a captain of a Firelance himself in the final battle over Hiigara against the Taidan forces of Emperor Riesstiu the Fourth. To be the captain or even the crew of a Firelance was a great honor, and is considered the elite of the elite in the Kushan fleet. It was in the last Homeworld battle where he distinguished himself, with his badly damaged frigate going toe to toe with a Skaal Fa missile destroyer. The destruction of the Beast Skaal Tel reminded him of that battle in a sweep of nostalgia. For a brief moment, he envied those captains in the Firelances, still young and tasting the joy of the kill. As for the Firelances, they will never replace those old birds, he thought. Years later, after the first Beast was killed by the Kiith Somtaaw, the other Kiith all went to license and bought the Somtaaw ships. But for him, the original ships from the Journey will have a special place in his heart, and even in obsolescence, the old ships remain wildly popular among their crews.

He waved his hand, and the bridge relayed orders to the rest of the fleet. The frigates have fallen behind the protection of the destroyers as they advanced to finish off the rest of the Beast fleet. His elite squad of Super Acolytes streak ahead, strafing a Beast carrier whose infection beams could not track fighters this fast.

Yes, the glory will be his and to the Kiith Naabal. Since the Somtaaw has slain the Beast, the prestige of the Naabal has declined in the light of the glory of the Beastslayers. The first war with the Beast has taken a massive toll in the ranks of the Naabal, Kushan's premier warrior kiith, who took the brunt of the early, disastrous battles against the Beast. Revenge was denied to the Naabal, as the final victory won by the ingenuity of a minor kiith called Somtaaw. Since then, the warriors of Naabal seek to recover the glory once theirs, and so they sought to destroy the remnants of the

Beast, with the Imperialists and the Raiders for good measure. The destruction of this Beast mutant will be the greatest victory for the Naabal since the extermination campaign began.

* * *

He bent his head low. His sight is not worthy of the Priestess in her privacy, and to raise his head would welcome instant execution. But her feminine scent tingles his nose, those oils she apply all over her body. He can hear her bath, the trickle of water drops, and finally the sound of her bare feet. Soon she stood over him naked, but he dared not raise his head. His heart raced and the stories tell of the beauty of the Priestess, but still he would not dare feast his eyes upon her.

The man's faith is strong, she thought. For all that matters she could be fully clothed in front of him. "What news have you brought for me?"

"Our forces are in position, Your Holiness."

"Very good, my child M'jor. You have served our Mother N'ua very well. If you win this battle, I shall put a good word for you to the Mother of the Gardens to see fit that she will bequeath you with her blessings...let's say, a fleet command promotion." She is perhaps less than half of his age but she treats him like a child, an action that made him uneasy.

She had this sweet smell that grew stronger as she bent over him. She ran her fingers over his hair. "You are a strong man, M'jor. I like that. I like only having the best..."

His eyebrows strained. "Will your Holiness care to bless us with her appearance in the bridge?"

"I have the full utmost confidence in you, my child M'jor. You can proceed without me. When I am through with my bath, I shall see you in the bridge. Do not fail me, M'jor, go...go..."

Then she opened a bottle of sacred oils. "Do you smell it, M'jor? It is the smell of the purest essence, the blood of our Mother. It is this purity that we seek to achieve and preserve. Remember this, M'jor. Everything we must do is the act of cleansing. When I finish my bath, I shall join you in the bridge." With that she bent and kissed him in the forehead.

* * *

The second Beast carrier has broken up. Now to finish the mothership. Njad gripped his fist. Now, now now!

"We are detecting new energy signatures" said an officer in the bridge.

"Identify."

"Extreme interference. Signatures indicate multiple ships and fighters bearing down on the Beast mothership."

What's this? Ships from a rival kiith coming down to steal his victory? He cannot have this.

"All ships full speed and get to the Beast ship first."

"...but the Infection Beam, sir?..."

"If you hit it fast, hard, in numbers, the Beast won't have a change to get a shot."

"Sending all orders now!!!"

Njad's eyes are fixed on the screen.

"Fighters are now on the Beast mothership itself."

"Hail the commander of that battle group! I want to talk to him," Njad shouted. As the communications go online, Njad grit his teeth. "Identify yourself, your rank and your fleet designation."

No answer.

"While we appreciate your assistance as allies, by this battle must be won by and only by the Naabal. We ask that you desist your attack and let us take care of this."

No answer.

Multiple lights headed to the Beast ship. Another set of lights came out from the Beast ship to challenge the first set of lights. The battle has been joined. Beast strike craft fought frantically to defend their mothership against wave and wave of the attackers.

"Cloak Generator signatures!!!"

Frigates materialized out of thin space near the Beast ship. Ion beams lanced from them into the mothership.

No!! No!!

"The Super Acolytes will soon be reaching the mothership position. We shall soon see who it is that dare intervene in our operation."

Njad's heart beat faster.

"We now have visual acquisition."

The frigates were tearing the helpless mothership apart in their beams while Beast fighters pop under the fighter onslaught. As soon as it started, it was all over. The Beast ended its existence in a blinding plasma explosion.

"What are those?" remarked the voice of a Super Acolyte pilot.

Something caught Njad's eye. Kushan? Taidan? No. But there is something familiar about them, a sight from the past. This is impossible. A chilling realization gripped him.

"ALL FIGHTERS ENGAGE THEM!!!" N'jad ordered frantically. "Fleet, all in defensive formation. Prepare to hyperspace as soon as possible. NOW!"

"But our fighters..." cried the bridge officer.

"They're good as dead, and we will join them if we don't get out soon," shouted Njad. In the screens, the Acolytes and the Blade fighters now engage fighters once thought as friends, but now enemies.

"Multiple signatures around us!!!" shouted the bridge officer. The new enemy fleet has materialized out of a massive cloaking field in all their directions.

No, not this far from the Gardens. It can't be, Njad thought.

"By the mercy of Sajuuk, HYPERSPACE NOW!!!" Njad slammed his fist on the console.

But the engines could not react. "What's happening," cried one of the officers. "Hyperspace inhibitors! But that's impossible" said the tactical officer.

In the screen, a Super Acolyte stumbled rolling out of control, as an Advanced Swarmer right behind it raked its four cannons into its soft belly. A scream ended the final second of one of Naabal's elite pilots. An X formation of Blade Mk 6 Interceptors rushed head first into an unruly mob of Swarmers, only to have the middle of their formation blown away, as the Swarmers raced right through the middle.

An ACV ripped its four energy cannons against a Swarmer head on, popping it. But the ACV wasn't fast enough to avoid its wingman, and the second Swarmer smashed into the hapless ACV. Two Hives unleashed their Swarm drones, cutting a wing of Swarmers into pieces. But another wing of Swarmers hit one Hive from behind, destroying it in one strafing pass, and before the second Hive can react, the second pass of the same Swarmer wing strafed the Hiver from front to end, and the Hiver ended its life in a fireball.

"Locate the source of the inhibitors, we need to destroy those if we have to get out from this!" Njad ordered. A flash in the screen indicated another Firelance is lost. A Dervish cut a Swarmer down, then another, then another again, but then got the receiving end of four ion beams coming out from nowhere. As the Dervish vaporized, the Kadeshi Multibeam Frigate barrel rolled and headed to its next prey, a Kudaark. The Assault Frigate too, died in a ball of white fire but not before it punched a few holes into its victor. Explosions rocked the carrier Kuura'sa, as beam cut through it. "We have located the source of the inhibitor. It is right in front of us," said one of the officers.

Njad watched in horror as a massive long needlelike shape is headed towards his ship, head on. From the Needleship, beams lanced to the carrier, and the pride of the Nabaal fleet was sliced from beginning to end. That was the last thing Njad saw in his life, as a Swarmer smashed into the bridge of the carrier, mercifully ending his fate before the entire ship ended in a ball of furious fire.

Cloaked in the finest silks and smelling in the finest myrrh, G'yela entered the bridge as she had promised to M'jor.

"What is the status?"

"The main resistance of the Unclean has been broken. The diseased mothership is also destroyed." Four needleships have converged on the position towards the Naabal carrier. An enemy destroyer blew as it was raked by two multibeam frigates.

"Good, good... The Mother will be pleased with the sacrifice of the blood of her enemies. What then is our own casualties?"

"The casualties in our fighter arm are high. We did not expect this much resistance from the strike arm of the diseased mothership and from the fleet of the Unclean."

"I shall pray for their souls," G'yela cried, raising her arms as the tears she has worked up, streamed down her cheeks. "A pilot's task is the one with most honor and the greatest sacrifice. Their loss is like my own as well, like the loss of my own children." G'yela was in fact, still a young virgin who will never give physical birth due to her vows she pledged and her permanent infertility in a ritual done in the Mother's altar. Instead, all of Kadesh's children will be her children. The sacrifice of a woman's fertility was the greatest offering one can give to the Mother of the Gardens, N'ua.

The singing of a holy choir has begun to fill the communication channels of all Kadesh ships and fighters, inspiring them to fight further beyond their call of duty and life. It was the glorious song of eternal life in service of the Mother. The greater the gift of martyrdom and sacrifice, the more the soldier was assured a place in Her bosom.

"Order all Grapppler corvettes to retrieve as many intact enemy ships as they can. Obtain as many intact ship weapons, fire control systems and engines as much as possible from destroyed and damaged ships as well," G'yela ordered to her captain, M'jor. The insect like Grapplers was the final act of the attack, rushing to pick off the prizes. These odd looking craft are based on the same chassis as the Fuel Pod, but instead of a gun and fighter ship grapples, the Grapppler had large mechanical jaws designed to grab large ships.

"In the meantime, I shall sing for my children's souls.." G'yela said. The screens are still filled with the lights of a determined enemy, but the Swarmers were as equally determined to shut them down.

"And please, M'jor, no survivors," she added. "For the sake of the Mother, our work must always be clean and thorough."

* * *

G'yela later toured the hangers with M'jor and Engineering officer, T'saok. "What do you think, Your Holiness?" T'saok said proudly. "Our reports indicate we have captured several dozen of the enemy's so called Acolyte, Avenger and Super Acolyte fighters. We have also captured several frigates, Hammer heavy and Tempest multigun corvettes, as well as the enemy's Blade, Thunderbolt, Shield,

and Arrow fighters."

"Your trivial inventory numbers do not concern me, my child T'saok. What matters is the technology you can salvage from all these. How will it benefit our fleet? Just remember, T'saok, I plan the whole attack solely for the purpose of gathering technology. The Bentusi will never deal with us, and we cannot deal with the Unclean. We will take what we need by force with the aid of the Mother's blessing."

T'saok continued. "There is nothing in most of these ships that we have surpassed. Our Advanced Swarmer drives have long equaled the efficiency of these fighters' drives, and our ion beams and projectile cannons are superior to the enemy. However we can benefit from their fire control systems."

"Our biggest prize is the fighter drive of these so called Acolytes. They are claimed to be from Bentusi design and are far more efficient from than our Advanced Swarmer Drive."

"...and what is the potential of these drives, my child T'saok?" said G'yela. "We cannot simply wait and rely on trapping ships as they come to the Gardens. No, we must go and hunt our goals ourselves. By going beyond the Gardens, we hope to capture technology from the Unclean that we can use for our Holy Causes."

"I see, Your Holiness," said T'saok. "In fact, I have already anticipated work on adapting these fighter drives to the Swarmers. With these new drives, we will remove the short range weaknesses of our fighters. Our fighters will be superior to those of the outsiders. The Priesthood and the Motherhood will be pleased."

"No they will not," G'yela corrected. "Our Holy Orders are filled with old men and women who dared not dream any longer. In fact, they will oppose what we will do. Our Order is the one of Hope and Dreams. We will go beyond the Gardens. The drives are for the fighters of our own Order only, and later for the Orders who will ally with us. With these drives, the fighters of our Order will be superior over those Orders who oppose us. We hope not to fight our own brethren, but a show of force will convince people to our cause and our right to power."

"Our civilization is stagnating inside the Gardens. Our people are as starved of hope as they are of food. If we are all to survive and find greatness once again, we have to leave the Gardens. It is with this promise that I shall lead you all."

"My children, T'saok and M'jor, you will now be privy to the secrets long kept by the K'jath, the Holy Order of the Daughters of N'ua, the oldest and most sacred order of Kadesh. We are the keepers of the ship Khar'nak who came to the gardens millennia ago. From this ship comes the cornerstone of our faith and our war against those who has driven us to the Gardens."

"But our true faith has been distorted through the ages. Inside the Ship lies the truth of our people. Inside lies a Guidestone, the star map that shows where once our ancestors lived. This is the Guidestone of the Everlasting Garden, the Guidestone for Hiigara."

"This Hiigara lies in the center of the Galaxy. Our translation of the ancient texts inside the sacred ship tells us that Hiigara, and our ancestors, was once the heart of an empire that stretches across the galaxy, only to be subdued by the Unclean. The Infidels, the Sinners, the Defilers and the Unclean all drove our ancestors to exile, and our Ancestors came to the Gardens, where they long fought to preserve our Faith. But this translations and the Truth they teach have to be kept by our Order for centuries as our people are not worthy of such knowledge, or are they ready to act on it."

"But something has happened to change this. We can no longer wait for the time our people is ready for this Truth. We have to force that time. When the Unclean Exiles first came to the Gardens, this led to an astonishing discovery by our Order. The Unclean has ships that have a similar energy and technology signature to ours. They too have a Guidestone and are on the journey to the gardens of Hiigara. We have come to the realization we are not the only Exiles. Soon enough, the Kushan Unclean defeated the Taidan Defilers who forced our ancestors to exile, and the Kushan Unclean have taken the Everlasting Garden of Hiigara to themselves."

"We will not let this continue. We will bring our people to the greatest Garden of all as our destiny and prophecies foretold. We shall lead our people to Hiigara and claim our right of our forefathers. Our people will once again lead the Galaxy and the light of N'ua will shine across the galaxy end to end. If we do not journey, we face eternal stagnation, and with it our damnation. Our precious Garden will be our prison, our Hell. My path will lead to our salvation. Follow me. for it is prophesied in the Guidestone that a savior will lead us and I am that Prophecy."

T'saok looked at her dumbfounded. This young frail girl in her silks and veils was utterly mad. But they were all utterly mad too, all the people of Kadeshi, hiding in perpetual fear in the eternal clouds of the Gardens. But in G'yela, the Priestess, it was her madness that discovered the truth. There is no other hope, except that a child will lead. Yes, T'saok will follow a child.

The fleet has turned toward the Gardens. This time, it is to face another enemy, the ones among themselves.

Chapter 2: The Holocaust

More than 3000 years ago...

"Get those people in here, quickly!" Lt. Commander N'ua Helan shouted, as she grabbed a child fallen to her knees. They can't do this, N'ua thought, oh gods of mercy, why are they doing this? Have they not enough of our blood? Since the defeat of the Empire, the Taidans had unleashed a galaxywide genocide against every living Hiigaran. The Galactic Council, revolted by the massacres, had issued a desist order and negotiated with the Taidans to allow all Hiigarans to an exile instead. But on the eve of Exile, as thousands of ships of the once proud Hiigaran Navy prepare their departure, the treacherous Taidans have decided to break the rule and unleashed a terrifying attack.

The once pristine blue skies of Hiigara burned red from horizon to horizon. The Firestorm will cleanse the planet, cleanse it all of the memory that was once Hiigara.

"Take this", N'ua said, as she passed the child to a lieutenant. Tears streaked from her eyes as she ran to where she taught the child's mother fell. The oxygen in the air has started to make her choke, but she persisted. Not there. She desperately looked around, and she saw a huddled choking figure in the ground, crying, screaming for her child.

She quickly grabbed and hugged the mother. "Don't worry," N'ua whispered. "Your daughter is safe with me. Just put your arm around my back".

She ran, despite the weight of the mother whose legs have weakened from the lack of oxygen. In front of them lies an immense fleet of ships, all the last of the glory that was once Hiigara. Mobs of people are desperately trying to rush into the bay doors of many ships. On the ground and around her, many people have fallen, choking in their last breath.

Not like this! N'ua thought. We can't die like animals!

She passed the mother to one of the helpers moving the refugees into the ships. She ran to help a few more, but many, many are dying.

Then she tripped and fell on something soft. It was another child. This one is not breathing anymore.

She started to sob uncontrollably, hugging the dead child.

One by one, the ships began to leave in trails of flame into an uncertain future in the sky. N'ua looked up in the sky. For a brief moment, she wanted to die, wanted the last thing she would feel to be the earth of Hiigara.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR!" Suddenly one of the helpers grabbed her. "Forget about him," the helper shouted, "He's gone. He's at peace now with our god."

The helper pulled her towards the ship. She watched the child lying in the ground, so peaceful from all the chaos happening around them. Ahead of her was the immense hulk of the Khar'nak, a Nova

class carrier that was converted into a refugee transport in the last moment, a fate shared with many of the surviving ships of the Hiigaran navy. Every possible ship, both civilian and military, were drastically recruited.

Refugees filled the ship from beam to beam, but there are many more they had to refuse. They had to find another ship, or face certain death from the firestorm.

"Come on," the helper shouted. He pulled her arm through the bay door and she fell into a dirty frightened human mass of crowded refugees. As she lifted herself from among them, she found herself looking at their blank stares, stares of people who have lost their home, their loved ones, and all hope. The bay doors closed as the last refugees were brought in.

If there was an abyss in the soul where one can find the last ounce of the will to live, N'ua pulled every one of it. She was a commander, and she needed to act like one now. Everyone of these people needs her to act like one now. She stood up to one of the ship's crew. The crew man were shouting to everyone to lay low, as the ship is about to take off. "You too," he shouted at her.

"Hmmm..." he exclaimed, as he saw the rank markings in her uniform. "Navy?" His face turned snide. "You people lost the war for us....maybe...maybe...I should throw you back outside...let you die...see what you have done..."

"Oh just shut the fuck up. Tell me where I can find the bridge," she said. The crewman pointed to a direction. "Thank you," she said.

"Lieutenant Commander N'ua Helan of the 57th Assault Wing at your service, SIR!" N'ua saluted to the captain in the bridge.

The captain looked pleased. "It's good to have more military types here. We need to keep some semblance of control here and people who can run the ship. Get to the tactical console. We need to launch now!"

N'ua quickly ran to the console. The visual screens activated

"Any experience in flying a big ship, Commander?" asked the captain. "What were you commanding anyway?"

"I used to command an assault Frigate. We call her the "Bushwacker". We lost her in the war. I was one of the lucky ones, or maybe unlucky. They picked me up on the pod."

"Sir," one of the bridge officers yelled. "The Khar'ban has taken off, sir. The Khar'osa is now powering her engines."

"Oxygen level in Hiigara is now under 30%," yelled another officer.

"Damn the Taidaniis," said the captain. "They will never stop until all of us are killed." All over the vid screens they could see corpses by the thousands. From the direction in the way they fell, they were all running towards the ships at the moment of death. "Concentrate on your duties, officers!"

I know all this sickens you, but we got thousands of people still alive in this ship and its our responsibility to see them through. We are their only hope now."

"Engage engines." Suddenly there was a rumble, and then a sense of lift.

"The Khar'nak has lifted," one of the officers said. "The Khar'toba is hailing us sir, they have begun engaging their engines. We have word now that the Khar'osa has also lifted. We are heading to the rendezvous point ordered by Fleet Command, Sir."

"Good," said the captain. He turned to N'ua. "I forgot to mind my manners, Commander Helan, as I have not formally introduced myself properly. I am Captain Sim Haas of the transport Khar'nak. I have been captaining merchant ships in all my life, and I have no way of knowing how to activate this ship's defensive systems. This used to be a Nova class carrier which I have no experience about since I was recruited to command this ship in the last minute. So I have a question to ask you. Do you have any idea how to get them running? If the Taidaniis have this chip in the shoulder with us, by god, we're going to need some protection."

"I will try," N'ua said, quickly punching buttons and keys in the tactical panel. "I only know assault frigates, not carrier weapon systems. I cannot assume we have 100% working weapons systems sir, so we may need to use manual override. I would need volunteers to man the turrets, sir."

"Do what you need to do, Commander," said Haas. "You have my full authority, and you better do it with some urgent haste."

"Right, sir", N'ua agreed, busily working on the panel. She couldn't help see the screens though. An angry deep red fire encased the sphere of Hiigara. Her first thoughts were the revulsion of the millions now dying in her homeworld damned by its conquerors. Her thoughts soon shifted to a more encompassing reality, something only few would hope to ever see. Right before her eyes, lies the end of her own civilization.

There was a deep pain curling her gut. Focus, focus. She needed to these systems working. On the monitors, she saw rows and rows of ships, the last surviving ships of both the Hiigaran mercantile and military navies, in military parade formation, maybe the last show of power Hiigara will ever have. The Khar'osa went ahead faster and has already gone into position. The Khar'nak would be next. The Khar'toba made up the rear.

* * *

The last few days has been the most harrowing he had experienced in his long life, and perhaps that of Kadesh for the last millennia. What was she thinking off, to challenge all the Elders like that--to confront the forces of the Blessed Mother Superior with no fear and every confidence of victory.

Cull was Khung of his Bloodkiith, the Father Superior of his great clan, who in turn dominates the greatest of the 12 Arkships of Kadesh. As leader of his clan, it was his duty to offer the most

beautiful and most intelligent girls of his clan to serve in the Motherhood, and hope that one of them would be candidate to the position of Supreme Motherhood. Whoever puts his puppet in the chair of the Blessed Mother Superior gets to pull the strings.

G'yela was a frail girl, but of incredible beauty and intelligence. The Arkships have been overpopulated and overcrowded, and everyone is on a sustenance level of poverty. Her mother may have some regrets giving her up for the clan's cause, but to be the mother of a Candidate was a social privilege of the first rank, and she turned from poverty into comfortable living overnight. As a Candidate herself, G'yela was groomed and educated with the best teachers of Faith and Techs in all of Kadesh. All that was a much better fate than being a slum rat in the forgotten decks of an Arkship.

It was only a few years since G'yela passed her Candidacy. Her rise in the ranks of the Motherhood was the most meteoric in the whole history of Kadesh, and his hopes rose that there is finally a good chance that one of his clan's Candidates may finally ascend to the most powerful position in all of Kadesh. She had this thing that men follow her. When she talks people listen. Multitudes appeared when she lectured, and many claim she can perform miracles.

Maybe she rose too fast. The idea of having the youngest Mother Superior ever freaked many of the Elders who waited for that position for far too long. The Orders of the Priesthood and Sisterhood began throwing obstacles against her. She can sense being pushed aside by the mainstream, and she deeply resented that. But in all this time she harbored an unusual vision to send an expeditious force outside of the Gardens to explore the outside universe. Her rivals took that as an opportunity to decry that G'yela was mentally unstable for any position higher than a mere Priestess.

So he pulled a few strings for her, and got her a small fleet, starting with a Needleship. Her rivals thought they had nothing to lose. They were eager to hear what was beyond the Gardens and could not wait for unlucky ships to be trapped in the Gardens. If G'yela fails and gets killed in the process, they have one less rival to contend with.

But G'yela did not fail. She had been studying every encounter of outside forces, from the Oppressors to the Unclean. She studied the Kadeshi defeats by the hands of the Unclean when they ventured into the Gardens and vowed not to repeat the same mistakes. She went back to the Gospel of N'ua, and how N'ua defeated the Oppressors. In her first foray, she pulled a stunning feat that led to the capture of a Taidan Cloaking and Gravwell Generator. Hidden hyperspace inhibitors boxed the Oppressor's convoy, and as fighters came out from the carrier, the Swarmers came in a blinding speed and raked the formation to pieces. She quickly made a peace offering to let the convoy go in exchange for some technology items. The convoy was quick to abide by this. She got her items, but when the convoy thought they were free, she unleashed another attack, this time backed with beam frigates and obliterated every ship in that convoy. That action established two qualities about her forte, first, her capacity for treachery and the second, that she leaves no survivors.

G'yela's prestige with the Fleet grew with every successful raid. Her stories of worlds beyond the Garden became a dream for the impoverished, overcrowded people in the Arkships. When she spoke about N'ua's Homeworld, she ignited a fire of hope for the people discontent with the stagnant

traditions they have lived under the Motherhood for so long. For the disenchanted young, G'yela had become a legend. The worst thing about this was that she knew it and played it like a fine tune. The legend grew in her own mind as well. The fire she started has become out of control.

This was the part of the equation he did not hope for. He wanted a puppet, not a megalomaniac. He wanted the power, and she's in the position to take it all for herself instead. He depended on the power structure that's been built in Kadesh for millennia and she is about to overturn that entire system. What he had worked for his entire life, she was about to achieve it in less than a quarter of the time.

Before G'yela's forces reached the Mother Superior's Arkship for the inevitable showdown, her numerous minions had broadcasted a speech extolling her heresy and asking the people and the Fleet to join her. Demonstrations and unrest had broken out in the Arkships, fanned by her supporters, demanding the resignation of the Mother Superior, and the turnover of that position to G'yela. Then, G'yela managed to take control of the Khar'nak and the most essential symbols of Kadesh faith. Nothing can stop her now.

Her fleet arrived at the space where the 12 Arkships parked. On her arrival, some Needleships defected to join her side. The other Needleships protecting the Arkship where the Mother Superior stayed, dared not to fire at the rebuilt Khar'nak, G'yela's new flagship.

When G'yela and her armed party entered the Mother Superior's throne chamber, the Elder lay slumped on her own throne, her body riddled a hundred times from the guns of her own guards. "G'yela, G'yela, G'yela!" the guards shouted her name, as they opened fire on all the other senior members of the Motherhood. The Sisters screamed and ran in panic, as each one was cut down in a blaze of fire. The Sentinel regiment that was the home guard of the arkship joined in the chant, and soon, the hundreds of thousands within the arkship. The chant spread to the other arkships, and then to the entire Fleet.

"G'yela is N'ua's Chosen One," all of Kadesh shouted. "Deliver us to the Promised Gardens, our Homeworld!"

G'yela raised her arms in triumph, saluting the crowd, waving them her blown kisses. She approached the throne of the Mother Superior, careful not to trip on the slippery blood on the floor. She ripped the head dress that was the symbol of the most highest rank of all Kadesh, ripped it off the bloody corpse that was once the Mother Superior. As the body slipped limply across the elevated steps in the throne, G'yela placed the mighty symbol in her own head, and the guards roared, shooting their guns at the ceiling.

"I am your Deliverer! I shall bring you to the Promised Gardens!" G'yela shouted at the top of her voice.

G'yela decreed that the Motherhood, the Sisterhood and the Priesthood be abolished. All members of the Ruling Orders must declare loyalties to her or be executed. Within an hour of her decree, members of the Ruling Orders were dragged to the streets in front of the mobs. Those who refuse

to swear loyalty to G'yela, were kicked and beaten to death. A soldier, taking pity on a whimpering priestess who was beaten to a pulp by a mob, shot her in the head.

To the loud approval of the crowd, the bleeding bodies of the dead Elders were displayed hanging in the center hall of the Motherhood's Arkship.

Cull knew what he had to do. He was responsible in creating this monster. He would be the one who must end it.

He can still hear the crowds shouting her name, like she was their prophesied savior. It sickened him to hear all that. If they only knew what she really was. The blade he held was thin, very sharp, and very cold.

Her attendants knew the prominent figure he was, and they let him rather stupidly, bowing their heads. Inside her private chambers, he can smell that thick pungent fragrance and it made him sick. In the soft light of burning embers and incense, he can sense a silhouette in the delicate curtains.

She came out with only a towel around her. "Oh it's you, Teacher," she said in a cute childish voice. "I am happy to see you. I miss you. I have not see you for a while. Ever seen I've entered the Motherhood, I don't see enough of you." She came to him, wrap her arms around his neck, placed her lips on his, and let the towel fall. Her figure with its soft mellow curves was one he had so often touched and enjoyed before. His breathing hastened and so did hers, and his loins hardened with heat, as he sensed her moistness. The blade fell to the ground, forgotten as his hands gripped her soft smooth body firmly, wantingly. He had desired her for a long time, desired her since the first time he saw her, desired her even now.

"Teacher, why don't we enjoy being in the pool together once again," she sweetly asked. He dropped his priestly robes as she led him into the pool of healing waters, where they waded in its soothing warmth. The glowing waters only made him want her even more, and his breathing became rough. Before he will do away with her, he will inject his seed in her one more time.

"Teacher, are you proud of me? I am now the Mother Superior. I...I...did it for everyone, for you especially."

"Yes, I am so so proud of you, G'yela, so so proud..."

He grabbed her and tried to pull her legs apart. He never expected the sharp pain that ripped under lungs. He quickly clutched his hand on the wound, as his dear life blood stained the healing waters.

"I hope so, Teacher, I learned so much from you...", Gyela said in a childish, teasing voice, then holding up a silvery blade in her hand.

He was speechless in a moment, then screamed from the burning pain, screamed at the reality of dying, then Gyela plunged and plunged the blade in his body. The blood spurted out from every cut she made, and she plunged and plunged. As his body drifted, she opened up the drain and increased the flow of water. The expression frozen in the lifeless face was that of surprise, and she drank from a goblet.

"I guess Teacher, you won't be coming with us in our great, great journey...", she said as she toasted him

* * *

Lt. Commander N'ua Helan was lucky to find some Navy veterans inside the Khar'nak who knows how to handle energy cannons. She quickly recruited them to the turrets. She wished that the Khar'nak's fighter production line would work. The turrets can only do so much under a sustained strike craft attack. She also found some engineers, and without asking permission from the captain, she ordered the engineers to attempt to make the production line operational.

The ragtag remnants of the once proud Hiigaran military and civilian navies set their formation above Hiigara, awaiting orders from Fleet Command. Beneath them, Hiigara burned and burned. N'ua watched the empty stares in ashen faces of those who have lost their homes, their loved ones and all hope, before she continued to work.

Haas checked the new coordinates from Fleet Command. In the screens are faces of the other captains, including those of the Khar'osa and the Khar'toba. "This is literally suicide, if we are not dead already. We are being scattered, our fleet split into several convoys destined to take us in all the opposite directions of the galaxy, right to the farthest edge of the galaxy, almost beyond known space. We are supposed to set landfall on a few habitable planets over there. The orders are not to be questioned, but most executed with all resources in your disposal."

Resources at my disposal, Haas thought. This is laughable. "We do not have a shred of resources, not enough food to feed, not enough weapons to defend, and not enough fuel to make this journey. We might as well crash this ship back into Hiigara and die in our homes instead being lost somewhere in a part of the galaxy no one knows. But..."

"...we still have our orders, and we will execute them until the last life energy in our fibers are spent..."

The captains nodded. Five ships are given similar destinations to the same sector of space---the Khar'osa, Khar'ban, Khar'nak, Khar'desh, and the Khar'toba. They will form one convoy. The five ships have begun to set a new separate formation, as the entire fleet have begun to split into separate groups heading for different destinations.

Admiral Riesstiu viewed the Hiigaran formations in the holoscreen of his flagship. "Sir, the Galactic Council has forbidden us to attack the Exiles," one of his advisers objected.

"Who cares what they say. They do not have the teeth to enforce what they decreed. If you let the Exiles live, someday, they will return and claim revenge against Taidan. Order all forces to attack. I want them completely wiped out, every last man, woman and child. Destroyed, you hear? Utterly and completely exterminate their vile presence from this universe."

Riesstiu swung his fist downward, and the signal was passed on to the rest of the Taidan armada.

The screens in the Khar'nak lit up and so did those in the rest of the fleet. "We got fighters coming in all vectors, headed our way...hyperspace signals, all over..." Taidan frigates filled their screens heading for them.

"Battle stations!" The same words echoed throughout the Hiigaran fleet.

"Commander Helan!" Haas shouted. "Are defense systems operational?" His fists clenched.

"Operational, Captain," N'ua replied, "...but we only have manual systems." Haas let out a sigh of relief, but only temporary. "That will be enough. All guns open fire in your own discretion."

Energy and plasma cannons filled the space with tracers. A Taidan fighter rolled, burning, then exploded. Behind it a Hiigaran fighter. But the Hiigaran itself was caught by tracers from another Taidan, ending its life in a ball of fire.

This is the real end now, Haas thought. N'ua shed all thoughts of fear and doubt as she mounted the seat of an energy cannon turret. With the press of a trigger, another Taidan fighter disintegrated in her reticles. If all of Hiigara are to die here, they will take as many as they can. A Taidan fighter was cut in half, but it was too late as a Hiigaran freighter blew in a large ball of plasma. The sight of the freighter's death sickened her, and just as she reeled from it, another Hiigaran ship exploded. She could not tell who it was.

The screens in Riesstiu's flagship flickered, and in them appeared the false holographic faces of the Galactic Council, members from the Koraii, the the Bentusi, the Baal, and other Unbound races. The faces bore an expression of dissatisfaction.

"Admiral Riesstiu of the great Taidani. You have violated our agreement to let the Hiigarans be. If you do not desist, the blood you spilled will not only be on your hands, but on the fate of the Taidani forever."

Riesstiu gave an innocent reckless smile, like a child caught by his parents.

"Oh my mistake.... my apologies, your High Council. But...but...if you do not take care of the disease now, it may lay dormant for a while, but it will come back to infect the rest of the body. If it comes back to haunt the Taidani, will I hold the members of the Council responsible? I certainly know about the agreement, but let's say,..."

"that I changed my mind?"

"You talk to the Council with an insolent voice, Riesstiu. Are you suggesting you can challenge the will of the Council?"

"Why should I follow the will of people who hide their faces in a mask like cowards?" Riesstiu turned his back on the screens and addressed his assistant. "Shut it off, these old guys are beginning to bother me."

A Hiigaran frigate broke in half, and bodies fell from it before they exploded in the vacuum. For a

moment, N'ua saw her ship in that frigate, her precious command long lost in this war. The turret swung around, and the energy cannons pumped their cargo into the belly of a luckless Taidani corvette, sending it spiraling before it exploded. Heavy sweat broke out in N'ua's brow, her mind deeply mesmerized in sheer hate, as she fired and fired, oh please, merciful gods of Hiigara, let me kill more of them before you take me into your arms.

"Fire the fucking engines," shouted Haas, with his comm opened to the other ships. "If we stay here and fight, and we don't get out here now, we are all fucking toast."

There was a loud boom, as the engines turned on the boost. The sudden acceleration snapped N'ua against her chair, knocking off her aim. A wing of Taidani corvettes raked the back of the Khar'nak, and there were shouts and screams within. The corvettes began to ring the Khar'nak in a circle of death, peppering its hide with devastating fire. The turrets fired back, killing two of the corvettes, but more corvettes and some fighters joined in, smelling the kill. Fire appeared in several decks of the Khar'nak, and mothers held their children tightly to protect them.

She fired and fired, as crewmen tried to stop the fires. She took out one corvette, but something else took down the other. A wing of fighters came down sweeping, its beams cutting the remaining corvettes. The Taidani interceptors quickly turned tail. Who are the new fighters, N'ua wondered. She has not seen them before, but she has heard of them. Bentusi fighters from the Galactic Council, finally, they have come to help us. Gods of Hiigara, thank you for answering our prayers.

The Bentusi fighters escorted them for a short distance, before boosting to engage Taidan ships in an attempt to save another Hiigaran freighter.

"Everyone brace yourself," Haas ordered, his voice heard throughout the speakers in the ship. "Prepare for hyperspace jump!"

The blue gates appeared, and they swallowed the entire length of Khar'nak. The ship reappeared again. This space is so peaceful compared to the one they left. They are so alone now, except for the multitude of stars. A second, then third, then a fourth gate appeared, and three other Hiigaran transports appeared.

They were the Khar'osa, the Khar'desh, and the Khar'toba.

"What happened to the Khar'ban?" Haas asked to the captain of the Khar'osa.

"It didn't make it. Four thousand souls lost," came the reply.

Chapter 3: The Pirate

Zha Khor had always wanted to be an engineer, ever since she discovered her hobby. That is, to modify and customize fighters for racing. When her father "Bones" was still alive, the Raider outpost they lived in often conducted races along a nearby asteroid belts. Some pilots get killed in the attempt, but the Raiders viewed it as the ultimate test of skill. She was good enough to beat 90% of the field, but there was always the upper elite of pilots that she couldn't somehow beat, even when she gave her 110%. That time, she had a stripped down Fiirkhan, when most pilots prefer the Bandit. The Fiirkhan itself was a present to her by a visiting young Imperialist admiral, and who was somewhat infatuated with her. He had this dreamy eyes too...

She was lying down all greased up in the floor, with wrenches around her. Ah well, those were the days. She never heard of the young admiral again, and the Fiirkhan had long since been lost in another battle. Later she managed to obtain a Triikor which became her second project. The Triikor, painted with flames and lightning bolts, was a true beauty in the eyes, but it wasn't the same like her old Fiirkhan. Even when she got other Fiirkhans—and the license to manufacture them, along with Triikors, in the Mule—it still wasn't the same. Maybe it was the motivation behind the giving of the old Fiirkhan that made that ship so special to her.

Sigh. She let herself burp as she had been stuffing herself with all the cheap pop drinks she stocked from the last port visit. Her shirt and shorts are all covered with greasy fluids from opening up the engine bay of a Swarmer they had captured. There was some of the goo right in her hair too. Seejuk was not only the turning point of her life, but he was one hell of an engineer. She heard that he was from a Kushan clan called LiirHra, the clan which not only designed and built the Mothership but also played a lead role in the development and construction of the Kushan vessels that defeated the Taidani empire. Seejuk may be physically repulsive, but to her, his mind is a god. He knew how to pick them apart, knew every intimate detail in their strengths and weaknesses, and felt their construction like as if they were music. With his talent, he turned a badly damaged and dilapidated Lord class carrier, into possibly the best run sample of its class. He was probably the first Kushan to ever lay their eyes on Turanic stealth technology and electronic countermeasures, things that were built into the Lord class carrier and Thief corvettes. After examination, Seejuk announced the Turanic technology, "primitive", and went on to add a few Kushan modifications, which gave the Mule the ability to hide deeper and longer than other Lord class carriers. Seejuk never passed the Turanic technology to his Kushan counterparts, on the condition that Zha herself would not pass the Kushan modifications to her Turanic friends. Their strange partnership is one that has no loyalty to either Kushan or Turanic. It's all about looking for number one—themselves.

Everytime they salvaged a wreck, she wanted to be there to see Seejuk and his team take them apart, hear their conversations and explanations, even to participate on some of the ship disassembly. Seejuk in turn, has learned to live with her persistent pestering presence, which can be quite interfering with their work.

Zha had been on overtime, dissecting the Swarmer. Earlier Seejuk was there too, examining the ships, then concluded they were simplistic. She heard him say he wanted something called a hyperspace inhibitor the Kadesh have. He's been a collector of exotic technologies, and the original

reason they were in this sector of space is to pick up a Beast mutation nanotech virus. Now he wanted to be on the fringes of Kadesh space itself, hoping to observe the anti-hyperspace phenomena or capture the device that generates it. She was both deeply disturbed and vastly excited about the risks. Sometimes she questions Seejuk's sanity but sometimes she praises his genius. She did not question him on this one. Big risk, big gain.

He may be interested in the inhibitor, but she's interested in the Swarmers themselves. What he sees as primitively simplistic, she sees as wonderfully elegant. The Kadesh, like the Turanics, knew their goals, and designed their ships with a common sense approach focused on that goal. Like the Bandit, the Swarmer knew its business well, putting the most powerful engine and guns in the smallest, lightest package they can think of. The whole ship is designed like a sea born animal, a chassis that is basically a one piece shell of great rigidity and strength, reinforced with a spinal structure that ends with a tail projecting beyond the ship. This was something similar to the way the Bentusi approached the chassis of their praised Acolyte design. The Bandit was a simple craft, utilitarian in design, but it didn't have the Swarmer's sweeping vision of structure and integrity. She took down these notes, so maybe she can come up with her own design later. She has heard about the dreaded Somtaaw Hive ships and it was said they took their inspiration from the Kadesh Swarmers. But the Hivers were just fancy drone ships and the Swarmer is a true manned fighter.

The obvious weakness was the fuel capacity. That is why the original engine is being removed to make way for an Acolyte drive. She's making two prototypes, one on the Swarmer and the second, on the Advanced Swarmer chassis. The result can potentially be the most potent fighter in the galaxy. Suddenly she had a most horrible thought. What if the Kadeshi had acquired this same engine technology?

The ship's speakers are calling her to the bridge. She ran, still in shirt and shorts stained by grease and goo, and the moment she entered, all eyes were on her, looking concerned.

The girl has a remarkable lack of etiquette and grace necessary for a ship's captain, Seejuk thought. But the little imp still has potential. For a while there, he saw his younger teenage self in her.

The Mule had hyperspaced and is on patrol just outside of the Great Nebula itself. They dared not to go in for fear of being trapped. The idea is however, to spring their own trap on a Kadeshi ship that would dare venture to go out.

"Hyperspace jumps tend to leave some residual radiation or energy signatures. It differs from ship to ship, and it's even possible to estimate, based on the signature, the mass and the size of the ships that hyperspaced. There have been recent incidents in sectors here, here and here," Seejuk said, pointing to a 3D starmap. "But an examination of Turanic ship activity indicates no Turanic ships in that area. After all we know their signatures quite well. The signatures do not match any known Kushan, Beast or Taidan ship, but they are fairly close to Kushan. Not exact, but close. The last time we encountered such any similarity in radiation and power signatures is when the Mothership encountered the Kadeshi, we might have to assume such similarities would parallel with hyperspace signatures. If these signatures are Kadeshi, then their capital ships are fully capable of hyperspacing to anywhere outside of the Great Nebula, which is no brainer to copy if they had captured jump

ships before."

Zha was looking in the screen as Seejuk lectured. She suddenly seemed agitated. Seejuks have noted that the Turanics, when they are not engaged on their notorious activities, are innately great space farers. They seem genetically born to have an intuitive sense of the space around them. Seejuk could not explain this phenomenon, but he has seen Zha demonstrate it.

"What is it, Zha?"

Zha barked a command. "Put the ship on stealth mode. Kill all communications. If we have fighters on patrol now, recall them back now."

"We were just about to send some fighters and corvettes on patrol," Seejuk said. "Cancel the orders," he told an officer. "Now tell me why?"

"Shhh..." Zha warned, blowing through her index finger. "Get me area scans now!!"

"Captain," one of the officers warned. "We are detecting hyperspace signatures!"

"Maximum power to cloaking modules," Zha ordered, "and minimal power to all ship systems. We will go into silent running." With minimum power, the Mule's energy signature is minimized, increasing cloaking efficiency, increased cloaking distances, and with less power requirement for the cloak generators. Lights dimmed and the engines reduced to a slow hum.

Zha looked to Seejuk. "Do you feel that?" Her eyes rolled around. Seejuk nodded his head in agreement, but he could not really feel what she is experiencing. The unusual situational awareness of the Turanics was an amazing discovery for him. For years, Hiigaran Intelligence thought that the Turanics have an advanced technology sensory system and had dispatched spies to obtain them. They never found that "system," and they would be rolling all over if they knew what Seejuk ultimately discovered---that this sensory systems is truly a myth, and the real system is a sixth sense that came from generations of Turanic genetic evolution as a space faring race.

Lighted symbols fill the sensor screens. "Magnify," Zha ordered.

"Oh Gods of Kharak," Seejuk said to himself. All the people in the bridge had their jaws agape as they stared in the screens.

The long thin shapes emerge from the stray clouds that make up the edges of the Great Nebula. Seejuk was only a young Sleeper in the Mothership during its historic journey. He had never the Needleships live before, only in the models and photos they displayed in the Mothership's historic gallery. They are not exactly the same as he pictured either. Some of them are smaller, others quite larger, which leads him to theorize that the Needleships encountered by the Mothership is only one of many Needleship classes.

"Did you get it, did you get it all?" Seejuk excitedly shouted. He was relieved to know that one of the crew had already set the sensors to record the event in all radiation spectrums.

"What in the Prophet's name are they?" Zha asked. "Kadeshi motherships," Seejuk replied. "Not just one, but a whole damn fleet!"

"What are they doing?" Zha's voice turned into a high pitch excitement. "Tell the ship to go into red alert, but maintain stealth profile!"

The Needleships of all sizes were joined by formations of Swarms, and then various frigates. "Look at that," Seejuk pointed. "I've seen them before. These are Fuel Pods, a kind of Support Frigate, and this, this is what they say you should look out for, the Multibeam Frigates. But I have never seen these types before," Seejuk pointed to some of the Kadeshi ships.

"These Pods are approaching the dust clouds, and I think they're resourcers of some kind. You better keep the Mule away from the asteroid belts and the dusk clouds, Zha," Seejuk said. Zha nodded. "We will temporarily refer to them as Resourcer Pods. These pods here, and here, on the other hand, have an enlarged nose section. On closer examination, here and here..." Seejuk zoomed the visual into the nose of the pods, "you can see it has twin cannons whereas the standard Fuel Pod only has one. We can assume these pods have a more confrontational intention."

Zha was listening to Seejuk's lecture, but she kept one concerned eye on the reserve energy levels powering the modified Taidan and Turanic cloak generators that were attached to the Mule with power tether cables. The tether cables supply power to the cloaks, one of the simple improvisations done to extend the ship's cloaking capabilities. She kept the other eye on the sensors screen, where even more lights have popped up.

"Now what in the names of Kharak's gods are these?" Seejuk exclaimed. "Magnify images".

The immense ships were like two saucer shaped structures joined in the middle, with a massive hole on the top pole and another hole in the bottom. Numerous ships come in and out of the holes, as well as rows of openings in the side.

"Now this is something new," Seejuk said, in a voice both of excitement and concern. "Look at the way they dwarf the Needleships. I would say about two or three times larger than the Mothership, with each ship possibly holding as much as one million souls each, estimated..."

".....and it looks like there are 12 of them....."

Seejuk looked into Zha's eyes, seeing that she could not grasp fully the importance of this occasion. "We thought we're going to ambush a Kadesh raiding party intended going beyond the Nebula. This is no raiding party. No raiding fleet would bring ships like that. I would say we have a full blown invasion in our hands, and we are right smack in the middle."

Seejuk's sense of Kushan patriotism has begun to conflict his need for self preservation, profits and disillusionment at the Kiiths. "We have to warn our peoples."

"Don't you think I would like to warn my people too?" Zha said. "But the moment we open channels, we're going to blow our cover. We're no use to anyone if we're dead, not the least to

ourselves."

Seejuk had to agree she was right. "The best we can do now is to gather as much information of this Kadesh armada and then send the data to our respective peoples when we're clear of them." He switched his eyes to the screen, magnifying each ship.

"Looking at the energy signatures and shells of these Swarmers, I would say there are two or three new types we have not encountered before, since the time the Mothership entered the Great Nebula. This Swarmer here suggests that it uses a single large energy or projectile cannon, and this one may even have an ion beam. Simply fascinating. Oh and I got some real bad news for our side. Look at the energy trails of these Swarmers here, I would say that's quite similar to a Bentusi Acolyte engine."

Zha felt a rush of vindication. "I was right. Just in the hanger I was experimenting putting an Acolyte power drive in two Swarmers. Do you think they got the drives from the Bentusi?"

"The Bentusi would never sell it to them. They either captured a Bentusi or a Somtaaw fighter and copied it from their engines," Seejuk replied. "If the Kadeshi has this powerplant in their Swarmers, along with these new types we are just discovering, I say all hell is going to break loose in the Galaxy. You did study the Homeworld Wars, did you, Zha?"

"Who in the Galaxy didn't?" Zha replied. "Even in the Turan regions, it was a bestseller, and some smugglers commanded high prices for it. Many people thought it was worth a bag of laughs....."

"Time to brush the dust off from it now," Seejuk said. "Other than Swarm inspiration for the Somtaaw Hivers, no one took any serious military analysis of the Kadesh. Some people thought that when the three Needleships are destroyed, so was the entire race. No one anticipated fighting the Kadesh again, and everyone viewed the Kadesh ships to be seriously tactically flawed. But if the Swarmers are able to get a new advanced high efficiency drive, those fighters would have serious range to back their firepower, which matches that of a Kushan Coffin Heavy Corvette. Their speed surpasses our scouts and their armor is as thick as a Defender. They do not have any turreted corvette designs, but their sheer firepower and maneuverability makes up for it."

"The last time, we were able to beat the Swarmers by targeting the Fuel Pods. If they have extended range, that tactic isn't going to work anymore. Damn, we also don't have Defenders and Multi Gun Corvettes in this ship."

"Not exactly," Zha refuted. "We got Brigand missile corvettes here. They are the main firepower of our strike force. Not enough to handle that armada though. If we can get to a base, we can pick up some Taidanii Defenders and MGCs. I know we can pick up a few ships, then copy the rest. Got enough Taidan machine tools here."

"You see those Fuel Pods there?" Seejuk said. "If you read the books, you would think they were easy kills. That single cannon packs more damage than what an Assault Frigate can dish out. Other than the Needleship, which combines a capital destroyer with the combined abilities of a carrier, the thing you should watch out for are these ships. Each is a Frigate with four ion beams, and they

kick ass more than an Ion Array Frigate could."

"More than an Ion Array?" Zha questioned.

"Yes, more than an ion array frigate. A few of these multi beam frigates nearly fried the Mothership."

"Now the centerpiece," Seejuk pointed to a zoomed image of a Needleship. "I am speculating that in the center cone of the ship lies a hyperspace inhibitor. Once those things go online, you can't hyperspace out of trouble, nor can you hyperspace reinforcements in. This alone can decide the battle for the Kadesh."

"We need to get some help here," Seejuk said, in a massive understatement. "But where?" He looked into Zha's eyes.

"I say we go to the nearest Turanic Outpost and call for help there," Zha said.

"This Armada will kick your Raider butt across the entire length of the galaxy! We got to call the Kushan Daiamid on this, or perhaps even the Galactic Council."

"This area is close to many secret Turanic Outposts, and I say, we'll go there first----" suddenly Zha grimaced in pain.

"Whathappened?" Seejuk turned his eyes to Zha, who has begun squirming uncomfortably, holding her head in agony. She seemed deeply troubled, and the sight of her troubled him too.

Zha walked up to the windows, staring at the armada, sweating badly, her brow folded in pain. "There is something else out there. Not something. Someone. Someone. I need to find this. I am going outside."

"No you won't," Seejuk protested.

"Don't worry, I got something planned, they can never catch me. They never expected this," Zha assured still breathing heavily and painfully. "Something, someone is out there. I feel drawn to it. It is something I must do, I must find out. Please, just support me on this."

Seejuk nodded. Wisdom says never bang your head against the stubborn. Zha's uncanny space senses are almost never wrong, but its not quite an exact science either. Nonetheless, if she feels something, you never discount her senses.

Moments later, she was back in the hanger. The salvaged Swarmer loomed above her in chains. This one is not yet finished she thought. An Acolyte engine rests in jacks.

But this one is, she thought. It was her first modification, an Advanced Swarmer salvaged before she came to the Great Nebula. The fitting of an Acolyte engine was surprisingly easy into the bay of the Advanced Swarmer, enough to spring in her mind a suggestion that the Bentusi themselves may have something to do with the design of the Swarmer in some strange way.

She talked to a microphone, her link to the bridge. "I want you to drop me off silently and maintain stealth mode in all costs. If I don't get back, I guess you all have to do without me, but I will be back don't worry." She slipped into the tight cockpit of the swarmer, placed the helmet on. The cockpit lowered and sealed her, and the floor shuddered, as the hydraulic supports moved the craft to the launching rails in the docking bay. The bay depressurized, the gate opened, and she was thrown back at the tiny seat rest, as the rails hurtled the Swarmer forward into the deep black.

In split seconds, she was viewing the underbelly of her Lord class carrier, and then the Mule disappeared as the Swarmer propelled beyond the cloaking envelope.

A flick on the switch and the Acolyte engine fired. The acceleration was nearly neck breaking, but she quickly tamed the beast by backing off the throttle.

Whoever flew this must be small but must have one strong grip, she thought. She pulled the joystick in both her hands in all her strength as severe gyroscopic forces competed to snatch the fighter and bring it into a spin. The Advanced Swarmer turned course, a thin blue trail pointing towards somewhere in the center of the Armada, and Zha wondered, what, or who, would be there to meet her.

Chapter 4: The Starfarer

Zha felt cold and alone, huddled in the small cockpit of the Swamer. She wondered if her impulsiveness would cost her big this time. She always acted courageous and cool for people in the outside, but inside, the sheer fear of death gripped her spine. There was no people outside to show her 'courage' now.

Sitting outside was the most massive fleet she has ever seen. A Kadeshi armada about to leave the Great Nebula for an unknown destination, and will most probably destroy everything in its path. First to be on peril would be her own people, as Turanic outposts are closest to the Great Nebula. Hundreds of Swamers patrolled the space around her, some in formation, some trying to get in formation, some not in formation. A sense of chaos prevailed, as if the Kadeshi are trying to get their act together. No one noticed her and her Swamer. Her journey takes her close to some Kadeshi ships, where she got to see Pods, Needleships and the dreaded Multibeam frigates up close. She opened communications to hear the chatter, and she heard among the chatter of pilots, the music of an angelic choir blaring the subwaves. She could not understand the lyrics, but she had no doubt it was extolling a glorious feeling into the Kadeshi pilots. For a while there she felt inspired herself.

She tried to focus in her journey that takes her into the center of the Armada. A feeling, a force compels her in to the center, like a star drawn into a black hole. She hoped she won't share the same fate, but that something there..... In the millennia past, the ancestral pioneers that were to become the forefathers of the Turanics spread to the outer, unknown borders of the Galaxy. To survive and navigate in their primitive craft across the vast expenses, some of them through genetic evolution developed an uncanny sense, an extraordinary perception of the space and stars around them. These people would be become legends among the stories and songs of the Raider nomads, and in poem and lyric, they would be called in legend as the Starfarers.

She never knew herself that she would have the potential to be a Starfarer. Before her father became the great Sultan of an Outpost to fulfill his blood destiny, he was a great pilot and formation leader. There were many stories of his exploits, and those achievements may be helped with the senses and skills of a Farer. Her father told her bedtime stories of the Starfarer legends, and one day, he admitted having felt the spirit and blood of being one of them. At first she thought he was exaggerating his own sense of ego and skill, till one day she began hearing the songs of the stars themselves.

That was long before a Beast mothership hit the Khor clan Outpost. Her father died during the attack, or at least she hoped he died there. He could have been one of those whose blood and flesh was assimilated into those monstrous horrors of steel and flesh they call a Beast ship, but she dared not to think of this. Her father died bravely in battle, that was the end of it. With the last survivors of the Khor outpost, she fled with a badly damaged Lord Class carrier. The carrier, now the Mule, had its navigational systems badly damaged, and so they drifted aimlessly while trying to avoid the predatory Beast, whose ships hunted them. That was when she decided to make her stand, as the last heir of the great Turanic clan of Khor, the word linguistically recognized throughout the known races of the galaxy as the Great Star. Knowing little only of interstellar navigation, she relied on her

senses and intuition and guided the carrier towards the first human interstellar base they can find. It was there perhaps her innate abilities of a Farer could have saved her and the ship, and she awakened more to the power of this strange nature. By a stroke of luck, the base turned out to be a Taidani Republic starbase, protected by Republican and Hiigaran ships. But even facing the Republicans and the Hiigarans were much preferable to the Beast, and they were also at war with the Beast. Initially, the Republicans and the Hiigrans were alarmed and sent ships ready to attack the Lord class carrier. But she sent a distress signal, telling the base they were refugees desperate for food and medical attention, and the ship was badly damaged to be starworthy longer.

That was when she met Seejuk Liirhra. He was doing services for the base, for the Republican and Hiigaran ships, and was planning his deep space technology salvage venture. The carrier was repaired, the wounded was taken care of, and Seejuk pulled political strings in a manner she could not understand at her age, even though she has seen her father did those things often. She repaid the Republican's humanitarian help with her ship and people by helping to defend the base against a Beast attack. The Mule, with Seejuk onboard, also participated in joint allied operations against the Beast. When other Turanic sultanates sought temporary alliances with the Republicans and the Hiigarans to wipe out the Beast forces in their sectors, her own alliance became politically palatable. Do any means necessary.

The journey to the Republican base was the first time she discovered that she may have the senses of a Starfarer. She suspected it somehow before, when she played as a pilot of her own beloved Fiirkhan, but never ventured beyond the sector of space where her Outpost lay. She felt that senses again as the captain of the Mule, the last major capital ship of the Khor, navigating adventurously into the unknown spaces of the galaxy, as she and Seejuk sought to recover technology and artifacts. She suspected Seejuk felt she had the blood of the Starfarers, and he often admired her talent of interstellar navigation. The Starfarer legends was a deep secret among the Turanic people, and they never shared their stories not even with their Imperialist allies.

A Starfarer would know the presence of another Starfarer even distances away. That was part of their extraordinary skill. She always felt the presence of her father when she was alive, and he felt the same way about her too. She thought it was parental or having to do with family, but later discovered to herself, it was their senses as a Starfarer acting. She always felt her father even as his fleet returned to the Outpost after a raiding mission.

The Swarmer passed by formation after formation of other Swarmers and other Kadeshi ships. Towards the center, she felt that presence again. It was the same feeling she sensed when her father was near. But it was not her father, just something like it. The presence of another Starfarer deep inside the Kadeshi Armada..... why is there, another one like her?

The feeling grew stronger and stronger. She felt it was right about here. A formation of Needleships circled protectively around a titanic ship that seemed to encase something deep inside its huge scaffold like structures. It looked like a mobile shipyard but it had to be a new Kadeshi mothership class. She carried in her cockpit a portable sensor equipment that could passively collect data. She turned it on now, pointing the hand held probe at the ship through her cockpit window. Her other hand on the joystick, the Swarmer rolled to get a closer look on the new ship. The Starfarer she

sensed had to be inside that massive ship.

For a moment, G'yela was distracted. There was a disturbing feeling and she barked some orders to the bridge officers. The ensign said, it was only a Swarmer that flew too close to the ship, and they ordered it to get away and go back into formation.

G'yela was disturbed by the unruliness of the Armada. In her excursions outside the Gardens, she had honed an elite task force that could navigate interstellar space and disciplined enough to take the best the Unclean could offer. But the rest of the Kadeshi fleet had long been spoiled inside the Gardens. They are having problems dealing with space beyond the Gardens. Much training had to be done, and she had dispatched experience personnel to every quarter in the fleet to begin extensive training programs to create a resource of interstellar abled officers. The Kadeshi warriors have much enthusiasm, but from the books of N'ua and what she had learned from the outside world and the Unclean, the Kadeshi needs a disciplined and structured force to defeat the Unclean. She had split up the fleet into smaller task groups, each led by a battle experienced officer that served under her task force. It was partly a political move too, to put all her loyalists in every branch and corner of the Kadeshi fleet.

The biggest logistical problem was the Arkships that contain the Kadeshi people and culture. They cannot move as fast as the rest of the force. In order to protect them as they fall behind, a separate force was assigned to protect the Arkships and designated the Home Guard. The rest of the Fleet were separated into Columns. Some Columns will go well ahead of the rest of the Fleet to scout for enemy systems and resources. Others will harvest the star systems and asteroid belts. The main Columns will strike against enemy fleets and bases, relying on speed and surprise. Without the Gardens to sustain them, the new Kadeshi nomads must rely on extensive deep space scouting and resourcing to feed the Arkships. The advance Columns are led by elite officers from her original strike force, and these elite Columns are the pride and joy of the new Kadeshi Crusade, attracting the best people for recruitment.

G'yela closely observed and scrutinized the Fleet movements, watching them navigate in space beyond the Gardens for the first time. The initial chaos gave way to more disciplined formations. The great people of the Gardens will overcome their own flaws.

There are still a few miscreants. From the screen she saw some ships still moving carelessly about. She still had a sense of uneasiness that came suddenly. She felt something is out there, watching her, something not supposed to be here. Yet strangely for the first time she felt not alone. She had always felt too different and alone from the rest of the Kadeshi people, never belonging in any sense. That strange loneliness had been a fire for her to reach out beyond the Gardens, where deep in interstellar space, she felt at home. There goes this feeling again, a strange feeling of kinship with something outside, someone outside.

"Was this sector scanned before we jumped into it, dear Bishop?" G'yela asked M'jor.

"We did a thorough reconnaissance of the area, o great Holiness," M'jor replied.

"Somehow I am not convinced. As soon as the Fleet jumps, I want a back force to recon the area once again, and eliminate possible enemy reconnaissance forces. We cannot take everything by chance. We cannot lose the element of surprise. The Mother rewards only those who are thorough."

"Now, we shall all pray to the Great Mother that our Crusade will be successful and bring glory to Her Name. "

Seejuk noticed that after Zha returned from her self made recon mission, she still looked troubled as ever. The plus side of it was that she was able to gather valuable data on the fleet from her portable sensor equipment. He was already making plans on a more extensive reconnaissance flight should they encounter the Kadeshi armada again, and this time, a Somtaaw recon probe is being fitted on the nose of a modified Swarmer fitted with long range high efficiency Acolyte engines. The guns in the fighter was removed.

Zha was strangely quiet as they prepared to discuss with the officers the data at the makeshift conference room inside the Mule.

"So far we have uncovered several new Kadeshi ship types, suggesting that we may be facing a more formidable and flexible opponent than what we previously thought. Other than what we identified as a salvager ship, there is no true Corvette types but that has not stopped the Somtaaw as we remember...look at these types...first the time in history outsiders are able to feast their eyes on Kadeshi resourcers... Contrary to the opinions of historians about the Homeworld War, the Kadeshi Needleships are not true motherships but some kind of super carrier class..."

"The last ship is the surprise. It's not like any of the 12 super large motherships. It's smaller, but definitely of a mothership class, and its bigger than a Needleship. Actually it looks like a pregnant Needleship with something being housed in the middle. We did a structural analysis in the middle structure, and we came up with this."

"This picture is rather startling. What you see is a ship within a ship, as if the larger ship is built as a structure around this ship. The analysis of this middle ship is another surprise. I thought it was vaguely familiar, and I remembered this artist conception of what the Khartoba would look like." Seejuk raised a picture.

"As you see, the derelict structure and the Khar'toba looked remarkably alike. I believe that structure is no other than a sister ship of the Khartoba. As you may recall from Kushan history, the Khartoba was the ship that brought my ancestors, the Exiles, to Kharak long time ago. During the Homeworld Wars, our Mothership encountered the Kadeshi in the Great Nebula, and discovered the energy signature of a wreck inside the Nebula that looked remarkably like that of the Kushans. We have also noted the amazing similarities of Kushan ship energy signatures with that of the Kadeshi, suggesting the same technological origins. That sister ship was never uncovered, until now..."

"This has to be the sister ship. As you can see, the Kadeshi built an entire mothership around it. Why

would they do that? Unless for them, the ship is also a sacred religious symbol that their fleet cannot do without..."

"A sacred symbol?" Zha asked.

"Yes," Seejuk replied. "I mean, the Kadeshi must have an entire culture and religion centered around that ship, its relics and its stories. By the Desert Gods, they must also have their own Guidestone. Any race of Exiles, if there was more of them, would have possessed this relic of cultural memory that will inevitably lead them back to Hiigara. That was the fate of the Kushans of Kharak, and that will be the inevitable fate of the Protectors of the Garden. Yet, during the first encounter of the Kadeshi and the Kushans in the Homeworld Wars, the Kadeshi failed to join the Kushans in their journey or let them pass. At that moment, I can only guess that their circumstances and reasons for being so were much different then. Today, I think their circumstances have changed different. For the Protectors of the Garden to leave the Garden itself, something--or someone--may have forced this great change. Before the Kadeshi were bordered and were in fear of the Taidan Empire. The Empire has fallen and inevitably those news would reach to the Kadeshi by the form of some recently captured ship. Another new catalyst is the Kushans themselves. When we entered the Gardens and announced what we were doing, that may have rekindled it for them too, and news of our success in the Homeworld journey would have been both inspiring and sacrilege for them."

"They would not have the Arkships outside of the Great Nebula, nor are they moving their most sacred relics, if they are not migrating their entire population. But where are they headed to? There can only be one place, and the Gods of Kharak have mercy on us all, as this entire fleet may be headed for Hiigara... The Kadeshi has started their own Homeworld journey."

Most of the explanations made sense for Zha, except for one item; Zha still wondered about the Starfarer's presence in the Kadeshi mothership. The relationship with the Khartoba would not explain that presence. The Kushans do not have Starfarer blood, nor does the Kadeshi. She was reluctant to tell Seejuk about what she felt, as the Starfarers are a sacred secret of the Turanic race.

"If this armada would be headed to Hiigara, I would suggest we must warn the Hiigaran authorities first," Seejuk advised.

"It is a plausible theory, but I think we should warn the nearest Raider outpost. There is no Raider force within the next ten sectors that can challenge that armada. They must be alerted about this," Zha concluded. "Seejuk, I will let you warn the Hiigaran authorities, but the Mule is a Raider ship first and all. I must warn my Raider brethren first, as they are the closest to the danger. This is supposed to be a matter of your own people, if these Kadeshi are your long lost cousins who want a piece of your home. I don't think we should risk the ship and its people for something that is not our battle. You Kushans should negotiate some way out of this"

Seejuk was quiet for a while. "If you ever knew what happened to the Kiith after the Landfall, this won't be easy. After the Landfall, the Kiith went back to their old power grabbing ways and political disunity, the Naabal, Gaalsien, Sjet, Paktu, Liirhra, the Manaani..... There may be less than half a million of us survivors, but that didn't stop the power struggles. The Kiith may unite for the

common cause, but they may refuse to share Hiigara with the Kadeshi. This is not a battle between the Good Exiles and the Evil Empire, this is a battle between two Exile races each with a valid claim to Hiigara."

A call from the bridge interrupted the session. "Captain, we have multiple hyperspace jump signatures."

Zha and Seejuk ran to the bridge as quickly as they can. The screens were full of pink and purple circles, each indicating a hyperspace jump event. "Oh my god, the whole damn fleet is jumping into hyperspace. Where are they headed?"

Zha issued new directives. "When the last Kadeshi ship leaves, we will jump to the nearest Turan outpost to alert them. Then we shall alert the Kushan and Republican authorities."

The number of hyperspace events started to recede until the last Kadeshi ship made its jump. "Rein in the Cloak Generators now, and prepare for Hyperspace Jump. Feed me the coordinates for the nearest Raider outpost."

"Captain, hyperspace jump refuses to engage."

"Try it again," Zha ordered.

"No Captain, the Mule won't engage."

"Run diagnostics quickly, we don't have much time," said Zha.

Seejuk looked troubled and his heartbeat raced. "By the Merciful Gods of Kharak, go into battle stations now. If I think what this is, we're in deep trouble."

"Now what is it, Seejuk?" Zha demanded her answers.

"Hyperspace inhibitors. Some weapon the Kadeshi uses to trap their prey."

At that moment, the sensor screens lit up with the red spots of an attacking enemy. Seejuk looked up into the screen.

"Swarmer!"

"Red Alert! Calling all available fighters! Prepare for launching. Defend the ship!" Zha commanded.

More lights appeared in the screen. Bigger ones, bearing down on the Mule.

"Oh my god Sajuuk," Seejuk exclaimed. "Kadeshi multibeam frigates, coming to fry this ship. We're not going to have a chance!"

"We will," Zha said. "I need you to take over this ship. I will command the fighter squadrons. Ensign, prepare to

activate the ion beam. Raise the arrays. "The Mule sports an unusual modification different from other Lord class carriers. Magnificent magnetic arrays, based on those used by the Turanic Ion Array Frigate, were raised from hidden panels in the Mule, ready to boost the ion beam against the Mule's targets.

"Release the Koraal Gravwell generator and have it escorted by a Cloak generator. I want that between the Mule and the enemy fighters." Zha ordered. The Gravwell was kept for emergencies; this was a time as good as any. Activate the Gravwell only when our fighters are clear past its sphere of influence.

She looked at Seejuk. "Keep your head clear and cool, and just follow my instructions." After saying this, she ran to the nearest launch tube.

Alarms and red lights were going off as Bandits and Brigands began to taxi for the launch. They were followed by Thief corvettes. Joining them would be the Mule's entire inventory of surplus Taidani fighters and corvettes. They included like the Fiirkan, the original Triikor fighter and Taalchok light corvette, which were phased as the Republicans shifted to the new Mark II Heavy Interceptor. The new interceptor added a second lateral rail gun to double the firepower and balance the design. However, aces lamented for its decreased performance from increased weight and a lower roll rate, and production lines lamented for its increased cost and complexity. The new fighter was a blessing in disguise for Zha as it forced the classic Fiirkan and Triikor into surplus obsolescence, where she can afford to buy them and their parts supply at a pittance. Production lines in the Mule have also learned to make copies of these ships.

Zha slipped into one of her custom Triikors and gave the thumbs up, as the Triikor was being led into the launching rail.

Outside, the Brigands and the Thief corvettes have fallen into formation, while the Bandits, Triikors, Fiirkans and Taalchoks settled into another formation. The Gravwell has left, followed closely by a Cloaking Generator that was activated.

These Swarmers, according to their energy trails, are equipped with the new high efficiency power drives, and the lack of Fuel Pods anywhere confirmed her suspicion. The old Kushan destroy the Fuel Pod tactic won't work here. Zha's plan instead was to throw the cloaked Gravwell against the Swarmers, immobilizing them with its gravitational field. The Mule would come over with its anti strike guns and finish off the Swarmers. The corvettes would strike at the MBFs, the Thief corvettes would try to capture as many frigates as possible, while the Brigands would destroy the rest with its missile volleys. The scouts, interceptors, and the Taalchoks would provide cover for the corvettes.

The Brigands hit the MBFs with a massive first strike of missile volleys. The MBFs were unable to turn fast enough as the Brigands readied to swoop down in a second pass. The Thiefs quickly went to do their dirty work, trapping a few MBFs in their jaws. A large formation of Swarmers were headed for the Mule, unaware of the Gravwell that stands between them and their prey. The fields did as advertised, and the Mule moved in to pop the immobile Swarmers with its defensive weaponry. Separated from the main group, some Swarmers headed to defend the MBFs. That was

when the fighters and Taalchoks hit them. The extreme speeds made some the Swarmers and Scouts collide with each other. Few Swarmers were lost but the Scouts took the worst damage.

Zha's special Triikor was able to keep up with a Swarmer firing madly at a Bandit. The Bandit blew, unable to escape the Swarmer's extreme speed and firepower. With the railgun at the side and the mass driver at the nose of the Triikor, she squeezed the trigger, and the deadly fire ripped at the round back of the Swarmer. The Swarmer boosted, but so did her Triikor, still pumping its shots, and the Kadeshi ship ended in a big ball of fire. Sensing trouble, she quickly rolled, as an Advanced Swarmer suddenly found itself shooting into empty space, its tracers seeking the spot where the Triikor was split seconds ago. The Triikor slipped under the Advanced Swarmer, and her guns ripped its belly.

The surprise initiative worked. The MBFs were defenseless prey against the corvette and fighter attack. The Mule's ion beam cut into the paralyzed cloud of Swarmers, and one after another were blown away. The Mule launched its few Taidani Resource Collectors, and the Collectors smashed their thick hides against the Swarmers.

That's when the unforeseen happened. From a nearby dust cloud, a long needleshape emerged, its ion beams lancing into the Mule from behind. The Mule shook at the intensity of the beams, and it turned around to face its attacker. An ion beam retaliated from the Mule, scorching the Needleship. Desperate, the Collectors headed to crash into the Needleship.

"Defend the Mule!" Zha commanded. An MBF torched the Gravwell, and the surviving Swarmers were free. But the MBF did not get away as the Brigands finished it off with a large volley of missiles.

Flames appeared in the Mule, as ion beams one after another connected to its hull. The Needleship was wounded from the desperate actions of the Collectors, and now the Brigands was firing wave after wave of missiles against its long hull. Swarmers, desperately defending the Needleship, took down a few Brigands. The Mule fired and fired its ion beam cannon, sending probes into the Needleship as scuttle bombs. The Thieves and the Raalchoks added their own firepower against the Needleship, while the Bandits, Triikors and Fiirkans continued to engage the Swarmers at a heavy cost to themselves. The battle became increasingly desperate for both sides in a race against time. Swarmers began crashing into the Mule, while Scouts crashed into the Needleship.

The Needleship changed its course, its head directed to the Mule for a ramming attack. "Oh my god!" Seejuk shouted. "Hard right, dammit!" The Mule wrestled at its hard turn, and the Needleship missed it by a few lengths. The Mule proved to be the more agile of the two ships as it turned once again to bear down its ion beam, while the Needleship peppered the Mule with its plasma fire.

The Needleship could not brake its approach, and near the Mule's last position was a few asteroids. It released the hyperspace inhibitor and moments before it would crash to the asteroids, the jump gate appeared and the Needleship slipped through it. Seejuk swore at the Needleship. For religious fanatics, it was a cowardly thing to run away, but apparently the Kadeshi were no longer interested in vain sacrifices, and needed to preserve every one of their big ships for more important battles.

Lucky thing to, if the battle was prolonged, the Mule would be toast. He called for damage assessment. The communications system was badly damaged and so was the jump capability. The hull suffered damage and casualties were in all decks.

Zha landed her ship, and she was livid at the sight of the damage. More than two thirds of her fighter and corvette complement was gone too, as well as all her Collectors, and her precious Gravwell generator. Her consolation prizes were a few captured MBFs, Swarmers and Advanced Swarmers. Prisoners were to be subjected to the interrogation style the Turanics were infamous throughout the galaxy for. The captured ships, which include many Swarmers and the valuable MBFs, had to be quickly refurnished so they may be used for temporary protection, and she needs to train pilots to fly them. She quickly ordered new Collectors to be built so they can harvest resources while the ship is undergoing repairs. The harvested resources would go to rebuilding the Mule's strike craft complement. She ordered the Cloak Generators out again to hide the Mule, in case the Kadeshi made a return visit.

Seejuk was there in the hanger to meet her. "Congratulations for being alive. Not bad for a young one like you. I thought we might not make it. "

Zha gave her thumbs up. Her joy of victory was short lived however. Without communications, the ship badly damaged and without jump capability, the Mule would be stranded for a while, incapable of warning the known worlds of the coming of the Kadeshi Crusade.

Chapter 5: The Mule

The decks were littered with sparks as every able body tries to repair the extensive damage on the carrier. Zha was happy she got Seejuk's competent team of Kiith Liirhra engineers working on the Mule, even if they were Kushans. She paced all over the carrier's decks, watching the progress of the repair. Having the Kushans were an advantage. The Turanics were never good engineers. They had mainly acquired and adapted someone else technology and braced them with their own common sense. They're not the best when it comes to maintenance and repair either, and Raider ships were often dependent on hiring Taidani engineers to work for them. The Imperialists were a boom for that.

In one of the decks, Seejuk Liirhra's voice was hoarse from shouting and managing his team. When Kiith Liirhra declined in influence, many engineers were left idle and without work. That was about the time other Kiith wanted to pursue their own ship design projects and shipyards, all part of a political manipulative attempt to reduce their dependence over Liirhra. The fact that Liirhra wanted exorbitant licensing fees did not help very much. The smaller Kiith went buying to the Somtaaw or the Bentusi. Many in the Liirhra went to work for the other Kiiths, but Seejuk managed to pull a competent team that was interested with his deep space ventures.

What was remarkable to the sight of Zha was that Seejuk managed even to pull the Turanic and Taidani engineers and workers in the Mule to work closely with their Kushan counterparts. Engineers, it seems, are their own breed, talk their own language, think together and stick together regardless of the race they came from. Seejuk went further by designing his own modifications to the Lord class carrier, like magnetic array panels to enhance the ion beam, and tethering Cloak Generators with cables to ensure a continuous power supply. The arrays were salvaged from a Turanic Ion Array frigate. Seejuk even promised that one time, the Mule will be able to illegally manufacture Kushan Arrow scouts and Blade Mk II interceptors without proper license, and even the Somtaaw Acolytes, as soon as they can illegally obtain the machine tools. This, she got to see.

She was deeply covered in sweat, her face in grease, from the heat of the welding, from putting out random fires, from trying to frantically repair ships with hot engines. She slumped down the post and into the floor for a short rest. In the hanger, the captured Swarmers are being refitted and repainted with her clan's markings. There was a lot of excitement when a Kadeshi Multibeam frigate was brought inside the hanger. Seejuk was all loud and talking on the very sight of the MBF's quad ion helix cannons, which was possibly the most powerful 'small' weapons he has seen, even over the Somtaaw's ion helixes. The Somtaaw never allowed the licensing of their ion helix to the other Kiith in order to protect their technological monopoly. But this, well, he's not going to ask the Kadeshi for licensing permission either. He intends to study it closely and make his own copy.

The captured MBFs were repaired, refitted and given new crews. Their bland beige white exterior soon gave way to an outlandish Raider style paint job, blessed with the markings of her clan. One MBF was too damaged for refitting, so Seejuk decided to put the MBF to scrap, and take out the engine, computers and ion beam helixes for spares. He mentioned about using the helixes in four makeshift turrets along the carrier as a defensive armament. He had noted that some of the Mule's own guns were damaged beyond repair. He then gave orders to modify the MBF drive to provide

power for these turrets alone. That would significantly raise the firepower capacity of the Mule the next time they would encounter a Needleship or some other bad guy. The expense would be the spare space taken up by the drive and they can't fire the four beams if the main ion beam cannon is ready to fire with the array panels deployed.

There was no rest until the Mule can be repaired. The urgency was the need to warn Turan, Higaara and the Republic of the Kadeshi Crusade. Zha was greatly disappointed to hear that the communications equipment of the Mule was so damaged it needed to be replaced completely. A makeshift communications system taken from a salvage was installed, but this communication system is not capable of the power of the original carrier system, and simply does not have the range required to contact the nearest outpost. The makeshift system was only sufficient for contacting ships within the sector and for coordinating combat ships.

As the Mule finally became interstellar worthy again, a final act for the fallen must be done. For all the adventures of the Mule and the time they spent together, there has never been a toll in life like this. The bay was cleared of the unnecessary equipment, all the fighters and corvettes laid in neat rows all clean and solemn. The bodies of the dead and effigies of those who died but their bodies never recovered, were all laid in the deck, wrapped in the Turan ceremonial cloth and packaged in a clear capsule.

All crew of Turan blood wore their tribal costumes, some showing the colors of the original tribe of their ancestry, but most wearing the colors of the clan of Khor. The Taidanis among the crew marched in their military uniforms, while the Kushans wore the funeral dress known of the Kiith Liirhra and the Hraal. He, Seejuk, wore the only one who wore uniform of a chief engineer of the Kiith Liirhra. There was a solemn drumbeat and the playing of flutes. Men in Turan tribal costume marched singing and carrying a torch. At the end of their song, they stood in formation across the hallway for the most important person to enter. A person formally announced the entrance of the Segura of Khor. The title Segura when translated, meant "Glorious Princess of Turan."

Zha entered wearing the thick glittering royal robes of a true Segura, her head covered with an extravagant head dress that appeared made from trophies of dead birds and predatory animals. No dominant royalty exists in the noble tribes of Turan, referred to as bandit kingdoms by the rest of the Galaxy. But the nobility's that rule the tribes and clans was bound by blood. Among the nobility's themselves, there was even an inner nobility and they were considered the most ancient and noble of the purest blood. Her father, the great Sultan, Zerun Khor, was also Shah of the inner Turan, or Great Prince. She, by blood, would be a Segura, a true Princess of Turan. But with the destruction of the Khor outpost, the clan Khor became disenfranchised in shame. Not until they have regained honor would they be allowed a new outpost. Zha herself never wanted to use this title, her social rank. For all and to everyone, that rank and title has disappeared with the loss of her outpost. The only thing that matters now was her ship and crew, and of course, to do whatever is needed to gain a decent profit. But for this occasion, it is only proper that the song, the voice and the tears of a Segura, of the highest and most noble of Turan, must be spoken and shed to give the highest honor for those who selflessly sacrificed their lives.

Seejuk had never seen her so beautiful and solemn, and he winked his eyes to make sure he's seeing

the right person, that raggy and punkish girl who can be a constant thorn to his side, now a beautiful princess worthy of the storybooks and legends. Zha was a girl entering the blossom of her womanhood, young and still innocent, but her eyes already tempered with the fire of battle and the coldness of death. Her face bared no emotion as she lit the candles near the corpses and effigies, but her frame seemed to struggle for balance with the weight of her costume and the tendency of her huge head dress to fall off her head. After the candles were lit, the drums began beating and the flutes sung a new sad lyric. She quietly stood up to a makeshift podium, and begun to sing a haunting melody, the ceremonial Turanic Song of the Dead, for the dead heroes and victims of the last battle as they journey to the afterworld.

For a Kushan to ever witness the Turanic Ritual of Sending the Dead is a great honor, much more even a greater honor to witness a true Princess of Turan sing the Song of Death. But it wasn't his first time to see this. Zha's song reminded him of the first time he saw her.

It was during the height of the Beast War. When a heavily damaged Turanic Lord class carrier hyperspaced in front of a joint allied Kushan-Republican base asking for help, Kushan engineers like him jumped up and down in joy. This was a golden opportunity to ever examine a Lord ship close hand. The ship itself was desperately in need of repairs, the crew, food and medicine. To provide the help was the only humanitarian thing to do and was a chance to study the carrier directly, and what better means to do it than by sending a Kushan repair crew. Inside however, his joy of examining the ship was quickly dampened at the sight of the refugees inside the ship, all the sick, wounded and starving, and many of them, women and children.

It was in the docking bay of the carrier one night, while working on the electrical systems in the deck that he heard a strange song being sung by a young girl in the dim light. He walked towards her, with the intention to ask her to leave the deck to allow him to continue the repairs uninterrupted. What he saw was a gaunt child in dirty rags, lighting a candle on the floor near a makeshift doll. She was singing this haunting hymn.

He asked her what was she doing.

"My father," she said, "was a Great Prince of Turan. But he died, and no one will sing for him on his journey to the heaven. He thought me to sing this song while he was alive, and told me to sing for him when he died. I am sending him to heaven now with a great funeral that fits a Prince."

She looked like she was weak and hasn't eaten in ages. Tears flowed from her eyes as she gathers what little strength she had for her song. In his greasy engineering coveralls, Seejuk sat down and lit a candle to join her small makeshift funeral ceremony for her father.

"My father will be happy," she said, looking at him with her gaunt puppy eyes, then continued her song. "I know he will," he replied, two lonely figures kneeling in a cold deck in candlelight, "he will get his princely funeral." He uttered a Hraal prayer asking for the Gods of Kharak to help a Prince of Turan on his journey.

She has grown since then, and now her song was for the fallen of her ship. A soft tear appeared in the corner of Seejuk's eye and he quickly wiped it out. The bodies were moved and lined up next

to a launch tube. As she continued her song, an officer announced the names of those who sacrificed, and their bodies were ejected to space in order return them to the Universe they came from.

As soon as the last body was sent, a silence fell upon the gathering for their final prayers. When that is over, the Segura looked over the crowd, who expected that she would say something solemn. Instead she barked "I want everyone to their stations now! We are going to hyperspace and not a second to lose!" She frantically waved her arms, "GO! GO! GO!"

Everyone was still in their ceremonial uniforms, as the bridge officers quickly ran diagnostics before powering up the engines. Zha didn't had time either to get rid of her Segura costume, placed the ungainly head dress on the control panel, and slinked into the captain's chair, robes and all. Seejuk was right behind her, headed to the sensors panel. "You know, you should have given us time to change to something more comfortable." To which she replied, never taking her eyes off her panel, "Worry about that later. Power up the engines! We must go now!"

The Bandits were in X formation as they headed to the area where the supposed interference was detected. Another boring patrol, the pilot thought. He wished to be part of those raiding missions he so often heard about being conducted once in a while against the Hiigarans and the Republic. But they let the inexperienced cut their teeth on boring patrols first, before they assign them on missions that have some true action.

"So what do you expect to find here?" the pilot calling to the female officer in the control bridge of the Outpost. She was a cute one, and he thought of asking her out when he comes back. Maybe for a joyride in the tight cockpit of this Bandit, he smiled. "Do you think--" he was asking when she suddenly cut him off. "Just keep your mind on the sensors. I swear I thought I detected a hyperspace jump signature here," she said.

"Okay okay..."

A long needlelike shape broke out of the dust clouds. "Huh?" the pilot said. His surprise turned into a smile of opportunity. Some merchant vessel accidentally came upon into this area. If he and his squadron were able to disable the vessel for capture, he would be on a fast track to an assignment with a real carrier on a raiding mission. He turned the comm link on again to contact the Outpost for reinforcements in the form of Thief corvettes to capture the merchant vessel.

No answer.

He flicked the switches. No answer again. Only static.

There is no time now. They have to strike or the vessel will get away. "Red alert, prepare to engage vessel----"

Before there was one needle vessel, now there were four of them. Smaller beige colored vessels in military formation were right next to them. "Oh my lord, Frigates! What is this! Who are these

people?" They appeared neither Kushan nor Republic. A V shaped formation of fighters were zooming to his way.

"Evasive maneuvers, emergency boost! Return to the base! We must warn them!" The Bandits u-turned in maximum boost. His back pushed to the chair by G-forces, the Bandits strained to get away. But as he watched his sensor screens, the enemy fighters were still closing in on them at a rapid rate of speed. There is only one thing left to do. He called on the least experienced pilot to continue running to the base.

The rest must engage. The formation of Bandits broke out into a flower, as they u-turned back against the Swarmers. A Swarmer opened fire and a Bandit exploded. Another Bandit collided with a Swarmer, ending both their fates. The pilot rolled as fire from another Swarmer shot underneath his craft. He looped, the Bandit struggling dangerously with extreme forces as his target reticle falls on the Swarmer. The Swarmer fired its boosters but before it got away, mass drivers from the Bandit tore into its armor, and the Swarmer's flight ended in an explosion.

As the battle turned into a furball, a lone Bandit headed back to the base on maximum boost. G'yela watched the event from the flagship, Khar'nak. She waved her hand, signaling open engagement. A formation of multibeam frigates appeared to spearhead the attack on the Turanic Outpost. A multiple wings of Swarmers have engaged their engines, and ionic trails began to mark the black space, heading for the Outpost. G'yela looked relaxed despite this being the first time she has engaged a Turanic Outpost.

"Sensors have detected enemy battlegroup, identified Lord class carrier with Ion Array Frigates for escort, all headed our way."

G'yela smirked. "Order all Multibeam Frigate formation to engage the Ion Array Frigates. Fire up the Khar'nak's ion beam cannons. That carrier is mine and the Mother's glory."

One of the Bandit pilots have gone out of the communications jamming range. His distress call released an angry swarm of Bandits and Brigand missile corvettes from the outpost and the carrier. But the sight of the angry swarm only brought smiles to the faces of the Swarmer pilots looking to prove their mettle against the Unclean. The first formation of Swarmers charged right into the middle of the Bandits, and explosions occurred as Swarmers collide with the Bandits. Wave after wave of Swarmers charged at the Turanic strike force, and as forces joined, a massive furball has taken shape. No one could make heads or tails of the great dogfight.

"The Outpost is calling help for Imperialist reinforcements!" the ensign warned. "Let them do it," G'yela replied. "I'll give you the signal when to apply the Hyperspace Inhibitors."

As the four needleships began to take position on four corners in the sector around the Outpost, the Multibeam frigates had commence firing on the Ion Array Frigates, which retaliated back. In the first exchange, two Ion Array frigs were destroyed, but the leading multibeam frigate was crippled from the initial blows. Another Multibeam frigate went down. But as the battle went on, the more powerful and maneuverable MBFs slaughtered the Ion Array frigates. A wave of Assault Pods---obsolete Fuel Pods modified with additional cannons, beared down on the Turanic task force to

support the MBFs. The Turanic carrier beam killed a Pod, but in turn, was subjected by cannon fire from the Pods. Fighters launched from the Turanic carrier but were immediately attacked by Swarmers.

It would be a good time to test the new Pod types, G'yela thought. In order to sustain a long range comprehensive campaign, G'yela, her top officers and engineers made a number of variations from the venerable Pod chassis that was the basis of the Fuel Pod that was partly made obsolete by the more efficient fighter drives. The Assault Pod added additional cannons in the spare space, turning the Pod into a formidable gunship that will supplement the MBFs in point to point battles. The Supply Pod was based on technology from a captured Supply Frigate. The green healing beams were made to sustain formations of Multibeam Frigates, Needleships, and Pods. It can also provide fuel and repair for the Swarmers docking to it.

Thief Corvettes made frantic attempts to steal or immobilize some MBFs, but were cut down by escorting Advanced Swarmers. Brigands smashed volley after volley of missiles in to the MBFs and Pods, taking a number down that led M'jor to show some concern. But as the Advanced Swarmers turned to face the Brigands, the Brigands were slaughtered. Swarmer Bombers---Swarmers with a single large cannon of heavy punch, in contrast to the dual cannon Swarmers and quad cannon Advanced Swarmers---has entered the fray in an attack wave, peppering Ion Array Frigates and the Turanic carrier.

A Taidani Imperialist fleet has hyperspaced between G'yela's flagship and the Turanic base. G'yela smiled---the trap is set. She gave her orders, and the four Needleships activated their hyperspace inhibitors. Escorting the Needleships were a formation of probes, not just sensor probes, but each containing a bomb that sends out a shock wave. "Bomb them," G'yela ordered. "Think of it as Gifts from the Mother," G'yela laughed.

Formations of Probe Bombs headed to the Imperialist fleet, which had no idea what they were. For the Turanic carrier and task force, it was too late; their agony ended in a series of brilliant explosions. The Imperialist carrier has begun to deploy its fighters and corvettes, while assault and ion frigates formed a protective formation around the carrier.

They would have felt their futility by now, G'yela thought. A sense of panic gripped the Imperialist forces when they failed to hyperspace. When Taidan fighters and corvettes tried to shoot down the probes, the bombs exploded, their shock waves destroying the small craft. More probes headed to the carrier and the frigates, and their automated turrets turned to shoot them. The resulting chain of explosions rocked the Imperialist capital ships, as a massive wave of Swarmers bore down on their position.

G'yela stood from her throne and walked to the big screen that showed the battle. She stood aloof with a sense of dignity. The sense of victory and the blood scent of the kill can be intoxicating but remained well hidden in her icy demeanor. Like the Taidanii, the Turanics have aided in the persecution of the Mother and the sacred ancestors of the Kadeshi race. Like the Taidanii, they are sinners that must be wiped out like the lowest vermin, for they are, like the Taidanii, the Unclean. They will pay for their sins against the Mother, even if the destiny of retribution will last for tens

of millenia. Like packs of predatory animals, the Pods and Beam Frigates rushed to devour the survivors of the Imperialist fleet.

"Cleanse this sector of space from the Unclean, " G'yela ordered, her voice heard in all the comm links of her fleet. "This glorious victory is an offering for the Mother, and this sector of space will be consecrated for the Mother. Our great heavenly Mother is pleased with the spilling of the blood of the Unclean. She will remember the great sacrifice, faith, and courage of our holy warriors, and the souls of those who died in Her Cause will forever have a place in Her Great Gardens."

The inhabitants---families---aboard the Turanic Outpost watched in sheer horror as their kin and loved ones died in the Turanic defenders were destroyed. Equally horrific was the total annihilation of the Imperialist fleet sent to help them right in front of their eyes. There was panic as the order for evacuation was given, and people flooded to the transport ships. The remaining defenders---the Ion Array Frigates, Brigands, Thieves, Bandits---were to be tasked in the desperate defense of the task force.

The Sultan of the Merak Outpost had died with the carrier. The last remaining commander of the Outpost had broadcasted his surrender to the attackers. He watched in horror as the unknown enemy continued its flight towards the Outpost, his request for surrender unheeded. He knew they would kill to the last Turanic woman and child. His purpose and those of the remaining defenders are finally clear; they would defend to their last ounce of breath. A final act must be made. All the videos, data and events of the battle were broadcasted to all Outposts within range as a final warning. He hoped they would learn from the data to deal with this new enemy that dared held its sword against the blood of Turan. When the final transport and lifeboat has left the Outpost, he will begin the final countdown sequence for the self destruction of the Outpost. He hoped shock waves from the blast would damage the enemy and provide cover to the refugees. As for him, he will stay with the Outpost to the very end. He uttered a silent prayer to the Gods who guard the Stars of Turan.

There were news that the transports were not enough to fill the refugees. He ordered the refugees to fill even the Taidani Resource Collectors and Controllers they have in the base, and fill every deck and space of the last few Turanic Ion Array frigates still in the docking bay. As the ships cleared, there were those who refused to go, and expressed their desire to die in the only home they knew. Outside, the Taidan gravwells have stopped the enemy fighters in their tracks, but the enemy frigates pressed on, and begun to bombard the Turanic Outpost.

G'yela watched the screen. She would not miss this act of cleansing. Suddenly there was a brilliant light. Formations of Swarmers, Pods and Beam Frigates perish with the explosion as the Outpost completed its final act of sacrifice. Her own casualties did not matter to G'yela. They performed well, and has earned their place in the Eternal Gardens of N'ua. The cleansing is completed.

The Mule jumped outside where the Merak Outpost was supposed to be. But there was only silence in the darkness.

For Zha, all she can see was the face of utter horror. There was wreckage everywhere and the sense of death around her. Seejuk watched her expression in concern. They were too late.

There was a moment of mournful silence that was broken when Zha gave her next command. "Scan the area for survivors. Go into red alert in case there are still Kadeshi roaming around."

He laid his hand on her shoulder. "I suggest we need to look among the wreckage if we can find enough material to make a powerful communications system that can let us contact a base."

Her voice was weak, and her eyes were wet. "Do that," she said softly. "Do whatever it takes." Seejuk waved his hand to the ensign, who ordered the Thief Corvettes to launch from the bay and search for wreckage.

She spoke to Seejuk softly. "I remembered how it was, when our Outpost was destroyed by the Beast. Wreckage like this everywhere."

Outside, the captured Multibeam Frigates in Turanic colors began to patrol the area looking for survivors. The Mule has begun to deploy every fighter and corvette it had on board, from the Bandits to the Brigands, Fiirkhans and Triikors, to the Swarmers captured in the previous battle. Their mission was to patrol for survivors or for any Kadeshi that may pose a threat.

Hours later, a weak distress signal was detected, and scouts investigated the location. There was a small convoy of heavily damaged transports, Ion Array Frigates, and Taidanii Resourceers, hiding among dust clouds and asteroids, hidden by a few Taidanii cloak generators. The Thief corvettes came and towed the ships to the Mule. A captain of a ship thanked the Gods of Turan for the deliverance. He told the Mule they have been hiding from Kadeshi patrols for hours, unable to hyperspace and when they detected the familiar energy signature of a Turanic vessel, they released their distress signal.

With her mind so occupied and her emotions in a turmoil, in all the hours she had forgotten to remove her ceremonial Segura robes. Her makeup though, had deteriorated significantly since the funeral rites. She didn't let the cumbersome robes impede her as she ran with Seejuk to the docking bays, as the Mule received their survivors from the Outpost.

When the refugees came out, there were crying from the death of loved ones and for the gift of still being alive. Several refugees fell down to their feet and kowtowed to a very surprised Zha.

"Praise the Segura for saving us. Princess of Turan, we are at your mercy!"

That was when she realized she still had her ceremonial robes. Seejuk nudged her shoulder, whispering, "Don't take it off, keep it for the effect."

He added, "These people need an authority figure right now, so you better act royally like one. Don't let them down." Zha looked at him with her sad reddened eyes, and nodded in agreement. Seejuk continued, "I'll take care of the ship and the necessary logistics, you just take care of your people."

"Thanks, " she said, as she knelt to help carry a wounded child.

The scene was terrible, much like he remembered when he first came on the Mule, full of displaced refugees. The wounded were being led to the medical facilities, while living quarters have to be prepared for the refugees. Some may have to sleep in the docking bays and the stock rooms. He thought it may be unsympathetic, but he saw an opportunity for the Mule to regain its strength and complement. He asked one of the officers to note every able bodied men and women. With some training, they can be recruited as crew and pilots for the Mule and its craft.

The Resource Collectors was heaven sent. The Mule was nearly bankrupt and they are in bad need to look for resources, not just to complete all repairs, but to feed the additional people in the ship. Soon enough, the Collectors will be sent to the clouds for both metallic and gaseous material that can be converted to nutrients. It was odd to see the Array Frigates used as emergency refugee ship, but they were a blessing too as additional firepower for the Mule's rag tag fleet.

The Thieves were salvaging anything of value. There were signs that a Taidanii fleet tried to assist the Outpost in vain, guessing from the wreckage, which looks like maybe, they can put some Taidani Attack Bombers, Heavy and Multigun Corvettes together. These would be valuable, he thought, if they're going to deal with Swarmers. Towards the end of the working period, the collection has added Bandits, Brigands, Thieves from the former outpost, some of them drifting in space without fuel and pilots still half alive just waiting for their oxygen to finally run out. There were even some drifting dead Swarmers too, including the Advanced and Bomber types. He wished if he could find the generator of a Defense Field Frigate, or some Defense fighters, but there were none. He should be content of his lucky finds, as now, the salvage has allowed the Mule to recover to nearly full strength.

It was exhausting but the work shall continue as they refitted the ships. Many of the refugees and surviving pilots announced their intentions to loyally serve under Princess Zha, Segura of Turan, and swore a blood oath of vengeance against the Kadeshi. As for Zha, who remained uncomfortable about titles, she was still busy tending to the refugees, assuring the despondent, even talking and singing to the children. He remembered how he was in her position once, and she was like those children. For a moment there his heart felt warm, and he felt proud.

She had made a makeshift bed in the docking bay, and several refugee children lay sleeping there. He could see it from where he was fixing a Taidani Heavy Corvette. There was something glittering on top of the bed, and he could not resist his curiosity to go there and find out.

Zha Khor was sleeping on the floor next to the children, dirty and deeply exhausted. Over the children, she had laid her golden glittering ceremonial robes as a blanket to warm them.

Chapter 6: Engagement

As a child she was frail, but unusual to look at. She had a metallic silvery blonde hair with cold steel eyes to match. For that other children were afraid of her, called her a freak. She never played with them either.

Inside the great Arkships of Kadesh, G'yela had only one friend. It was a creature alien to the Arkships, a Bunari, a slimy, slithering creature with two big eyes with an unusual sensitivity of its environment. No one knows how the Bunaris got to the Arkships, or what they were originally called, but that was what the Kadeshi called them. When the Kadeshi trapped and captured unsuspecting merchant ships who unexpectedly ran into the Gardens, these ships often carried all sorts of alien vermin in their holds. When the captured ships were brought to the Arkships for assimilation, these vermin escape into the slums of the Arkships, adding themselves to the ecology in the slums. Sometimes when the vermin get big enough, the people themselves will eat them.

In the Arkships, there was no day or night. They were always surrounded by the pinkish glare from the nebula clouds that will never go away, an existence of perpetual cloudiness that drives many Kadeshi into madness. It was in a sense, that the Gardens were a living hell, a state of condemnation bestowed upon them by the Mother. The Kadeshi were taught to protect the Gardens, for the Gardens protect them, provide them nourishment. But the Gardens also demand their sanities with its perpetual cloudiness and glare, in a cycle where there is no day, where there is no night. For the nourishing Gardens was also their Hell.

Sometimes the Arkships drift in a part of the Gardens where the clouds were thinnest. That was when the Stars appear in the sky. The first time G'yela saw a Star, a sense of liberation came down deep inside her. She knew then that if the skies can change, so can life. She knew then that there was something beyond her paltry existence, that if she can reach for it, she will be free. But most of all, she felt she belonged out there.

Even as poor as the vermin around her, G'yela would ask the older people questions to learn about the stars. She wanted to learn how to read, so she can read the ancient texts of the Faith, where she heard, would hold the secrets about the Stars.

She never knew when the Stars would appear again. They would appear one day, disappear the next. During the time she waited, she would toy with this Bunari that has found a home in a crack near her own home. Her pet Bunari would always listen to her, whatever her feelings was, whatever she dreamt about, even if it would never speak. Its eyes would always looked at hers.

But one day, the Bunari wasn't there to wait for the Stars with her. She looked around, calling it with the name she gave to it before. But the Bunari was no where. Then across the window of a neighbor, she saw its carcass hanging from a stick on top of a fire. The woman inside the house was cooking the Bunari for her family.

G'yela screamed at the top of her lungs with a shrill voice. She banged and banged at the woman's door, calling the Bunari's name, asking the woman to stop, to give back her Bunari, her only friend.

The woman opened the door, her right hand raised and holding a big stick. She hit G'yela on the head with the stick, then again, but G'yela would not leave the door, wanting to save her only friend. Even when her head bled, she would not abandon her friend. The woman was fed up, grabbed G'yela on her hair, and dragged her across the street, then hit her, again and again.

G'yela could not remember nor feel the pain even as she lay in the street on a puddle of her own blood. She only wanted to save her friend. She shouted and shouted the name of her friend, but the door stayed closed.

G'yela woke up, breathing heavily. The Kadeshi was cursed with madness, and she herself bore that curse. The Kadeshi will always protect the Gardens, but they will also be doomed by it.

For the porthole of her Mothership the Khar'nak, G'yela could see the darkness and the Stars in them. She walked to the porthole, and sat there, staring.

Zha woke up from the alarms sounding off. She had given her robes to the children as a blanket, and with only a thin blouse and shorts, she could feel the coldness of the air in the docking bay. Her head ached---but the flashing red lights...Red Alert! There was an engineer's jacket that lay there and did not belong to her, but she took it anyway.

On the bridge, Seejuk looked trim and ready as always. She herself was a complete mess, but it didn't stop her from walking proudly to the captain's chair. "Status report!" she barked with an authoritative tone, trying to hide her sleepiness.

Seejuk typed something in his console, and the screens came up. The series of lights indicated enemy ships. "We got our cloaks up, and all our ships have either docked or remained within the cloaking field. What you see now is a small enemy task force engaged in resourcing. They have not detected us yet, so we have the supreme tactical advantage of surprise. "

"Now, Captain, we have a choice. We can attack, or we can ignore. We do not stand to profit from any action. I do warn you though that our new recruits are not ready, many of the acquired ships are not battle ready and only half of our strike force complement are operational."

But Zha looked determined. "From the way I see it, Seejuk, we got two choices. We can hide like cowardly dogs or strike out like a true predator of Togath! We have many here that have sworn a Blood Oath against those who wantonly destroyed the Merak outpost. We will not disappoint them. If we win, this will be big boost in morale....."

".....and if we lose.....we will all die too.....including those refugees....." Seejuk added. "We can determine our chances. Our tactical analysis reveals this large ship as possibly a new type, my estimate to be possibly an escort or assault carrier. It's much smaller than a Needleship, but given the way Swarmers move in and out from it, it is definitely a carrier. These Resourcers are also docking with it, which you can't do with a Fuel Pod. The carrier is protected by a usual complement of smaller capital ships, your multibeam frigates, fuel, supply and assault pods. "

Zha studied the screens, weighing all tactical options. She noted that considerable distances lay between the Kadeshi carrier task force and the resources, and she saw her opening.

"We need to execute this as precisely as possible. Seejuk, if we cannot win this, then we can never win at all. We would have deserved to die instead."

The alarms screamed in a Kadeshi Resourceer as an X formation of Bandit interceptors emerged from the random asteroid formation. The Bandits strafed the Resourceer, while a mixed formation of Taidani Scouts, Interceptors, Light Corvettes, and Attack Bombers hit another Resourceer. Sure enough, all Swarms currently in space responded to the distress calls of the Resourceers and rushed to engage the unexpected enemy.

"Now, NOW!" Zha shouted, forming her hand into a fist and angrily shaking it at her tactical screens.

The Mule hyperspaced right under the Kadeshi assault carrier, with an escorting fleet of Turanic Ion Array Frigates and captured Kadeshi Multi Beam Frigates, just seconds before the assault carrier hit the hyperspace inhibitor. The special array panel in the Mule's nose opened like a flower, and the massive ion beam shot out from it, burning into the assault carrier. In a split second later, smaller beams joined the main beam. Some of these beams were from the Mule's new auxiliary ion cannons, salvaged from Multi Beam Frigates earlier. Others came from the Ion Array Frigates and the captured Multi Beam frigates.

The beams blasted through the carrier's flight decks, stopping the remaining Swarms from taking off. The escorting Kadeshi pods and frigates opened desperate fire against the Mule.

"Oh the Desert Gods of Kharak! This is all ruining the Mule's new paint job!" Seejuk exclaimed, his fingers rummaging through his trim hair.

"Fire again!" Zha shouted, as enemy beams racked the Mule. The Mule's main beam blew through the Kadeshi Assault Carrier, the final blow in the duel between equals.

"Yes!" Zha threw her fist in the air. As the carrier turned into a brilliant fireball, her frigates took advantage of the confusion and torched the Kadeshi escort frigates and pods.

"I do not want the enemy pods and frigates destroyed. Send the Thief Corvettes in. Hyperspace the Mule and our Frigates out of here!" Zha snapped.

The Kadeshi frigates found themselves shooting into empty space as the Turanic fleet quickly disappeared through the jump gates. They had little time to respond as Thief corvettes escorted by Brigands lit up their screens. Their slow maneuverability and poor weapons coverage meant that the Pods and Multi Beam Frigates were unable to meet their new attackers in time, and the Raiders demonstrated their textbook forte. Soon, Kadeshi frigates and pods hopelessly struggled, as the Thieves carried them off as proud prizes.

But elsewhere, the battle was not turning to her favor. The Kadeshi Resourceers proved the tough

hides, and both Turanic and Taidani fighters were unable to deal with both Resourcers and Swarmers simultaneously. The Bandits, Triikors, Fiirkans, Raachoks, and Kaarks were in a disadvantage dogfighting the heavier armed, armored and faster Swarmers. Zha's joy of victory was clouded as another of her fighters blew into a cloud of smoke.

"As soon as the Thief corvettes deliver the Kadeshi frigates, I want them all on the remaining Resourcers. Get the Brigands to cover our fighters. This time I am going in personally!"

"But....." Seejuk objected. But there was no use arguing against a young captain whose ship happened to be named after her character. He quickly called the docking bay. "Sir," one of the engineers responded, "we can get one or two of the Taidani Heavy and Multigun Corvettes out. We're still fixing up the rest"

"Then I want those that can fly out to cover our captain's ass!" Seejuk ordered. "Dammit I wish we got our gravwells by now."

Optimized against capital ships best, the Brigands were not doing any better against the fast and maneuverable Swarmers. But for the dogfighting Taidani and Turanic ships, the presence of the Brigands were encouraging. Some of the Thieves have finished delivering their captured cargo and has set out to deliver the Resourcers.

The appearance of the Captain's custom Triikor added a further boost to the morale of the fighters and corvettes still engaging the Swarmers. Right behind her were two Heavy Corvettes and one Diirvaas Multigun corvette. Zha was reckless in her pursuit of the Swarmers. Her escorting corvettes showed their worth as they blew two Swarmers that got into her tail.

Some of the Swarmers saw the Thieves moving into the Resourcers. One or two of the Resourcers managed to hyperspace, but one got into the jaws of two Thieves. But two of the Swarmers showed their amazing speed, strafing their Thieves, and blowing up one of them. The other Thief let go, turned around, and fired its turrets at an incoming Swarmer. The Swarmer disintegrated from its devastating fire.

Scattered and without support, one by one, the Swarmers fought to a gallant end, as the Mule sent more hastily repaired fighters and corvettes to turn the tide of battle. Those that didn't die in battle, tried to crash against the Turanic corvettes. Despite heavy covering fire, some were successful in their kamikaze attempts.

As Zha returned to the hanger in her Triikor, Seejuk, waiting, saw her frustration. "Damn, they were all too fast this time. I could not get a single one of them."

Seejuk could smell her sweat and other body odors from her flight suit. The girl has not cleaned up for some time to have made this too obvious. Not letting her odors distract him, Seejuk pronounced his conclusions.

"The good news is we got some new ships to add to our fleet. The Multibeam Frigates are always valuable, but this time, we got the new Assault and the Supply Pods. The Supply Pods clearly show

the Kadeshi are taking any salvaged technology they can and are adapting them to their use. We know they got Cloaks and by now, they probably have Gravwells as well. The Assault Carrier also shows the Kadeshi are developing a more tactically comprehensive fleet. Sooner or later they will fill up all the holes in their fleet roster classes, which will include Destroyers, Cruisers in the heavy end, and maybe corvette variation in the light end."

"The bad news is that we lost more of our strike force complement and the Resourcers got away. We cannot take any engagement against the Kadeshi more unless we have some way to deal with their Swarming tactics. In the Homeworld War, they were limited by fuel capacity and blowing their Fuel Pods would have done it. Now it's a different matter with their high efficiency drives."

"We can obtain some Defenders but they're only useful in a defensive role. They may have good weapons coverage but in a straight fight in deep space, their lack of speed is a major disadvantage against Swarmers nearly three times faster. Another alternative is to beef up our corvette fleet. While still economical, our Raachoks are being fought to the limits of their capability, and we need to make more Multigun Corvettes, but their cost may bankrupt us if we are to build a large number of them and maintain our Thieves and Brigands. Same goes with Heavy Corvettes which we also have a few. Unless of course, we can get some one who would happily donate them to us. I suggest, we head for the nearest Republican or Kushan base. Maybe we can get some donations with these Heavy and Multi Gun corvettes, and we can obtain more surplus and black market light corvettes. I know a place that we can get Kushan Cavaliers quite cheap, and get more Raachoks too. For no less the cash you can get for a brand new Interceptor. They would help as a stop gap."

Zha walked to one of the captured Swarmers inside the bay. "Seejuk, how about this alternative? What are the chances we can copy these ships?"

Seejuk had anticipated this line of reasoning. "It can be done, but if we use our current powerplants, fuel capacity is bad. Unless we put advanced fighter Acolyte type drives, those things would have to refuel so often. That was the weakness of the original Swarmer design. But we do not have a supply of those Acolyte drives other than the ones we got captured here, salvaged from Acolytes, or bought in the black market like the one you have in your custom Triikor. Those drives are part of Kushan trade restriction, and we do not have the tools to build or maintain them. I've been analyzing those drives, but the facts are, that despite I am a Kushan, the Somtaaw have a technological and manufacturing monopoly on those drives and would not want to share it even with their fellow Kushans. They would prefer to sell you the drives for a neat profit in their bottom line. All business, of course. It does not mean that the other Kiith are trying to copy the drive behind the Somtaaw backs. I bet the Republicans are doing it too. But the Somtaaw got their lawyers and politicians at any sign of such an attempt, and they will sue you back to the wastelands of Kharak. The Kadeshi of course, are not covered by the Somtaaw legal sharks."

"I don't care about the legalities, Seejuk," Zha said, "just do it. I know you can do it if you put your mind to it. We will obtain the tools if we have to, and I don't think Turan is covered by Somtaaw legal goons.. We do what is needed. We will copy the Swarmers, clone the drives, and we will steal or beg or screw with the Bentusi if we have to. This is something I already have thought for a while. We win first, and will worry about the copyright infringement issues later and please don't worry

about me selling those things to the other Turanic Sultanates. I don't have any loyalties to them after they have turned their backs on me and the House of Khor. The first Turanic Swarmer will be a Zha Khor exclusive."

"I'm afraid that you're going to say that," Seejuk admitted, feeling at one of the modified Swarmers.

Allied bases were a product of the Beast War. These were originally Taidani bases that were under a joint Taidan Republican and Kushan command in a cooperative military venture against the Beast. These days, these bases were used against Turanic Raider activity or Taidan Imperialist excursions. It was no surprise then that the base sent out a large welcoming party of at least a Heavy Cruiser, two destroyers and a flotilla of frigates when a Turanic carrier task force hyperspaced with a flotilla of Ion Array frigates and quite remarkably with Kadeshi Multi Beam Frigates.

"Wow, I've never seen a Kushan Heavy Cruiser before. That thing looks quite impressive. Those Kushan destroyers too....." Zha excitedly exclaimed.

"They're not going to be friendly either, unless we do something soon," Seejuk said. "Give me the comms."

After some communication protocol switching, the faces of the Kushan fleet commander appeared in the screen.

"Turanic Raider, state your intentions. You will either stand down or surrender, or are you going to engage us in glorious battle?"

"Fleet Commander," Seejuk replied. "This is Five Star Commander Seejuk Liirhra of Hiigaran intelligence. I am sending you my verification codes right now. This Turanic task force you see is coming not with hostile intentions, but on a diplomatic mission and with a request for humanitarian and military aid against the Kadeshi forces. I have in my presence, no less than a member of the Turanic Inner House of Lords, a Princess, you might say."

The Fleet Commander replied after a few seconds. "This is a most unusual circumstance that a Intelligence Commander of your rank would be aboard the command bridge of a Turanic carrier force. But your numbers checked out. Welcome Commander. We will escort to the base."

Zha appeared shocked. ".....Commander? Hiigaran Intelligence? What?....."

Chapter 7: The Proposal

"What?..." Zha's face was livid and turning red. She started to prance around the bridge deck, hunting for an explanation.

"Are you?...are you, a spy?..." Zha started to stutter with rage.

"To be exact to the term, no. Sooner or later, I did intend to tell you, but err, the busy events in the last few weeks have totally occupied my mind," Seejuk replied. "I am, not by the exact definition, a spy. I have never compromised you and the security of your ship. Think of me more of let's say, a covert diplomat. Since the war with the Beast, there are factions in both the Hiigaran Intelligence and the Daiamid that are seeing the advantages of developing relations with the Turanic kingdoms. I should inform you as well, that there are factions in your Turanic Inner House of Lords that are increasingly viewing their alliance with the Imperialists as a long term losing proposition. They are looking for a more profitable future beyond that and has covertly contacted both the Republicans and the new Hiigaran Daiamid."

"You can thank the Beast for this. The Beast has greatly ravaged Turanic power in their sector, and both pirating and mercenary activity, the economic blood of the Turanics, are imperiled by Beast fragments

and mutations. Much of that fault came with the Imperialists themselves, who with the support of some factions in the Turanic Inner House, tried to develop a project to domesticate the Beast nanotech and have it blew up in their faces, at a great cost of Turanic life. The Beast, or let's say, mutations of such, ran amok in the Turanic home sectors, and I believe, your father, the Sultan Zerun Khor, who contested such experimentation in the Inner House, and your family's outpost, were among the casualties. Faced with their current situation, and other perils like the Kadeshi, I believe the Inner House is open for any ideas to protect their future, and that includes military and trade alliances with the Republicans and Hiigarans. For us Hiigarans, and the Republicans as well, we see an opportunity to stop Turanic pirate activity once and for all, as well as an additional ally against further Beast incursions and other unknown threats to the galaxy at the moment."

"I was an engineer and scientist working with the Black Star wing of Hiigaran Intelligence. The purpose of Black Star is covert deep space reconnaissance and technology salvage into the outer hostile regions of the Galaxy looking to study, monitor, and perhaps even to tame and control the Beast and its technologies. Our search includes studying Beast nanotech mutations, their migrations, and searching for any more ships like the Naggarrok or the Outsider aliens who brought the Naggarrok. Our covert operations are not formally approved by the Daiamid, so we are working under great risk, but the urgency and importance of the task means we cannot for the politics."

"You know what?" Zha uttered, her arms crossed and mouth in a pout. "For a Kushan you spin a lot!"

It was Seejuk's tum to be emotional, and the tone of his voice surprised even Zha as Seejuk is normally the symbol of cold collectedness under fire. "Zha! Believe me when I tell you this. When

your battered carrier came limping into our base one day, it was never part of the original plan. I saw an opportunity and the Black Star saw it too. It was our engineers and resources that help put you and your ship back together again. I could not do it alone without them."

"...and I thought you did it because somehow I thought you have a heart..." Zha sadly countered. "...and a bit of selfish greed as well. I thought we're business partners. You said you wanted the Beast nanotech for truly selfish reasons and share it with me. That was to be my ultimate revenge against the Beast. I cannot destroy the Beast, but I can enslave it so I can do to them what it did to what remained of my father and my people. With your confession, now you disappoint me..."

"Now, that was not completely untrue..." Seejuk said. "Look, I need to retire someday, and mastering that nanotech technology may be the biggest breakthrough in the galaxy yet. I don't have to lecture you the potential it has for computer and ship building technology."

"Believe me when I say I am truly sorry, Zha," Seejuk continued. "I have grown fond of you, this ship and its crew and our adventures together. Maybe I should have told, but I do want to tell you that I do trust you with my life and that of my engineers."

"...those engineers, they're Black Star too?" Zha asked. Seejuk nodded. "They won't have the training, the tools and the resource if they're not. Like I said, we would never sabotage or compromise you and this ship. In fact, we put this ship together and enhanced it to make it the most powerful carrier in the entire Turanic fleet. The Mule is probably more powerful than the Kushan Imperator, Taidan Saarkin-Cho, and the Somtaaw Shaman class carrier!"

"Don't flatter yourself, Seejuk," Zha curtly replied.

"You know, Zha," Seejuk said, "you are not completely honest with me either. Everyone of us has our own little secret, even you included."

"What do you mean, Seejuk," she replied.

"Something you have not told me," Seejuk said. "Your senses of the stars. What you Turanics call for "Those Who can Find the Stars", what your own legends call the Starfarers, an ancient people that once spanned and navigated the galaxy with an uncanny intuition and sensory perception. They help guide the ancestors of the Turans and other races to the edge of the Galaxy and finally intermingled with them. You don't think I would find out, don't you? I never believed the legend, but every legend started from a seed of truth, and I have seen you demonstrate an uncanny ability to perceive and navigate the deep stellar spaces."

Zha exhaled with resignation.

The communications officer rudely interrupted them with a message from the escorting Kushan task force.

"Commander Seejuk Liifra, this is Fleet Commander Admiral Gaas Paktu of the task force. Permission to come onboard the Lord class carrier." The message was polite and friendly. "When I was a young crewman in the Mothership, we encountered the Rancor, the Lord Class carrier that

attacked the Mothership. Since then I'm kind of interested to see how the Lord ships looked from the inside. Without imposing on you, I truly wish to satisfy my curiosity."

"I would like to ask you to come on board, but the final approval has to come from the Princess," Seejuk replied, looking at Zha. Zha waved her hand. "The Princess gives her approval," said Seejuk to Gaas, "but only with the condition that you reciprocate with a guided tour on your base." The last condition was something Seejuk made up.

"Very well," the Fleet Commander smiled. "I will be meeting you soon."

Moments later, Seejuk and Zha waited in the carrier bay for the Fleet Commander's shuttle to dock. Seejuk, trim in his uniform, bent over to Zha, who was wearing a greasy engineers uniform with ragged shorts. "Where the hell is your princess robes?" Seejuk said. "Don't tell me you're greeting a Kushan Admiral looking like this."

"What can you expect?" Zha replied. "I don't have time to dress up and I left my robes with some children."

"So I noticed," Seejuk said as the shuttle finished docking and opened its doors.

"Admiral," Seejuk saluted. The Admiral saluted back.

"This is a great pleasure and honor to come aboard this ship," Admiral Gaas said. "As I said before I had a fascination how the Rancor would look like from the inside. I also heard stories that this carrier and this task force had defeated the Kadeshi in two occasions. That is quite an achievement given that many other forces have not fared as well. That's quite a collection of captured Multibeamers out there and I see you got a few captured Swarms in here too. I would like to see them closely if you don't mind when I tour this ship. But first I must have the great honor of meeting the Turanic Princess, and I like to let you know we are in the verge of a historic breakthrough in relations between Hiigara and Turan."

"She's right here next to me, Sir," Seejuk said, pointing to his protégée on the side. Zha made a friendly wave to the Admiral.

"Oh oh, my dear gods of Kharak. My apologies, Princess, I am most honored to meet you," Gaas said, taken aback by the appearance of dirty teenage imp. He started sniffing, frowned slightly from the slightly offensive odours, but kept his graceful politeness in front of Zha, as he bowed to kiss her hand. Seejuk rolled his eyes, nervous from the embarrassment. "We have just been a terrible battle and we are not adequately prepared for your visit, Admiral."

"Not much of a problem. I like people who dirtied themselves in the flames of battle," Gaas said. He turned his next address to Zha. "My dear Princess, ever since the deep space probes detected and recorded your victories against the Kadeshi, your fame has gotten far and wide, and most especially among your own peoples, who have suffered humiliating defeats against the Kadeshi. They are in need of a hero, or I should say, a heroine, and it is no small event for them that an Inner Lord such as you are able to defeat the Kadeshi in two occasions. "

"Thank you Admiral. My victories did not come without some good help from your own intelligence officer here," Zha said, with a smirk directed to Seejuk. "However, he did withhold some important information from me, and that must not go unpunished according to my rules."

"What?----" Seejuk exclaimed, but was badly interrupted as he crouched in deep pain as Zha suddenly smashed her knee into his crotch.

"With the sentencing and punishment now properly applied, the officer will now kindly tour the gracious Admiral around the ship. As you know, we have no secrets here, and as there are matters I must attend to immediately, I will meet you Admiral later in my bridge. Excuse me Admiral and I look forward to seeing you later." With holding a fixed smile, Zha huffed and puffed her way back to the bridge.

* * *

The Mule and her frigates lay in a wary orbit around the Allied base, with the Kushan fleet in friendly but suspicious watch. The Admiral obviously enjoyed his tour of the Lord class carrier and a chance to finally meet Thief and Brigand corvettes up close. He welcomed the opportunity to study the Swarmers and Multbeamers closely. Finally the Admiral got to see the Mule made a trial demonstration of her main ion beam cannon. Gaas admitted to being a proponent of the Assault Carrier class, a carrier that can not only deliver fighters but has enough firepower to stand up against enemy capital ships and not just for strike craft defense. The Mule was very much a materialization of the concepts he had in mind.

Then the fun part. With an officer in tow, Zha got her tour of the Allied base. The best part was the opportunity to see so many different fighters, both Kushan and Taidan, for a ship groupie like Zha, she was close to heaven.

She saw lines of spanking new Acolyte fighters with the latest upgrades. She had seen Acolytes broken up, but not clean and new. She jumped and down at the very sight of the legendary Super Acolytes parked in the docking bay. She saw a Hive Frigate on repairs and got a little too close looking at a drone Swarmer. What is that? A Mimic with some Somtaaaw Recon scouts. The guide did mention that mimics were often used for covert reconnaissance. She went ooh and aah again at the sight of the latest Taidan fighter developments. The latest Taidan Interceptor, the Mark II, featured the nose rail gun moved to the empty wing to balance the asymmetrically laid lateral rail gun on the other wing. This balanced the fighter's handling at the expense of roll rate, making the fighter lovely for beginners to handle but a curse for veterans looking for additional maneuverability. The nose beak featured a new enclosure to fire a few missiles. The cumulative upgrades made the fighter a better match against large ships. However it does nothing to improve its dogfighting capability. The Taidans also featured a new Fűrkan Scout with an enhanced probing range. Also featured was the new Kushan Blade Mk 6 Interceptor, which basically remains like the Mk 5 with modest performance improvements and a missile pack enhancement. Thinking back at her Bandit interceptors, and the obsolete Taidan fighters the Mule was licensed to make, they felt old and outdated compared to the sleek state of the art fighters that lay in front of her. The thought made her even more determined to reverse engineer the Swarmers, and she hoped she didn't kick

Seejuk too hard the last time.

Where was the guy by the way, she thought to herself.

Seejuk himself was in the Admiral's office, where there were engaged on some confidential conversation.

"We had suspicions that the Kadeshi were exploring the spaces outside of the Great Nebula but never had any clear evidence," the Admiral said. "There were several attacks against fleets and convoys around here and here," Admiral Gaas said as he displayed a holographic three dimensional map of the area near the Great Nebula. "However, many in the Fleet Intelligence dismissed the idea and blamed the attacks on Turanic Raiders instead. They believed that the Kadeshi were finished in the last Homeworld war."

"Well it's about time, they should see my data," Seejuk said.

"I concur," Gaas Paktu said. "I am very grateful for the data you collected on the Kadeshi. You have done well and the data's value is immeasurable. The data you have brought shown that the Kadeshi has evolved a well rounded fleet capable of undertaking a major interstellar campaign. Of particular interest are the ships you displayed here....."

The first model was an Arkship. "I might have to go with your suspicions", said Gaas. The Kadeshi has been hiding the bulk of their population in those ships. If these ships are leaving the Nebula, the whole Kadeshi race is leaving with them. But where? I dread to think the thought that it would be Hiigara where this armada is heading. After the Beast War, Hiigara cannot afford another war that will strain her economic and population resources even further."

Gaas Paktu made a second holographic model appear. "This was is even more interesting. That huge Needleship has a massive foreign structure in its stalk, and our analysis has confirmed with your studies once again. That structure is very similar to the remnant ship structure found in the ancient city of Khar-toba. This could be the Hiigaran transport ship we have detected in the Great Nebula with the Mothership during the Homeworld Wars but never found. So why is the Kadeshi moving this? I do not know. But take a look at another structure here....."

Gaas pointed to a tube like structure projecting from the foreign ship structure and ending with an output port in the very end of the Needleship's "umbrella". "You know what that is?"

"No," Seejuk said.

"Gods of Kharak help us if this thing is true and functional. This is something I have only recently seen with the Somtaaw Kuun-Laan and recently fitted on the Faal-Corum as well. It's a derelict siege cannon."

"So how the gods the Kadeshi are able to gain that technology?" Seejuk asked.

"Good question. But then, how are they able to gain hyperspace inhibitors, developed the micro Ion beam cannon ahead of us and the Taidan, developed the Swarmer chassis which none of our

metallurgical and structural fighter technology are able to fully match in providing its combination of lightness and strength. So many questions are unanswered."

"After the attack against the Turanic Merak Outpost, our Kadeshi friends made a full blunt assault against a major stronghold of the Taidan Imperialist forces, backed by Turanic task forces looking for some revenge against the onslaught at Merak. Guess what was the outcome?"

"When our deep space reconns came to the area, guess what we found," Gaas said, pointing to a display with plenty of ship wreckage, most of them recognizably Taidan and Turanic. "In one decisive battle, the Kadeshi has wiped out the backbone of the Imperialist and Turanic fleet. Who in Kharak's sands is leading this armada? That is why the news that you, your carrier and your princess is able to survive and score victories against their peripheral forces is so remarkable, and has made both of you instant celebrities."

"Seejuk, if we accept your conclusion that this Kadeshi armada is headed for Hiigara, we will be in a big heap of trouble. That is why we have this favor to ask from you. Our populations is low after the Homeworld journey. The Daiamid has executed a program that will mass produce millions of test babies formed from frozen DNA preserved and carried with the Mothership, as well as sperm and ova donations from among the living. That program will produce an enormous amount of children in the next few years, but there is nothing we can use here to stop the Kadeshi."

Admiral Gaas Paktu proudly showed the new model.

"A new carrier class. The first of its kind, the Kushan assault carrier, the Baal-Hasim. The best engineers of Kiith Liihra designed the ship as a political counter against the Somtaaw Shaman carrier class. I am proud of this ship as it embodies my philosophical beliefs of an Assault Carrier. Running along its length, here and here, are two Ion beam cannons complemented by mini ion cannon turrets for strike craft defense. The small cannons combined with the main ones will toast any enemy destroyer or cruiser that comes into range of such ship. It is supported by the latest innovations such as Support Module technology and Crystal Resource processing. "

"I am looking for the best, and that is why I am asking you to be the captain of this new carrier. We do not have a large reservoir of experienced resourceful officers. Please consider this."

Chapter 8: Black Star

Lt. Commander Seejuk Liirhra sat on the stool at the bar. Nothing matches the good old ale brewed from the deserts in Kharak. He rammed the drink down to his throat. Ahhh.. Kiith Manaani had been looking in all over Hiigara for a desert to match the exact conditions found in Kharak to correctly brew the ale. They are about that close but not quite.

He should be happy for the offer the Admiral offered him. To command the first of a brand new "Marshall" class of assault carriers, the Baal-Hasim, would be a great honor. If it was any other commander, the promotion would not be an option. But those who work for the Black Star wing of Hiigaran Fleet Intelligence are not answerable to the normal military rank and ladder. Only to the leader of Black Star, a secret member of the Daiamid, can they be only accountable to. The very purpose of Black Star was to engage in illegal projects that were formally banned by the laws of the new Hiigara, but the potential threat of these projects were deemed necessary for the very survival of Hiigara. The whole Daiamid deliberately denies the existence of Black Star. Both Fleet Command and Fleet Intelligence knows about them but will never formally admit their existence either. Still, if a Black Star officer was encountered, he cannot be formally questioned about his activities, or respond to the normal rank and file. The lack Star officer has to resign his post in Black Star. That was the option he faced.

But leaving Black Star wasn't what's troubling him.

Zha Khor pranced happily to the bar. "I am truly amazed by the hardware here. I wonder if by any means you can put to the Admiral's ear, if we can purchase or trade for some of the fighters and technology I've seen."

"Like what?" Seejuk asked.

"Oh like the Somtaaw sensor mining array, you know, the one they used on those Recon scouts of theirs. Maybe an Acolyte or two, and the dreaded Kushan Spectre Cloaked fighter. How about a Mimic?"

Seejuk looked at her with some amazement. "For what, for your joyride? We have to take care of the essentials first. We would be considered export market, and there are Hiigaran trade restrictions. Mimics and Spectres would fall into that category but not Acolytes. They still view you as a pirate and they would be out of their mind if they would sell anything with mimic or light folding technology. Triikor Mk 2s are also out of the question because the Republicans don't like Turanics that still aid the Imperialists. But in view of thawing out relations between Turan and Hiigara, they may consider selling you or the rest of Turan, the Blade Mk 6s or Acolytes but they're going to gouge you for it because the Kiith are also hungry for cash. Besides, they're not much better from what you already have and what you're going to get are downgraded, export versions. Stick to the original game plan, and see if we can get surplus light corvettes, Cavaliers and Raachoks at bargain prices, like 30 to 40 RU's, and Fiirkan and Arrow scouts for a fraction of the price. If you don't believe me, I'm going to give you all the current journals of Hiigaran Ship Illustrated to read."

"What's with you?" Zha asked, surprised at his reaction. "You don't have to be snippy about it."

"Nothing, just nothing," Seejuk mumbled. "The Admiral asked me to show you your quarters in the base, and teach you some of the features. Just follow me."

They left the bar and Zha followed him. After a long walk, they came to her designated quarters. The sheer size and the luxury amazed her. Quarters in the Mule and the Turanic Outposts tend to be so spartan.

"This is better than the quarters of the Taidan Emperor himself!" Zha exclaimed.

"I won't stretch it that far, but this is about the best quarters in the house. The base has special rooms for visiting dignitaries and politicians," Seejuk said.

".....and I qualify?" Zha humbly asked.

"You most certainly do, at least in their eyes," Seejuk said. "The Admiral told me that you need to wash up and be presentable. You are going to have a visitor coming. Hey look at this, back issues of Hiigaran Ship Illustrated!" Seejuk waved at a pile of data tablets.

"Who's the visitor?" Zha asked.

"I don't know," Seejuk said. "He just said to get ready. Here I will show you something."

Seejuk showed a large tub. He opened a faucet and water poured out of it.

"Don't waste that!" Zha screamed.

Seejuk laughed. "You have been living in a carrier too long. Water supply in a carrier is limited. But in a big base like this, we got plenty of recyclable water." Seejuk let the water flow and build up to an acceptable level.

"Now go in there and wash yourself thoroughly until not a trace of your smells are left. You badly need it. You're not going to get this opportunity for a long time," Seejuk said. He turned away, walked and sat on the sofa some distance away. He took one of the ship journals, turned it on and started to read it on the low light.

Zha closed the curtains. She stripped off her dirty clothes, and cautiously slipped into the water and testing the temperature with her toes. She laid in the tub as the running water reached her neck and tickled her body with its clean warmth.

"Oh its so good!....." she said. "You people truly live like kings."

"Not us Kushans," Seejuk replied. "We're still basically Kharakian desert rednecks. Give that credit to the Taidani. They designed and built the base while the Emperor was still alive, and this room may have been built for him and his inner court in mind if they stayed on base. So what you said may be true. You may be taking a bath in the very same tub the Emperor himself may have used."

"Yuck!" Zha said. "I heard the Emperor was like a walking mummy before he died. Or was killed by you people. Don't spoil the effect, please!"

Seejuk smiled, but her words were not able to stop a teardrop in his eye. Neither did the journals provided sufficient distraction from his troubled thoughts.

The girl was having a great time on the tub. She chatted nonstop. Her enthusiasm about ships and fighters were as unbound as the spirit of the Bentusi. Seeing all the hardware in this great base flamed that fire. But Seejuk could no longer follow her words, which mumbled everything about trying to clone the latest Taidan Interceptor to cloning a Swarmer and what to do with the Kadeshi next. He methodically replied "Uh-uh.....yes....." once in a while at timed pauses in her speech.

But being once again in the crossroads of life makes one think deeply of nothing else.

"You seemed strangely quiet," Zha asked. Her statement broke an enthralling spell his concerns had cast over him.

"What?....." he replied. ".....its nothing....."

"Is something bother you?" she asked again.

"No no," he replied.

So she chatted and chatted. He could hear her splashing water, but he could hear his own thoughts much louder.

At the very least, he decided, he owed her his honesty this time.

"Zha," he said.

"Yes," she said, still splashing and playing in the water.

"You know, the Admiral offered me a new position," Seejuk said in a calm and easy manner.

"What?" she replied, and her splashing stopped.

"A new position, as captain of a new Kushan assault carrier. It's called the Baal-Hasim, and it may probably come out in the next latest issues of the Hiigaran Ship Illustrated." He was amazed at himself for saying out so casually.

There was a deathly pause, and then a reply through the curtains. "I..I will be proud of you. Go take it, you deserve it," she uttered. "I will be okay. The Mule will be okay."

Seejuk could not stand the tension of the silence. He placed the journal back to the pile, stood up and said, "I need to do some preparations. I will see you later."

Zha could hear the door opened and then closed. She waded her hands in the water, and then just sat there soaking in the tub. Hours of silence went by and at the end of it, a teardrop fell from her

eye.

* * *

The Admiral provided her with new clothes. This wasn't the first time she wore the khaki uniforms of the Kharakian desert armies of the pre-Homeworld eras. They provided her with the same clothes they first arrived to an Allied base after the Beast destroyed her outpost. After the Homeworld arrival, the Kiith reverted to their traditional uniforms. She did find them comfortable, although quite utilitarian, in contrast to the lavish robes and body paint favored by the Turanic nobility.

The Admiral called her to his private office. Seejuk was also there, but the third visitor was a surprise. Zha has not seen a fellow member of the Turanic Inner House of Lords since the death of her father. He was an older man, somewhat like the Kushan Admiral or Seejuk. He wore the loud metallic glittering robes of a Sha, a Prince of Turan, with metal shiny bracelets and rings in his arms and fingers, golden ear rings, multicolored hair and facial war paint. His loud extravagance contrasted sharply to the dull utilitarian colors and look of the uniforms worn by the Admiral and Seejuk.

"Where is the Segura I heard so much about?" he bellowed.

The Admiral introduced her to the Sha, and likewise he to her, as the Sha of the Turanic Inner House of Sirak. A disappointed frown appeared on the Sha's face.

"Somehow, I expected an older woman of great beauty and figure for one worthy of defeating the Crusaders and of the name and House of Khor, not a mere child," he said.

Seejuk was sure that the alliance between Imperialists and the Turanics were purely of convenience. The highly cultured and formalistic Taidani had often criticized the Kushans for their drabness and lack of style. The touchy Taidani would have positively hated the Turanics for their body odors, poor taste and etiquette.

The Sha added to his disapproval why the Segura was wearing a Kushan military uniform instead of the proper robes of her stature. He has vowed to change that.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," the Admiral said, trying to calm and assure the Sha. For Fleet Admiral Gaas Paktu, it would be a major feather in his cap to bag the first formal relations between Hiigara and an Inner House of Turan. The political benefits were obvious. If one House started relations with Hiigara, the other Houses will follow. It would bring an end to the piracy, open up the Turanics as economic and military allies, open up the outer lying sectors of the Galaxy for trade and exploration, and even gain the Turanics as an arms market. For the Turanics, it would mean reducing their dependence on the Imperialists, legitimizing their bandit kingdoms to the other races of the Galaxy and to the face of the Galactic Council. It means opening up trade as their primary economic means instead of piracy, and access of what was perceivably, the arguably superior technology of the Kushans over the Taidani. The jewel in the crown was the superior mining technology of the Somtaaw, which would have greatly enriched the Turanic Sultanates if they mined the rich resources of the Outer areas, but that was still subject to discussion. The Somtaaw has

reiterated they're not interested to share their mining technology to anyone, but would prefer to pay a healthy commission for the resources they mined on someone else's backyard. Gaas Paktu did expect eventually that some concessions will be made and a new mining treaty will be forged. Finally of course, the fact that the Turanics were dead broke both economically and militarily from having to deal first with the Beast, and now the Kadeshi, was what ultimately brought them to the bargaining table.

But talking about mining wasn't what the Sha of House of Sirak was here about.

The Sha made his announcement. "I have come here in behalf of my son, the next Sha of Sirak and a Prince of Turan. I have come to ask for the hand of the Segura of Khor to arrange for marriage with my son. By this marriage, I will come to unite the dispossessed House of Khor with that of the House of Sirak and preserve the integrity of the Inner House of Lords, return the legitimacy of Khor and bring a new home worthy of a Princess of Turan. For the people of the carrier formerly known as the Arak-Na, they would now have an outpost to return to and call their home. "

The Sha never did once looked at Zha when he announced his proposal. He was looking at the Admiral whom he trusted would deliver Zha and the Mule to him. The announcement was never meant as an option.

Seejuk was seething at the disrespect shown to Zha. They were not interested on what she had to say or think. He knew this was going to be another typically politically advantageous move by one House of Turan over another. To gain Zha Khor and join the Sirak bloodline would have greatly enhanced the prestige of the House of Sirak, as Zha has become a celebrity from her brushes with the Kadeshi. As Seejuk found out earlier, the Sirak was one of the Houses whose task forces was severely mauled by the Kadeshi. Getting Zha would have meant getting the Mule and both her strike and task forces.

Zha frowned angrily. But all she said was "Give me time. Let me think about this."

The Sha appeared offended, but smiled, looking at her for the first time. His tone changed, "My child, there is not much to think about. I offer you a new home, a new family, and a chance to legitimize once again your House name. My son is a good man. He would learn to love you dearly as you would learn to love him. Your name is now well known among our peoples. It is time for you to return and boost their spirit."

Zha didn't say a word after that as she hurriedly left. Seejuk thought he saw a tear in her eye but she had always fought from crying.

"She will come around," Gaas Paktu said. "Do not worry. My dear Prince, we still have some other negotiations to make."

The Sha appeared not the least bit worried and seemed accustomed to acts of rudeness. He smiled and sat down to trade stories and jokes with the Admiral.

Seejuk did some paperwork and then spent the next hour or so searching for Zha through out the

base. He found her in the docking bay, looking at the fighters once again, and has even charmed the Taidani security guards to letting her sit inside the cockpit of a Super Acolyte. She was gripping its joystick, making flying noises apparently fantasizing flying the fighter.

"This ship is beautiful," she said. "I wonder if I will ever have the chance of flying one. State of the art instrumentation, and everything." Seejuk sensed she was trying to hide her feelings with some artificial enthusiasms. He knew her long enough.

A bird whose wings were going to be clipped would be the saddest sight in the universe, Seejuk thought.

"Seejuk, what are you doing here?" she said. "Don't you think you should be preparing for your new command. That was a great looking carrier according to the latest Hiigaran flight journal. As for me, don't worry, I will soon have a new home. The Mule too."

Seejuk was busily studying his paperwork. "I made some studies and I think we can get what we want. There were a few dozen Cavaliers and Raachoks in the base that we can obtain. These surplus ships were originally meant for the Frakkhans as an arms shipment, but they changed their mind. Both the Taidani and the Kushans are recently building Fiirkans and Arrow scouts for export purposes. I found the branch offices of export companies representing both Taidan and Kushan interests in this base. They were trying to outbid each other, so not to burn bridges, I've decided to acquire from both parties. We are able to obtain some Gravwells. The purchase orders will require your signature." Seejuk handed the data tablets to a surprised Zha for her thumb mark signature.

"By the way," Seejuk smiled, "I have contacted Black Star command. We have new orders. It looks like the orders for my new commission will have to be indefinitely postponed. They have made a request to you that they will require your services and the Mule for a new mission. It looks like your wedding plans needed to be indefinitely postponed as well. The dear Admiral Paktu will be informed of this."

"I don't want to get married to that creep's son, or join his House for whatever reason," Zha said. "But I still thank you for pulling whatever strings you did. So what do we have to do now?"

"As soon as we obtain the equipment," Seejuk said, "we will be on our way. We will be getting a new prototype fighter, a Mimic with a modified Heavy Neutrino Scanning probe like those used on the Somtaaw Recon scouts. The probe is optimized to scan in details the internals of subject ships. The new fighters are prototypes not intended for export, but Black Star has sent orders that these ships would be delivered to us as being necessary for our new mission."

"This sounds like its going to be a dangerous mission, Zha. You can still back out you know and marry that Turanic prince," Seejuk said with some sarcasm.

"I would rather take my chances with the Kadeshi," Zha replied.

Chapter 9: The Tiamat

As the carrier left orbit around the base, Zha and Seejuk were busy with the tedious details of logging the inventory. Rows and rows of spanking "new" fighters and corvettes---mostly reconditioned surplus---have brought the Mule's strike force complement to full strength. For Seejuk, it was surreal to view the hybrid force----some Taidani, some Kushan, some Turanic plus a dose of captured Kadeshi Swarmers. To be able to house the fighters, Seejuk planned to hack support units along the bottom of the Mule, based on proposals he read from the latest Hiigaran ship engineering journals.

Zha braced as she was about to hear a long lecture from Seejuk.

He began. "The problem of fighters was that lately, after the Beast Wars, they have taken the turn towards heavier armament over performance. While they have greatly improved their firepower which favors striking capital ships, there is not much improvement in their overall performance. Fighter performance is driven to outmatch the other, and when the other is concentrating attacking capital ships over pure fighter to fighter dogfights, there is not much incentive to improve overall fighter performance. That's why the Blade Mk6, Triikor Mk2 and the the Acolyte upgraded versions are not really better performers than their predecessors. That is why us Kushans and the Taidanis are going to pay for this mistake dearly when they face up with new upgraded Swarmers, which will fly rings around their craft. The problem is that it will take a while to develop a new super fighter to take the Swarmers on, and by that time, they may have overrun our defenses. The short term partial solution would be to bring back the classic scouts of the Homeworld War, the Arrows and the Fiirkans, as they are the only things that can keep up against the Swarmers, which had a maximum velocity nearly twice as that of the latest interceptor. "

"The other solution is another mothballed design which was graciously retired after the Somtaaw Sentinel took its place. I have taken the initiative to order these, and we might be able to copy it for our production." Seejuk pointed to some closed crates, which workers were hurriedly trying to unpack.

The crate opened to reveal a Shield Mk 3c Advanced Defender fighter. The 3c variant featured a firepower improvement over the 3b Heavy Defender and 3a Light Defender variant with the addition of a fourth cannon. "The thing is slow, but the firepower and armor of those things are going to help us fight off a Swarmer attack," Seejuk said.

"Black Star also sent us another fighter variation for our mission.," Seejuk said. Another crate was opened to reveal a Kushan cloaked fighter. "We can't produce this, and we only have a few of them. These cloaked fighters have their guns removed for sensory equipment. They won't be sending us these if they're expecting that we will be risking our lives in these. These cloaked fighters are to complement the Mimic Recon fighter over there."

Zha hummed. The mission must be both very important and risky if Black Star was willing to spare the best tools.

Seejuk then presented Zha with a box. "That came from your suitor's father," he said teasingly. Zha smirked and opened the box. Inside was the new glittering royal robes fit for a Turanic princess. Seejuk laughed hoarsely as Zha frantically tried to put the box away. "I won't throw it away if I were you. It may have some value with ceremonial purposes," Seejuk said. "It looks like the Sirak still want to be on your good side in case you would like to come back to them."

Zha laughed sarcastically.

"The Sha's too other presents are these," Seejuk said. He pointed to a box and a crate that looked like it could hold a small fighter. "I don't really know what they are," he added.

He opened the box and inside was a data tablet. He turned the data tablet on. "Dear gods of Kharak," Seejuk exclaimed. "The Sha is genuinely serious if he won't give this."

The tablet showed a friendly message from the Sha of Sirak, and was followed by schematics for a small holographic projector. This appeared more primitive, but he had seen something like that in the Mimic fighter. Seejuk gave a big smile. The Somtaaw claimed to encounter Raiders with holographic technology, and that inspired them to develop the Mimics. But there was no other proof that the Raiders had Mimic technology of their own apart from that report. When he first came on board the Arak-Na, the Lord carrier that was renamed as the Mule, he saw no evidence of such a technology. So, the Raider mimic technology is kept a secret only available to a faction within the Raiders. What can the other crate hold?

The crate revealed a Turanic fighter class never seen before. It was perhaps a diplomatic present. The new fighter had a hunkered down squat shape, and a look at the side indicated holographic projectors such as those in the schematic. There was no doubt in his mind that this is a new Turanic Heavy Interceptor with mimic capabilities, the possible answer to a problem that Hiigaran Fleet Intelligence has been bothered with anonymous attacks. On the negative side, the projectors do take up the space that might have been used for a secondary special weapon, like a missile pack or EMP.

Zha was staring at the new ship like as if her jaws were on the floor. "The ship is a working example, the tablet contained schematics to build more of them," Seejuk said. "Think of it as an advanced wedding present," Seejuk laughed and ran as Zha took after him waving a large wrench.

* * *

"Our gifts did not come free," Seejuk said as he hunkered down in the board room with Zha and a few close officers. "Black Star correctly assumed, based on our encounters, that our carrier was better suited for the task than anything in the Kushan or Taidan fleet. We are to locate the enemy fleet, stalk and survey it with the cloak or mimic ships, keeping ourselves undetected for the whole time."

"Our mission targets include this," Seejuk said, pointing to a model of the mysterious Kadeshi mothership with Hiigaran ship structure in the middle that might possibly be the sister ship of the Khar-toba. "Our captain discovered this ship, but there is more to this. We need to verify the structure here, between the Hiigaran ship, and the umbrella here. One possible suspicion is that it

can be a siege cannon."

"A siege cannon?" Zha asked.

"Imagine that pointing at your fleet. We have no knowledge if the weapon is operational. If it were, the Taidan and the Turanic fleets could have been decimated by it," Seejuk said.

"Our next targets are these," Seejuk showed new models. "Remember this? It's the assault carrier we engaged. The ship had a remarkable resemblance to our Kushan carriers. It also had a remarkable resemblance to this----" Seejuk showed the next model. "These were taken during the Homeworld Wars. They were derelicts in the Karos graveyard. A similar ship was also detected and photographed within the Great Nebula itself, where we detected the Khar-toba sister ship. "

"The next model is another derelict in Karos. Quite possibly it's a heavy cruiser. Our next shot here looks like a shipyard scaffold. Yes we also took this shot. The structure inside the scaffold is similar to the derelict, and if it is, the Kadeshi might be expected to field heavy cruisers soon. Historians claim that the derelicts in the Karos Graveyard were ships belonging to the old Hiigaran empire. The design of the cruiser and the assault carrier is of indication that the Kadeshi still somehow possess the old Hiigaran technology and has resurrected them for their own use."

"So, we need to bring the Mule within close range of the Kadeshi fleet under cloaked running, close enough to launch our mimic and cloaked fighters, which will recon the fleet, and verify these developments. We will follow the fleet closely. Black Star Intelligence computed that our path will bring us close to the Karos graveyard. The path the Kadeshi is taking is similar to the one the Kushan Mothership took, which confirms that they have a star map like the one the Mothership had--a second Guidestone if you will. If we reach the Graveyard, we will investigate the Derelicts for anything that we can learn to defeat the Kadeshi. The Karos junkyard salvagers and autoguns will be waiting for any interloper, and we will maintain stealth running as we go through the junkyard."

"Tough task ahead of us, Zha?"

"Oh, sounds exciting," Zha replied. "I can't wait."

* * *

(Three thousand years ago)

From the Logs of Lt. Commander N'ua Helan, Hiigaran Imperial Fleet Command---

"The Taidan continued their sneak attacks. Despite the outrage of the Galactic Council, the new Taidan's emperor campaign for the total extermination of all Hiigarans continued. The forces of the new Emperor hunt us down like prey. Because of the incessant attacks, we have lost the freighter Khar'osa, with many lives, but many of her survivors are with the surviving ships. It is also sad to say that we have lost the captain of the Khar'nak in his heroic defense of the convoy. I, Lt. Commander N'ua Helan, is the remaining highest ranking officer not only in the Khar'nak but with the remaining fleet"

"Our convoy are now down to three ships---the Khar'nak, the Khar'toba and the Khar'desh. We still do not have adequate defense. The Khar'nak and the Khar'toba were once the immense Nova class carriers, the pride of the Hiigaran Imperial Fleet, but had been stripped of most of their ship building equipment to make room for the refugees. Our only hope for defense lies with the Khar'desh, a smaller Storm class assault carrier, which did not have sufficient time to be stripped of her ship building equipment. She could not hold enough refugees, but her bane could be our blessing. We will attempt to build a protective force, but we need resources. The Taidan is expecting us to travel a straight route direct to the borders of the Galaxy; we will circumvent their traps. We will head to where the great Battle of Khar'os was fought, in the center of the galaxy, the nebula of birthing stars whom with irony, the late freighter Khar'osa was named after. It is also with irony that this is where the Khar'nak and the Khar'toba once fought as carriers, and it is here that I fought in command of an assault frigate. The name of Khar'os means birth of the Great Star. But for us, and for the biggest irony of all, it meant it's fall."

"It is now in the great graveyard that was once the battle that led to the fall of the Empire, that I lost my ship. I should have died with it. For a captain to survive without her ship is a badge of shame. This is the dishonor that I will bear for the rest of my life. But perhaps the Gods of Hiigara had something else for my fate planned, why I would miraculously survived the battle. Perhaps it is my destiny to lead the survivors, to plant the seed that Hiigara, and our Empire, should rise again."

"Now I must return to the site of the battle that sealed the fate of an Empire, and that of my own. It is only because we are not much more than beggars now, the dogs that live on the scraps. We are only here to salvage all what we can find from the derelicts of our own navy, so that we may survive our long journey ahead."

With these words, N'ua finished her latest entries. She was in the bridge of the Khar'desh, and monitored the screens as the salvagers and resourcers left the carrier to scour the graveyard of ships. Hours later, a traffic was formed as the small ships came in and out, presenting their prizes. Her heart lightened with each resourcer bringing in valuable material to the three ships, and the salvagers were finding spare parts and still usable weapons among the wrecks.

A message came to the screen. "Commander N'ua," the voice said. It was from one of the salvagers. "We found the Khar'kusha."

The Khar'kusha. The Great Star of Kusha, patron god of Hiigara. The great battleship of the last Hiigaran Emperor himself. In its end and with his death, sealed the fate of an empire.

"My scans are showing that many parts of the ship are intact," said the message.

"On screen, and interface the data with our computers for analysis," N'ua commanded. The screens flashed as the schematic of the Khar'kusha appeared and brought to study.

"Looks like some of the weapons and equipment aboard the ship can still be salvaged. I am ordering the other salvagers to assist you. I, in particular, want the imperial banner in the ship. It is not right for the Imperial Banner of Hiigara to be in junkyard. It must go with us standing wherever we go,"

N'ua said.

N'ua looked at the scans more. "Salvager Alpha," she said. "It appears that the siege cannon of the battleship is still intact. Can you salvage it?"

"Roger," the message said. "As soon as the other salvagers arrive, the task will be done."

N'ua does not have a battleship in her rag fleet, but the Khar'nak was formerly a Nova class carrier before her conversion. The massive carrier has the structure that can be outfitted with the siege cannon, and there were plans to actually do so before Hiigara itself was defeated.

The operation took a few more hours, and the Khar'kushan's siege cannon had been towed back to the fleet. Engineers began the immediate task of attaching it to the hull of the Khar'nak.

Suddenly the screens flashed red. "Hyperspace signatures!"

Ships came out from hyperspace and surrounded them. There was no time to set up a defence. They would be destroyed immediately.

But the ships were not Taidan. They surrounded the fleet in a threatening position, but they did not move. They appeared like salvagers of some kind as well, with their jaw equipment and lack of guns. Other ships appeared and these appeared like armed corvette class vessels.

"Please we mean no harm!," N'ua shouted at the screens, as the com links frantically tried to connect to the frequency of the new ships. "This is Commander N'ua Helan of the Hiigaran Imperial Fleet. We are in a mission that requires mercy. We have nothing here but refugees."

A much larger hyperspace signature started to manifest. From the gate, came an giant ship of glittering metal.

"We are the Unbound. On behalf of the Galactic Council, we have come to aid you for your journey. The small ships here you see are the Dogs that protect the graveyard from the sacrilege of the Taidani. We cannot permit the technology of the Hiigaran Empire to fall into the hands of the Taidan tyrant. The Dogs meant you no harm as they are here to protect those who lay in peace. When they detected your presence, they contacted us, unsure if you are enemy or friend."

N'ua stared at the Bentusi ship, which was a magnificent sight. "We appreciate protecting the sanctity of the remains who died in battle here. We have come here to retrieve what is rightfully ours for what is necessary for our defense and survival. While we appreciate the actions of the Council, there was nothing they can do to help us. The Taidani defied your edict behind your backs and still hunt us down like animals. I do not know the fate of the other ships that left Hiigara. For all I know, we may now be the only survivors of our race."

The Bentusi replied. "Hiigaran. We know of your plight. Do not concern yourself of the other ships. They will find their own destinies. Your concern, and ours as well, would be your survival. The Taidani will not be unpunished. The Council will not stand idly. Be prepared for the gift you will receive."

A fighter left the Bentusi ship and headed for the Khar'desh's dock.

"A single Bentusi fighter to help us? Is this the bizarre humor of the Bentusi?" N'ua said.

The Bentusi replied. "The ship contains a new technology that you can replicate. A new fighter that you can build for less the cost and less the time than your conventional fighters. It will offer greater speed and protection that no Hiigaran fighter possess. But even the Unbound are bound by our own rules in giving technology to a lesser star faring race. You will have to supply both the fighter drive and the armament of the ship. Consider this our token gift. The new fighters are for your defence, and they will help you outfight anything the Taidani possess."

Another major hyperspace signature appeared in the screen. A new monstrous ship, menacing, with its huge arms around a circular disk, came out of the gate and hovered near the Bentusi ship.

"The Forbidden," the Bentusi said. "Why are you here? Have you not interfered with the natural order enough? Your interference has caused the death of an Empire and for a tyrant to rise."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," the new voice said teasingly. "Your natural order of things is a stagnant universe that you can take advantage with for your business. The natural order of things is one of chaos and balance. You helped the Hiigarans, so we helped the Taidani. It is only through chaos that the natural order finds rebirth."

The new voice turned to N'ua. "We are the Tiamat. We too are members of the Council. Would you believe that we have to come help you as well?"

"You said you helped the Taidani, and that makes you our enemy as well," N'ua said. "All the lives you have cost."

"You only see the past, Hiigaran," the voice boomed. "You do not see the future. Your empire was destined to fall. Shall we say, we just speeded up the process? But we did not expect your total obliteration. That is not in the interest of the Tiamat. We are interested in rebirth through chaos. We are only interested in redressing the imbalance the Bentusi did when they granted assistance of the Hiigaran Empire. You have the potential of greater glory and we have come to lay our seeds for that."

"The gift that the Bentusi gave is but a token one. Ours will not be. Prepare your data interfaces."

N'ua never made the orders but the ship's computers accepted the massive data downloads.

"What, Tiamat, have you given the Hiigaran?" said the Bentusi. "By the Directive, we are not allowed to give weapons technology to a lesser space race. This will upset the order of destiny in generations to come."

"Your stance is hypocritical once again, Bentusi," said the Tiamat. "You only play with the letter of the Law, not the intention. You provided them the chassis of a new fighter. That is interference enough. That by any means a weapon. You have already violated the Directive in spirit."

"I must warn you Hiigaran for using the technologies given by the Forbidden," said the Bentusi.

"Take your gifts back, Tiamat," N'ua said. "We don't trust you or any who assisted the Taidan."

"Your trust is not an option," the Tiamat said. "You are the Defeated, and yet you remain arrogant. You will use the gifts we granted you as you please. The day and the moment will come when you will use them. The Council has failed you. The Empire will hunt you down. The fate of your race is in your hands. Will you let your entire race die by your principles? Or will you do whatever it takes for their survival?"

N'ua stood silently in front of the screens. Her officers stared at her, waiting for her next move. "We're are puppets," she said.

"But you are, and always have been," said the Tiamat. "We are the wheel of fate."

With those last words, the Tiamat supership began to spin, its arms lighting in different colors. A gate appeared, and the Tiamat ship disappeared through it.

The Bentusi has not said a word as well, and the jumpgates have opened for them to make their exit too. The junkyard dogs were no where to be found as well.

"Commander," one of the officers said. "The data.... I think we can use this. No, I think we should use them against the Taidan. This is our chance to survive, regain Hiigara and wreak vengeance upon the Taidani." There is not one officer aboard who has not lost a loved one from the Taidani and their atrocities. To refuse the gifts would have meant a loss of confidence in her as the commander and a mutiny later. N'ua herself too, burned with the desire for people to live, and one day, to strike back at the enemy.

The gifts the Forbidden has given were three. The first was a new ion beam weapon that is much smaller and more efficient than the ones they were using. It is far superior to anything used by the Taidan or Hiigaran. The officers were discussing the weapon, and it is easy to see how it can lead to a new generation of powerful capital ships.

The second weapon was one that could alter the very fabric of space. To hyperspace requires a balance of factors and fields inherent in the space time continuum. By disturbing these fields, the balance is affected, preventing the opening of the hyperspace gate. The disturbance field can be used to trap ships. To house the inhibitor required a vast new ship design, which was the third gift. The inhibitor was housed in a massive circular symmetrical structure which the rest of the ship was built around, followed by an enormous stalk. The circular, alien design of the ship was a stark contrast to the slab like simple functionality of Hiigaran design. The symmetry and circular design was consistent to the way the Tiamat would approach things if their ship was of any indication.

The size of the ship alone exceeded that of the greatest Hiigaran battleships. What was the Tiamat thinking? The Hiigarans cannot use this for their survival. The ship would have required far greater resources to build than what they can afford.

But the new ion beam cannons and the efficiency of the new fighter design given by the Bentusi can be most helpful. N'ua ordered the engineers to begin work on the new designs.

Chapter 10: The Wheel of Fate

Zha was staring at her personal monitor. She smiled at the farewell messages the refugee children gave her as she left them in the Allied Base. The Black Star and the Sirak had made arrangements to transport them back to the nearest Turanic Outpost.

"Captain, your attention is needed on the bridge," said a message flashing in the screen. She had only her night clothes but she quickly donned a uniform and ran to the bridge.

As always, Seejuk was trim and ready. The patrol missions consisting of the new stealth and mimic fighters have been running all day and night. Seejuk had been triangulating all known appearances and contacts with the Kadeshi in the hopes of estimating where their next destination would be. The Mule and her task force had been under cloak mode too. The Multibeamers keep themselves close enough to the tethered cloak generators while the Ion Array Frigates rely on their own cloak generators.

"This is like hunting a rodent in the desert," Seejuk said. "So our next move is to guess where their next attack will be. The Kadeshi do not wait for the battle to come to them. They bring it direct to the enemy instead. They have hit one Turanic and Imperialist base after another, so my estimates they should be attacking this Imperialist base but nothing has happened."

"Do you think they changed targets?" Zha asked.

Seejuk did not answer directly. "Sorry I woke you up."

"Just preparing for my beauty sleep. Nothing important," she said, noting that they are still in Imperialist space.

* * *

The Kushan fleets gathered near the new Taidani Republican Nomad Moon. It had been developed to counter a Beast attack, but should serve conveniently against the Kadeshi should they come to the area. The moon and the fleets were not far from Imperialist space.

A debate raged among the Hiigaran and Taidan commanders and politicians. Some members of different Kithid like the Sjet, Paktu, Somtaaw, and Liirhra favored a diplomatic negotiation with the Kadeshi to stop the Crusade and offer a compromise. Others like the Manaani, Naabal, Gaalsien, and Soban favored going to war. The Taidans support attacking the Kadeshi, fearing Republican bases would be next in the Kadeshi agenda. While all fleets were ready to go to war, there was considerable dissent among the admirals as to who will lead the overall fleet. Each wanted to strike out on their own, to prove their mettle to the other Kiithid. The Taidani had their own divisions too, as their regional fiefdoms have their own self interests. The Nabaal had learned from Fleet Intelligence, that there is evidence that the Kadeshi had destroyed one of their task forces. Whether the Kadeshi had Hiigaran blood or not, the Naabal had sworn the blood oath of the God Sajuuk against them.

"Oh another Kushan fleet coming," the sensors array operator remarked, looking at the new Kushan energy ship signatures on screen. "Another Kiithid going to add to the bullshiting arguing. Can they ever make up their minds. The new ships have submitted their proper FF codes but did not communicate with him directly yet.

"Roger, fleet, please idenitfy yourselves," the officer said.

"Roger, ten four, this is commander of the Kiith Ferriil fleet. Requesting permission to join your party," came the reply.

"Acknowledged, you are all clear."

I never knew the Ferriil had such a large fleet, the officer thought to himself. The fleet had begun to deploy fighters and more major capital ships have come into sensors range. He has heard the Kiith were fielding new major capital ship classes and these might be them. He zoomed in to take a look. The carriers and heavy cruisers do look Kushan alright but not recognizably that of existing classes. Something bigger lies in the distance. He zoomed the sensors further. "What in the name of Sajuuk is that?"

It was an incredibly large ship, like a mothership with an umbrella in one end followed by a long stalk.

He panicked and a few vital seconds passed before he regained his composure. He opened the comlinks but there was only static. Frequency bars indicated all out jamming. Then there was a ramming sound in the hull of the array. The computers were being over ridden and lethal gas being injected as the Kadeshi Grapplers seized the array.

"Magnificent, my dear child M'jor," G'yela watched. "If all the eggs are in one basket you can break them in a one blow." Her eyes watched the energy meter bar of the siege cannon attain full strength.

With delight, she said, "Fire."

The massive ball of energy and fury headed to the Nomad Moon. They watched through the scanners as the shock wave took out fighters and ships in military formation. The blast destroyed a line of gravwell generators.

"Sensors indicate the enemy's repulsion technology is no longer operable," an officer said.

G'yela watched in interest as she prepared for a bite of her favorite snack. A lizard like creature was impaled on a small stick, and it squirmed and struggled in pain for its dear life. G'yela's attention was hypnotized on the screen as she bit off the head of the creature.

As she chewed, she said, "Good! You must cut off the head of the enemy." The officers could not tell if the remark was about the progress of the battle or the delicacy of the creature's flesh.

"The Holiness Mother Superior," M'jor said. "The Great Mother of the Gardens once again favors us with her blessings."

"Indeed," she said. "It's about time we bless our Unclean brethren with the wisdom of the Mother. Engage second wave."

Rows and rows of probe bombs headed to the Moon and the surviving fleets that parked near the Nomad Moon. Their explosions rocked the Kushan and Taidani fleets, destroying strike craft and damaging capital ships. But the Kushans and Taidans continued to show their indomitable spirit, as their heavy cruisers, destroyers, carrier and frigates head out in rag formation towards the Needleships. The bombs and the siege cannon failed to take out the enemy strike forces completely as many were docked in their protective carriers. Waves and waves of Acolytes, Blade Mk 6 and Triikor Mk. 2 fighters rushed to intercept the Kadeshi fleets.

"Blessed Holiness, we may have underestimated the enemy," M'jor said. "We did not expect this many to survive our initial attacks."

"A small detail," G'yela replied, as she bit off the tale of the creature. The tale squirmed in her mouth but its blood had a sweet taste as she chewed off the flesh. "Order our new cruisers and carriers to engage the enemy. It's time to see what they're made of. It's time to see how our resurrection of the old Hiigaran power and might will fare against the so called New Hiigarans, the Unclean."

The Interceptors rushed head on against waves of Swarmers. Many of them collided; others turned as they prepared to dogfight. Waves of Assault and Beam Swarmers rushed to the enemy ships and were met with defensive fire from Dervishes, Kudaarks and Vengeance assault frigates. Many Swarmers exploded from the intense cross fire but Beam Swarmers managed to cut a Vengeance in half. Ion beam frigates were in flames as Assault Swarmers peppered them with their powerful single cannon.

Beams, energy cannons and plasma bombs exchanged between the Kadeshi and the Kushan/Taidan cruiser formations. Multibeamers appeared, raking the Kushan destroyers and frigates. One Deacon managed to destroy a Multibeam frigate but four other Multibeams rushed to savage the Deacon.

"It is now up to the Great Mother of the Gardens. We will sing the song to inspire our forces to fight for heavenly glory," G'yela ordered, standing from her command throne in white lace like robes. A choir joined her as she sang the Songs of Liberation and Martyrdom. The music was broadcast in all channels. The Kushans were taken aback by the bizarre but haunting melodies. "What is this?" a pilot exclaimed.

But for the Kadeshi, they shouted united through a thousand comlinks, the reaffirmation of their Great Faith. "Holiest of Holies," they sang, "deliver the souls of our enemies to the Righteous Sword of the Mother. The Unclean must be cleansed, the Defilers must be punished. We are unworthy but in death for the Mother, we become united with her, in the Great Gardens of Paradise."

"Victories cannot easy," G'yela said, pausing from her song. "Or they weaken the blood of the Kadeshi. Even with the cannon and the bombs, our battles must be hard fought. Our martyrs must taste the blood of the enemy. They must strike the sword through their hearts and feel their life

drain."

Then she shouted for all the comlinks to hear. "Fight on, mighty Kadesh. Fight for the glory of the Mother. Fight for the cleansing of Souls. Your Fire will burn brightest....." G'yela burst into song.

With tears in her eyes, G'yela said, "My children, you are all so wonderful....." A Taidan Qwaar-Jet heavy cruiser broke in half; the destiny of an Avatar Heavy Cruiser sealed in a ball of fire.

"Fight on.....fight on.....the Blood of Martyrs shall burn the Unclean....."

A Kushan Emperor carrier died as Beam Swarmers and Multibeamers raped the carrier from beam to aft.

".....Let the blood of the Unclean flow....."

A Taidan Saarkin Cho carrier gave up its ghost as Kadeshi cruisers ripped its belly.

".....the cup of the Mother will overflow from the sacrifice....."

Even an Archangel dreadnought, with all its power, cannot stop from the unending torrent of attacks from Multibeams, Assault Pods and Assault Swarmers. Early it held back its enemies using repulsors, but it was damage from the relentless attacks. Burning, the Dreadnought died in honor with all hands on board.

".....the blood of heroes and the slain will till the soil of the Gardens....."

The Nomad Moon itself, defenseless since the initial onslaught, shook and shook as beam after beam connected from the Needleships and cruisers. Its core bursted, and its short existence ended with a brilliant flash of light.

".....there will be no escape for the Unclean from the Dark Pit of Souls....."

Surviving Allied ships tried to hyper jump, only to face the feared Hyperspace Inhibitor. The realization of inevitable death froze in the faces of their crews, as they gallantly faced their end in the face of hordes of Swarmers filling their monitor screens.

".....Fire shall consume and cleanse them all....."

* * *

The great divine has been crossed. It was now the blood of Hiigaran against Hiigaran.

Would the Mother have wanted this?

G'yela thought, as Fleet celebrated their greatest victory yet. In a drunken, mad stupor, surviving Kushans and Taidans were brought to the altars of the Mother Goddess N'ua, where they were executed or sacrificed in front of large crowds. The hurrahs from the crowds drowned the desperate screams of the sacrificed. Blood stained the altars.

"G'yela! G'yela! G'yela!" The crowds chanted, and the executioner pierced his sword into the body of another bound Kushan, his cries unheard.

It will not be this way if the Wheel of Fate has not turned in their first journey outside of the Gardens.

She can remember that day.....

The Needleship broke through the last of the clouds of the Garden. The colored expenses in its blue and brilliant orange colors gave way to a total blackness. The stars.....she has never seen so many stars. They broke up and littered the very darkness like glittering jewels. A band of nebulas, all great gardens, themselves, lit to show the center of the galaxy.

There was a sense of freedom and exhilaration she has never felt before. She was a young ranking priestess, given the command of her own Needleship to accomplish a sacred mission of discovery and revelation. News from trapped ships told of great events that changed the Galaxy. News such as the fall of the Defilers's empire were greeted with suspicion and fascination. The Defilers hunted the Mother Goddess and the Seed of Kadesh across the stars to seek refuge in the Gardens. The final Sword of Righteousness had finally come to judge the Defilers. It is the fulfillment of the Great Mother's prophecy.

If that is true, will the other great prophecies be fulfilled. The day will come that the Seed of Kadesh will leave the Gardens, to the First Garden, the Garden where the Goddess N'ua was born. She has prophesied through the Great Stone. But the prophecies were twisted by the old Orders. They see that their power is based on keeping Kadesh in the Gardens, subservient to their needs. They had twisted the original gospels, removing the context of the First Gardens, the one where the Mother is born, and instead made the new Gardens which the Mother took refuge as the one great Garden. She pledged that one day, she will reveal this fallacy to the people of Kadesh, but the Orders will be against her. She is but a young girl, how will she find the courage and strength?

The stars made her feel at home. Like she was all a part of it somehow in a way she never knew.

"We have detected forces of the Defilers coming our way," the officer said. "Holy Priestess, what is your orders?"

This is the first time G'yela encountered battle. A sickening feeling formed in her stomach. For the first time, she felt the closeness of death and how it will engulf all the souls around her. But the Orders taught that one must face death in the eye. One must focus and channel your spirit into the task. Form your thoughts into the unbreakable, righteous sword of the Mother.

She kept her cool and barked the orders.

"Battle stations! Activate Hyperspace Inhibitors. Launch all Swarmers. Multibeam frigates form formation A. Concentrate fire on the largest ship in the enemy formation. Fuel Pods, form formation B. Support Swarmer wing. Turn the Needleship around and head for the largest enemy ship. Activate all Ion beam cannons!"

"Yes, Holiness," the officer affirmed. In the screens, the Swarmers and Advanced Swarmers were launching, setting up a claw formation. Packs of three Multibeam frigates create a large loose formation and headed to the enemy fleet.

The enemy formation wheeled towards them. The Saarkin Cho began launching fighters. A walled formation of ion beam frigates headed their way.

The Advanced Swarmers engaged the enemy Triikors in a wild wild dogfight. Swarmers heading the main fleet were suddenly froze in their tracks and began being picked off by Kudaark assault frigates.

"Our fighters are encountering a strange field. They are being immobilized by it," said the sensors officer.

With the Swarmers, their fleet would be destroyed. G'yela did not know what to do. The iron composure taught by the Orders began to melt under the heat of battle.

Then a strange voice spoke in her mind. It told her to do this.

"Attack the field generators with the Fuel Pods and Multibeam frigates and do it soon!" G'yela ordered. "What?" an officer objected. "Just do it," she affirmed.

The Pods were first to reach the Gravwell generators. They are armed only with a single cannon, but that single cannon is deadly. They punch large holes and two of the generators exploded in a starburst. A Multibeam frigate breached the third generator in time.

G'yela shook her fist at the screen with triumph. The Assault Frigates had attacked the Pods, which had turned to go toe to toe with the Frigates. The Swarmers now freed, attacked the Assault Frigates with vengeance, then run to the pods for refueling to attack again.

The battle between the Ion Frigates of the Unclean Defilers and the great Kadeshi multibeam frigates went to the Kadeshi's favor. The packs trapped the Ion frigates and hit them from all directions.

The Needleship was able to deploy more Swarmers than the enemy has with fighters and corvettes. Sheer numbers, speed and firepower overwhelmed the enemy strike wing. Salvagers released from the Needleship preyed on the surviving Assault and Ion frigates.

The enemy carrier tried to vainly escape, but the Needleship has caught up to it. The carrier desperately fired its plasma weapons, but beam after beam from the Needleship raked the carrier.

"Fire," G'yela shouted as the energy bars of the beam cannon goes green. "Fire."

As suddenly as it started, the enemy carrier ended in a brilliant flash of light.

G'yela threw herself back into the chair, disbelieving that she had won her first victory. The officers in the bridge were jubilant, and shouts were heard from the comlinks in the Swarmers.

"Hyperspace signature appearing....." an officer warned.

What the? G'yela thought as she stared into the black starry screens.

An immense large spider ship in black and silver appeared, eight giant arms radiating from its center.

"Do not be afraid," said a voice. "We are not your enemies. We are your Gods of Old. The God of your Mother, N'ua. The Gods that gave you the Thunderbolt of Justice. The Gods that gave you the Orb that will twist Space. The Gods that gave you the Chariot that holds the Orb. We are whom your prophecies calls the Dark Ones. But for you, we shall be known as the Wheel of Fate."

"The hyperspace inhibitor is not working," said one of the officers.

"See our power. Only the Gods that gave you the Orb will have the power to control it," said the voice.

The voice was familiar. It was the same voice that spoke in her head.

"It is indeed the Dark Ones of the Abyss," G'yela said. "The ones who helped the Great Mother escape the claws of the Defilers as listed in the Gospels."

She bent to her knees, and bowed. Every officer quickly followed her example. "O Holy Ones, O Dark Ones, we are your servants," they all prayed in unison.

To the cries in awe and wonder, G'yela disappeared from the bridge of the Needleship and into the great awe of the Wheel of Fate.

Chapter 11: The Revelation

All around her, there was darkness. The floor was hard and cold. Fear gripped G'yela's young heart, and she prayed and bowed repeatedly with her head down. She did not know where she was, and all around her she could hear voices. Some voices were deep, other were high and shrill.

One voice said, "You brought this so called Kadeshi on board? She is so pathetic."

Another said, "She has the blood of a Hiigaran."

The first voice replied. "For a Hiigaran, she is a pitiful sight. Look at her cower and shake in fear. Where is the Hiigaran arrogance that is the hallmark of their imperial race? Look at this rodent. She is so scared that she will pee in her legs."

A new voice said, "She has the blood of a Starfarer, the ancient Voyagers of the Stars. I can sense her abilities."

Another voice in the darkness asked, "How did a Starfarer ended in the Great Nebula, living with this pathetic Kadeshi race?"

Still another voice replied, "Her ancestor was trapped in the nebula by the same device we have given to the Kadeshi forefathers long ago. He lived and died among them, his genes intermingling and surviving across the generations, manifesting itself every few generations. She is the one now."

"Do you trust that this pathetic creature would be the one that will change the destiny of the Kadeshi?" asked a voice.

"She is the one," replied another voice.

A deeper voice addressed G'yela. "Child, stand up, so we may all see."

She was shaking as she stood, her eyes kept low on the ground as she heard the chorus of voices, daring not to answer them.

"We are the one of a Thousand Voices."

"Others have called us by many names."

"We are the ones your ancestors called the Angels from the Abyss."

"The Council called us the Forbidden, for we dared touch the tapestry of destiny."

"We are Tiamat."

"We are Destruction, and we are Rebirth."

"We are the Determination of Destiny."

"We are the Wheel of Fate."

"Priestess of Kadesh, we have brought before you to realize your destiny and that of the people of Kadesh. Millennia ago, we gave help to the founder of your Race, the one you call the Great Mother. Without our help, there will be no Kadesh. We helped your race begin because we saw your potential. We saw the power of your destiny."

"But the Millennia passed. All we saw is the former great race of Hiigara, now called Kadesh, the Protectors of the Garden, living like cowardly rodents protecting their farm. They have even lost the will and the ability to navigate the distances of the stars. Your religious orders, your leaders have corrupted the Promise and the Prophecies of Kadesh."

"We are displeased."

"The ones who have sent you to the place you call the Gardens have been destroyed. Only pockets that survive of their main power still exist, allied to the ones called Kushans, who share your Hiigaran bloodline. They have taken the First Gardens, the ones where your Great Mother and your sacred ancestors are born, the place where your race, the sacred people of Kadesh, is destined to return to."

"If the race of Kadesh allowed this great sacrilege to continue, you will all be condemned in the place you call the Gardens. To live like the pirate vermin you live like now, while the rest of the Galaxy, including your former enemies and rivals, all of whom you call the Unclean, will experience greater glory that was stolen from you."

"You have the blood of a Voyager of the Stars. It was part of our great plan to inject that seed into your race. That seed will blossom, of which you are now. That blossom will bring the light to the people of Kadesh, and lead them away from an existence of humiliation. You will fulfill the prophecy and destiny that is marked with the people of Kadesh by your Great Mother."

"As one who has the blood of the Voyager of the Stars, spaces between the stars of light will be your domain. Your sense and knowledge to navigate the vast distances will be awakened. All the knowledge that will let you move through the stars will be given to you and your ships. You will use them in conjunction with the Guidestone to return to Hiigara, the First Gardens, the sacred place where your Great Mother was born."

".....and all those who oppose you will be destroyed. We have given your race the first tools for that power. You will learn to make new ones, to build a mighty host which the very stars will tremble from its sight. Empires will fall on the wake of this mighty host, and new ones will rise."

"But I....." said G'yela. "I am only a novice priestess of the Order. How do I hope to accomplish all these? I do not have the strength or the will....."

"Silence my child," the voices said. "We will be with you. Your faith is great. You will discover your courage. In all what you do, realize that our Power will be behind you. You will have the power to change Kadesh and set its people to its rightful path."

"This is only the will of your Great Mother," said the voice, and a beautiful image of the Great

Mother N'ua appeared before G'yela, who immediately kneeled at its presence.

"You are our Messenger, and our Prophet."

"You are the Illumination of the Word of your Great Mother."

"You will be the Savior of your Race, and your people will see that."

A brilliant light enveloped G'yela. Suddenly her mind felt clearer than before, like a cloudy veil has been lifted. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she felt her very purpose of being has become so clear for her.

Suddenly she found herself once again in the bridge of the Needleship. She was covered in a radiant aura, a glowing light shining from her face, her hair streaked in brilliance.

Everyone fell to their knees at the sight of her. The screens were flashing, the computers temporarily overloaded by the data of revelation that flooded their banks in an instant.

"I have returned from the Angels of the Abyss. They have given me the Word from the Great Mother. I, and only I will speak in behalf of the Great Mother from now on. I will be Her sole Messenger and Prophet. I am the Deliverer," G'yela announced.

They all chanted the name of the Great Mother and that of G'yela.

It seemed both long ago, and yet as recent as the last second.

G'yela's thoughts drifted back to the present. They were celebrating a great victory against the unclean Kushan. So many of their ships, weapons and technology have been captured. They will be harnessed for the greater glory of the Mother.

The Comet Star of Kadesh burns brightly even now, and its Righteous Sword will be unstoppable.

* * *

Seejuk watched the news from the subspace links, transfixed at the events. They were in the mess hall of the Mule, with Zha and the crew.

"Hiigaran forces have suffered a major defeat, the first of such since the war with the Beast. The Daiamid and all the Kiith-sa have now pledged their unity against the common enemy," Seejuk said. "All Kushan have a blood oath to defend."

Seejuk watched in the monitor as a scene from the battle was transmitted. In the scene, Pod Bombs--Kadeshi Fuel Pods loaded with explosives---rushed against Gravwell lines and massed Corvette Walls. As they exploded, they take the Gravwells and Heavy Corvettes with them. He watch Grapplers—more frigate class Fuel Pods modified as Salvagers---defy the Gravwell fields that would immobilize most Salvagers, to immobilize and capture capital ships and Gravwell generators themselves. Seejuk shook his head.

"In Kharak, there exists in the wildlands a creature called the Luun-Kar. It is a social insect that lives in mounds. All its workers and soldiers are incapable of reproduction, and the whole nest is sustained by a single Queen, which after it subdues its rivals, becomes the egg factory for the entire nest.

"After the rainy seasons, the Luun-Kar will leave their nest. They have collected food in their nest to build a mighty host, and when they leave, they will consume everything in their path. The more they consume, the greater they become, to a point the whole army becomes unstoppable. Even the greatest predators in the lands of Kharak will fall to them, their flesh consumed right from their bones."

"Only with death of their Queen can this army be stopped," Seejuk said.

"I see the Kadeshi like the Luun-Kar. Every step they made, they harvest resources, acquire technology, develop new ships, build a fleet that becomes larger and larger, until there is no one that can stop them," Seejuk said.

"Both us Kushans and the Taidans have made a fatal flaw in their campaign. Since defeating the Beast, we have thought that technology is the solution for everything. If we are beaten, we build better fighters, bigger ships, more powerful weapons. It is not the Swarmer technology, neither the Multibeam technology, nor the Hyperspace inhibitors that is making the Kadeshi unstoppable. It is the Kadeshi themselves. They are inspired to fight like a people possessed. They fight like it is not their option to lose. Their courage and determination is incredible."

"During the Homeworld Wars, the Kushan people in the Mothership had that spirit, knowing their entire destiny is trust upon them. If we fail, it would be the end of our race. On the other side, the Taidani were suffering from the lack of morale and great dissent from the atrocity of their Emperor. The Taidani had numbers and they had the superior technology first until they were copied. Yet we Kushans beat them. We beat them because the single spirit in one Kushan fighter let them fight the equal of two or three Taidan opponents. "

"But since the Hiigaran Planetfall, the Kiithid once again fell back to their old disunited habits. They politicized against each other in trivial issues. Old rivalries emerged, dissent appeared, cracks formed. The Beast did nothing to change that. For a while we were united. The Beast was formidable, but only because of its technology. It did not have the indomitable spirit. We beat the Beast with technology, our technology, Somtaaw technology, Bentusi Technology."

"But while the indomitable spirit would rise in occasion, as with the Somtaaw, the lesson remained largely forgotten. After the Beast, once again, we're back to old habits. "

"This time, the tables are reversed. It is the Kadeshi with the indomitable spirit, while we Kushans are like the Taidani before. They are the ones with the purpose, the sword of destiny trust in their hands, and we are the ones without."

"If we are to win over the Kadeshi, we need to find what is driving them, and to take that away from them," Seejuk said. The recent battles have narrowed the possible routes which the Kadeshi will

take next. Seejuk made his calculations and estimations, and have passed them both the navigational computers and the ensign on the helm.

"How do you expect to do that?" Zha asked.

"I will see you in the Bridge, Captain Zha," Seejuk said.

From the bridge, Zha gave her order to hyperspace according the new coordinates.

The Mule came out from hyperspace. This time they hit the jackpot. The sensors lit up with the detection of large numbers of ship signatures. The signatures were Kadeshi.

"Go into cloak mode," Zha ordered. The cloak generators went on, hiding the Mule, her resourcers and her captured Multibeamers. Beyond the main cloak generator fields, the Ion Array Frigates triggered their own cloak generators.

It will be the time of decision.

Chapter 12: Siren's Song

Zha watched as the cloak and the mimic reconnaissance fighters left the Mule, heading towards the Kadeshi fleet. A strong passion burned in her to join them, to share the danger and discover the unknown, but her duties in the ship has prevented her from that, but only for the moment.

Seejuk worked on the tactical panel, and the screens for the probes and the recon fighters lit up. A new officer came on the bridge, a Kushan, Zha can guess, from his height and tannish skin color.

"Captain Zha, I would like you to meet Lieutenant Ta'haar of the Kiith Manaani. He is complements of the Black Star Intelligence. His specialty is linguistics and code breaking. He has come here to break the language and code of the Kadeshi comlink transmissions. From here, we will know what they're talking, and what they're next plans are." Ta'haar bowed at her.

Ever curious, Zha asked, "So how do you plan to do that?"

He replied, "Kadeshi tongue is not that much different from Kushan tongue. Just 3000 years removed. We identify keywords from both languages, find out how the Kadeshi word differed from the Kushan word, and compare them with the language of the Guidestone, then apply them to the rest of the Kadeshi words. Its really a lot more complicated than my description, because we also have to consider the grammar..."

"Forget I asked," Zha said, her hands waving in the air, "This is all beyond me. Carry on."

She became silent for a while, as a strange presence overcame her. She walked to the ship's windows, each pace seemingly like a struggle.

"Is something wrong, Zha?" Seejuk asked.

"Nothing, nothing," she replied.

"You suddenly look sick," Seejuk said.

"Nothing, I tell you," she insisted. She bent on the transparency that separated her from deep space, staring at the tiny lights that was the Kadeshi fleet. The strange force beckons her, like nocturnal creatures drawn fatally to a flame of light. Then in moments, the strength of her senses vastly increased. She could sense the cosmic winds between the stars, winds that start as flares from the surface of the stars and blow into space. She could sense the gravity and magnetic fields of stars, planets and asteroids. Yet there was no chaos. Between the winds and the fields, there was a harmonic balance, a tune. A tone here, a tone there, and they all sing. The cosmos was at song, the universe was singing.

Since the dawn of her womanhood, these senses have grown stronger. Sometimes they were not there, but increasingly often enough, the sensations hit her like a deep wave that engulfs her with nothing but visions and songs. Her father once said to her, the stars sing and let their songs find you the way. Was this how the Starfarers find their way through the stars in a primeval time with only the most primitive of instruments? The Taidans have their own legends, those of Sirens among the

stars who can lead voyagers into safety or death just by their songs. Her father thought her more than just the ceremonial songs of the Segura ; he thought her the songs of the ancient sacred star culture of the Raiders. We were not just pirates and bandits, he told her, as the Taidani made them look to be. Once they were a nomadic race that spanned the stars. But other races came to power, prosecuted their ancestors, who turned to rebellion, and then to piracy. We, the noble nomads of Turan, have survived, he said, but we must still preserve whom we were. We have left little in letter and word, but we have preserved much in song. In those songs lay the secrets of how our long ancestors spanned the cosmos. So her father said.

"I think I want to go to bed," Zha said, bending on the window.

"You don't look alright, and I think you better go. We'll take care of things here. Don't worry," said Seejuk, always rational, always analytical. His eyes never left the screens as the scanners displayed data poured in by the recon fighters. Ta'haar was on the other console, eavesdropping on the comlinks of the Kadeshi.

Zha found moving through the hallways to her small quarters an increasing struggle. She could not concentrate on her immediate senses, on her sight and her balance. The waves of visions and sensations continue to engulf her.

Like a cold dark wind, she could feel a breath, a presence. Since her father died, she could never feel another one like her. But for the first time again, yes, yes, is this true? Is this possible? She could feel someone else again, another Voyager, another Siren, another Farer of the cosmos. She could hear her sing through, her passions and dreams among the stars. A tone there and a note there. Her power was magnificent, far greater than Zha's own, and the spells she spins enthralls the lesser minds around her.

Zha was falling, falling, spinning uncontrollably into a black vortex. But there was a strange peace around her, and she swam with the currents into the center of the vortex. Even the currents sing to her, and the songs were wonderful. She sung with them.

Zha, her eyes closed, her lips on a smile, collapsed on the hallway, never making it to her room.

G'yela was singing tunes in her head. Sometimes she hummed and even sang them to the people in the bridge, who voice the pleasure in hearing her songs. The Songs of Faith that have driven the Faithful to fight with the greatest of spirit, can also calm and heal their souls. At other times, the Songs can enlighten and illuminate the mind to find the right way among the stars.

She had ordered the number of patrols to increase, and all scanners to increase probing. Her officers never understood, but never questioned. She could feel the Other again, the other one like her, who knows and shares her secret as a Starfarer. She does not know who the other was, or what was she doing here. Her mind was young too, her powers not as fully realized as hers was. She could sense this things. Since the Angels who call themselves the Tiamat have ignited the power within her, she has become more than a girl, more than a priestess, more than a Kadeshi. For only the Farers can

touch the face of the gods and ride the songs of the cosmos.

Her external senses have become weaker, her balance losing. Her staff held her gently and layed her on her throne. Others bent in great homage for the most profound moment that their Holiness will experience another vision from the gods. "O Holiest of Holies," they all sang in unison. Her servants brought her a smoking incense to her feet. The incense carried a powerful hallucogenic drug and G'yela inhaled its sweet smelling smoke. Her mind fell into a pit of blackness and then through a tunnel of light.

She could hear the songs of the stars once again, the same songs that beckoned her when she was a child, the songs that became clearer when she first left the Gardens. She could fly through its winds, wade among its currents, watch the starry orbs themselves. She could hear the Other, not fully awakened yet, but already capable of singing. The Other was singing too.

Among the cosmic winds, there were no rank, no flesh and no bone. No Kadeshi, Kushan or Taidan. Only the inner soul lives.

She swam close to the Other to hear her song, and then sang her own. The Other heard her song and joined her. Who was she? She can sing so well. Will she be an enemy or will she be a friend? That was not her concern now. Only the harmonies between themselves was all that matters.

Among the winds, there was no sense of time. The songs can be like a moment, or they can be forever.

Someone was slapping her face and that odor burnt through her nose. "Hey, wake up! Wake up!" Seejuk said, lightly slapping her cheeks.

Zha could see that she was in the infirmary of the ship. Seejuk and two others were standing above her.

"They found in you in the hallway," Seejuk said. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Zha said. "It was all like a dream."

"What was like a dream?" Seejuk asked.

"It's kind of hard to explain, all the swirling, all the songs running in my head," Zha said.

"Maybe try," Seejuk requested.

Zha sighed, but the chief medical officer interrupted. "I don't think the captain is fit for anything right now. She needs some rest."

"I don't need to break this to you," Seejuk said. "But we are in dangerous times. We can't afford for you to be sick, hazy or be in any way incapable of performing your duties."

"I will be fine, Seejuk. I don't weaken that easy. I know my duties," Zha said.

"When you're ready, maybe you like to hear what we found," Seejuk said.

"I'm always ready," Zha said.

"Well maybe you like to hear this," Seejuk said as he brought out an audio device. "We have been getting this from the Kadeshi comlinks and has been recording. We have been trying to make heads and tails out of it." Seejuk played the device.

Zha could hear the immediate chatter of the Kadeshi pilots talking. But it was the background that struck her. There was a serene music. It was like the music she heard in her visions.

Seejuk observed Zha's expressions as she heard the audio. "The communications was just plain chit chat among the Kadeshi pilots. Nothing unusual or valuable. But that music behind has been prevalent. We have started analyzing the notes and lyrics. The music seemed religious in nature. But you seem bothered by it. Anything wrong?"

"I think I heard that music before," Zha admitted. "But I still don't understand everything."

"You heard that music before?" Seejuk seemed surprised. "Explain, I need to know."

"Like I said, I seemed to know it but I don't understand," Zha insisted. "Must you be so persistent and nosy about everything?"

"It's my job to be nosy and persistent," Seejuk said. "And our victory and survival depends on it." Seejuk smiled.

"I'm going to try," Zha said. "Things are not all clear to me and it's all hazy in many areas, but I'm going to try. Our race, the Turans, have legends of an ancient race of Starfarers. They were the first to venture into the unknown outer boundaries of the Galaxy, and the first to come to the areas around Turan..."

"Yes, I've learned about them," Seejuk said. "All legends have a seed of truth in them. The legend you speak of are shared by many races. The Taidans called them Sirens. They have the ability to navigate through the stars intuitively. What you describe is not an impossibility. Animals in different planets, including those we observed in Kharak and Hiigara, are able to migrate enormous distances across their respective globes to breed or hibernate, with nothing but the stars and their senses to guide them. Scientists speculated that life is capable of developing a new sense, one of intuitive navigation. There is no reason why intelligent life is not capable of this. This is what we believe the Unbound, Bentusi was capable of. This is where I think the Starfarer legend came about. There were rumors that your father had this capability. I suspect you yourself had that too. You seem unusually good in guiding this ship."

"You almost could read my mind through analysis," Zha said. "But this is not cold logic or sudden intuition. Sometimes it seems like I could sense the stars themselves, the cosmic winds between

them. There is a harmony in the universe that is like a song, like the stars themselves singing. Each has a different voice, a different note or tune. It is beautiful to ever experience them sing. You guide yourself through the harmonies. This background music in the Kadeshi interlinks, its much like that. I think it's guiding them. I think a Starfarer is guiding them."

"I know your instincts, Zha," Seejuk said. "I know I can trust on them. If you think or felt something, there is truly something about it. If a Starfarer is leading the Kadeshi, it could explain their amazing progress across the galaxy, and the tactical ability to sense our forces first, then ambush them. But how did a Starfarer got into the Great Nebula? Maybe it was trapped by one of those hyperspace inhibitors. We don't know. How it got into power? We don't know. What we know is this," Seejuk played a new part in the audio device.

"We know they are being led by an individual named G'yela," Seejuk said. "There is always constant reference to her as the leader, both militarily and religious, of this entire crusade from Kadesh."

G'yela...G'yela, Zha sounded the name in her head. That name too sounded familiar, but she could not pinpoint it. No..no...it was more of her presence.

The all too familiar red alarms sounded again. "Red Alert, Red Alert, Battle Stations!" the intercoms sounded.

"I guess back to work again," Seejuk said.

"I guess I better hurry to the bridge, too," Zha said, showing effort getting out of the bed.

On the bridge, Zha watched the screens as she assumed the captain's chair. Seejuk sat on tactical. "Report, report," she urgently asked.

"We are not being attacked, Captain," the ensign said. "So far we are not being detected yet. Not even close. But we have detected many new hyperspace signatures, all showing energy weapons and charging."

"Identify," Zha asked.

"Kushan-Republican fleet, led by an Explorer class vessel, the Kuun-Laan. It's headed to the center of the Kadeshi fleet," Seejuk said, watching the lights in his console.

Chapter 13: The Cannon

"All battle stations!" Zha ordered. "All recon fighters regroup to the Mule at once! Maintain cloaked running for all fighters. Do no engage unless ordered."

Everyone was focused on the screens. The Allied forces were intent in getting even, and they have sent the Kuun-Laan escorted an array of Kushan and Taidan capital ships. Behind the great walls of capital ships were X formations of fighters and walls of corvettes. Under any other circumstance, Zha would be excited to see the Somtaaw Explorer ship, the Kuun-Laan, known throughout the Galaxy as the Beast Slayer. This was the ship that killed the Beast and with that act, avenged for her the death of her father. But other circumstances were overriding that joy.

"The Siege Cannon is powering up," said one of the officers in the bridge. The energy signature of the Siege Cannon was like a beacon for all the energy scanners.

"What is their target?" Seejuk asked one of the tactical officers.

"We got the coordinates," he replied, and displayed them on screen. There was a cluster of needleships.

"Sensor zoom in the area, now!" Seejuk ordered.

Seejuk was wide eyed as he saw the image in the screen. "There it is!" he shouted. A huge Needleship dominated the screen like a massive sea animal, and smaller needleships surrounded the big animal like its cubs.

"The Khar-toba sister ship!" Seejuk said. "Our communications tap have indeed confirmed that this ship is the flagship of the Crusade. Now the Siege Cannon is aimed at it. Yes, justice is going to be done, right smack in the face of the Kadeshi. This time, they're going to take it the head!"

Zha did not match Seejuk's exuberance. Her face wore a frown of great concern. Her expression changed into that of utter horror.

"NO! NO!" Zha shouted. The Other, the Kadeshi—they are not the Beast. They cannot be fought like that monster.

"Why?" Seejuk asked.

"Scan the Needleship energy signatures. We need to warn the Alliance. I can sense it, those are not real ships!" Zha stood up and shouted.

Seejuk performed the deep energy scans. When it ended, his face shared the same utter horror. "I could not believe it. I cannot find the Khar-toba energy signature. These are not typical energy signatures...."

Seejuk was badly interrupted by an ensign's excited voice. "Sir! The Kuun Laan has fired the Siege Cannon!"

Seejuk slapped his forehead. "...these are the energy signatures of a huge holographic generator...Mimics on a capital and mothership scale!"

Zha let out a deep breath of tension and sank down on her seat. She nodded her head.

"Energy ball Impact on target in three....two...one...Impact!" the ensign reported. There was a flash in the screen as a brilliant light exploded in a ring spreading in all directions.

Seejuk was running scans. "There is insufficient debris to substantiate not even a single major capital ship!"

Zha stood up, alarmed. The comlinks were full of the voices of Kushans and Taidans shouting of victory, confident they have surprised then wiped out the enemy in a single blast. But the voices were not the real reason why she stood up.

Zha could sense her, that Other. She is there somewhere. As Zha could sense her, the Other could sense the enemy ahead, ready to spring her own trap. A voice seemingly silent, has picked up in the background, growing into a song.

Zha shouted to the sensors officer. "Scan point Alpha Three, point Beta 67, point Omega 45!" The officer did not hesitate. Seejuk just stared at her incredulously.

The scans were off to the opposite ends of the map. There was nothing but clouds and asteroid debris.

"Magnify!" Zha ordered. They can see nothing. Then the asteroids started to change shape.

"By the blood of Sajuuk, the Kadeshi has copied cloak now and they have copied mimic technology," Seejuk said, hands busy on his tactical console. The shapes were turning into Needleships, Pods and Multibeamers. The song has picked up in tempo, and has turned into its full glory. The cries of Allied victory in turn, grew into a hushed silence.

"Hyperspace Inhibitors are active! Hyperspace Inhibitors are active!" the ensign shouted.

"How are our forces," Zha asked?

Seejuk replied, "We are still cloaked. Our mimic and cloak fighters have almost finished regrouping."

"Maintain cloaked running," Zha ordered. "Anyone who breaks our cover and joins the battle without my orders I will have his or her head in my table!" Silently she prayed that the discipline of her forces would prevent them from being betrayed to the energy scanners.

As the Needleships emerged from the clouds, lines of ionic trails streaked the darkness of the cosmos from one end of sight to the other---the visual signature of massive waves of fanatic Swarmers heading for the kill. For many a pilot, the sight was one of certain death.

The song in the comlinks was both terrifying and magnificently haunting. They can hear the individual voices of Kadeshi pilots in what must be prayer, their voices joining in chorus with the song.

The voices of the Kushans and Taidans, once jubilant in victory, have become the voices of those who have accepted a fate of death. The order was given to all pilots of the strike craft. They will fight to the end.

"The Kuun Laan siege cannon is powering up again..." said the ensign. Then suddenly he interrupted himself. "We have another siege cannon signature!"

"By the blood of Sajuuk, pinpoint and magnify!" Seejuk ordered. Scans immediately ran to where the second siege cannon signature was detected, and the screens were suddenly filled with a massive long Needleship that dwarfed the other Needleships around it.

"It's got the right signature! The Khar'toba sister ship!" Seejuk said.

There she is, Zha thought as she stared at the screen. The Other. The One who also fared the stars, who can hear its melodies and sing its songs. The One was like herself. The One who was also her enemy. Her thoughts were interrupted.

"The Kadeshi has fired their Siege Cannon," the ensign shouted. "Sir, there is no way the Kuun Laan can avoid the blast."

"Damn!" Seejuk pounded on the console. "If we lose the Kuun-Laan, the Crusade will take Hiigara!"

The ensign was frozen on his screen "Five Seconds to Impact!.... Four... Three.... Two... One... Impact!"

There was a brilliant fireball where the Kuun-Laan was. The wave front expanded, rocking the major capital ships, but tidal wave front destroyed rows of fighters, corvettes and frigates.

"Damn again. By the hammer of Sajuuk, that siege cannon was even more powerful than what the Kuun-Laan had!" Seejuk said. Seejuk's expression of horror turned to relief, as new data from his scanner flooded his screens.

"The Kuun-Laan is still alive! Dammit, that is a tough ship!" Seejuk exclaimed, and then making a short

sincere prayer to the gods for letting the ship live. "But she is heavily damaged," he added. "She has lost many of her modules, and her siege cannon as well. She is hanging on. She is requesting assistance and reinforcements. She needs to escape. She got a few thousand valuable personnel on board. We cannot afford to lose the Kuun-Laan, and if we do, so will Hiigara's fate. If she escapes, she can regroup and repair to fight another battle. It cannot end here."

The ensign interrupted them again. "Enemy siege cannon is beginning to recharge. We have sighted

a secondary wave of Probe Bombs and Pod Bombs heading to the Kuun-Laan. They will finish her off!"

Seejuk turned around and watched the icy glare of Zha's eyes. He did not say anything and she didn't either. But he knew what was on her mind, and she knew what he was going to ask.

"It has finally come to this, Zha." Seejuk said. "The Mule is a ship carrying the banner of the Turanic Raiders. It is not obligated to help the Kushans or the Alliance. It is up to you."

Zha's eyes were teary. In her eyes, Seejuk felt that she had accepted her own fate. She said, "Seejuk. Your people helped me and this ship in a time of need despite that your people hated the Raiders, hated what a Lord carrier did in your Homeworld Wars, hated what a carrier like this stood for. If it were not for you and the Kushans, this great ship would not be here. I would not be here. I owe this to you. That ship over there, the one you call the Kuun-Laan, is the one we all call the Beast-Slayer. That ship avenged the death of my father from the Beast and finally gave him his peace. I owe that to my father. The Mule, this Lord carrier, this was my father's ship. He would only want it this way."

Zha stared at the wanting eyes of her officers in the bridge. "I will put all your lives at risk here. I need to know if all of you are behind me."

"My brother died when the Crusade attacked the Merak outpost," one of the officers said. "I am with you all the way." He saluted with his fist, and all the others joined him in a rhythm.

She turned to the ensign. "Set an intercept course to the Kadeshi flagship. Maintain cloak., and when you are in firing range, the Mule and all frigates will open fire. Target the siege cannon and take it out. "

Zha loosened the buttons in her shirt. "All pilots, report to your fighters and corvettes. I want every strike ship out on my mark."

She turned to Seejuk. "Seejuk, you will take command of this ship and the frigates. You know what to do. Take out that cannon and get out, keep as many of the crew and the frigates alive."

Seejuk stared at her. "What in the sands of Kharak are you planning to do?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Zha said. "I'm going to get my pilot's coveralls. The Mule and the frigates are not going to stop that siege cannon in time. We need to send a strike force to take it out. I am going to lead that strike force!"

Seejuk looked at her bewildered. "You are not serious!"

"Yes I am," she said, "and we don't have much time before the cannon fires again. I will be okay. I promise."

Seejuk raised both his hands. He gave up, he can't argue with her. He didn't have much time either. "Go now," he said, "and by the god Sajuuk's name, you better come back." Seejuk quickly regained

his position in the tactical console. "Maximum speed," he ordered. "I want the max out of this bucket of bolts!"

Zha zipped up her flight suit, helmet in hand, her custom Triikor ready and sitting on the launch rails. She was rolling her fists, a motion to make every fighter launch. The vibration in the Mule's hangers told her that the carrier was at maximum speed, but as long as her course was straight, they can launch fighters. Rows of fighters and corvettes were being launched ahead of her. The atmosphere was intoxicated with excitement.

G forces pushed her back against the seat as the rail launched her fighter into space. The strike force was waiting, an odd assortment of Kushan, Taidan and Turanic ships. They should not have waited. There was not even time to make nice neat wall formations, only loose broad formations. She quickly set her Triikor on course to the Kadeshi flagship, and the strike force formed behind her. Behind the backs was the Mule, hauling her engines to the maximum, with Ion array and former Kadeshi Multibeam frigates close behind.

"All corvettes, form into Alpha wing. All bombers and interceptors form into Beta wing. All scouts form into Delta wing, all Defenders form into Gamma wing." Zha ordered. "We will hit our target in two waves. Beta force will hit them first as they are faster, followed by Alpha. There will be plenty of Swarmers trying to stop us so Delta will cover Beta and Gamma will cover Alpha. We don't have much time before that cannon goes. Our target is the swelling between the Khar-toba ship structure in the Needleship and the forward circular structure. Damage the cannon port on the top of the forward circular structure. Let's go!"

G forces pushed her back again as the Triikor boosted, and she can see one, two, three, then the entire force lit up their boosters. Ion trails fell behind them. There was a distraction in the moment. She can feel the Other's presence getting stronger, and she knew the Other would feel her too. The haunting music filled the comlinks, now with shouts and the cries of death as the Kadeshi Swarmers engaged the latest Taidan and Kushan interceptors in a dogfight to the death.

"This is Seejuk, are you there, Zha?" Seejuk's voice was in her comlink. "Yes, I'm here," she replied.

Seejuk continued. "I've contacted the main fleet. The defences from the frigates, destroyers and cruisers surrounding the Kuun-Laan are engaging the pod and probe bombs. Enemy multibeamers and pods are coming their way next so they will have their hands full. I've asked that the main fleet to send you some assistance and help you take out their siege cannon. It's bigger than the Kuun-Laan and got more punch but it looks like it will take a longer time to recharge. How long we don't know. I only know we don't have time to waste."

"Affirmative, Seejuk. Good job," Zha said. Clouds rushed past her cockpit. The massive Needleship appeared before her. "Target is on sight. Heading into attack vector. Warning tone indicates we have been detected, and Swarmers will soon be on my back. Wish me luck. Zha, out."

"Alright, Beta force," Zha said from her cockpit, "let's hit them. Delta cover us!" Her Triikor rolled and banked towards the Needleship. Another Triikor followed her, then a Bandit, then a Kaark, then that new Turanic interceptor, recently designated as the Demon, then the rest of the force. Further

away, Arrows and Fiirkans of Delta force met the Swarmers in their own dance of death.

The Other's presence was even stronger now, stronger than she has ever felt. The Other was inside that flagship. Her presence and her songs were energizing, and she must be galvanizing the Kadeshi. Zha cannot let the Other distract her. She must focus on destroying the siege cannon. The Needleship was immense. She never thought that anyone could build ships as big as these. The cannon's housing was on sight and she pressed the trigger. The Triikor's dual rail guns blasted away at their targets. She fired and fired, hoping that her shots would get through the skin and damage what was underneath.

She rolled and looped for another strafing pass. The second and third interceptors unloaded their guns at the target. As she headed for next firing pass, the bomber wave hit their targets with plasma launchers.

"Yahoo!" Zha shouted in her comlink. Corvettes of Alpha wing was on visual range and has begun their attack run. The Defenders of Gamma wing have joined the Scouts trying to tackle down the Swarmers. Energy cannons and mass drivers from corvettes smashed at their targets in a rain of fire. Then a spectacular volley of missiles from the Brigands hit the cannon enclosure.

Defensive fire from the Needleships was fierce. Zha could see some of her own strike craft being hit, and one or two have tumbled out of control and crashed into the Needleship.

Seejuk's voice came on from the comlink. "The hits from your attacks are causing the power levels in the cannon to fluctuate. Good job. This may cause some delay for them to fire. The bad news is that the power levels continue to rise, and they can still fire before we can reach our firing position. I got a new plan and I'm downloading them to all strike craft. We need to hit the sensor receivers of the Needleship here and here. Make them blind."

"Got it," Zha affirmed. She rolled her Triikor and aimed her railguns at the antenna that protude from upper structure of the Needleship. She blasted away, and the other strike ships followed her.

"It's working, they can't seem to fix on the Kuun-laen," Seejuk said.

Aboard the Mule, Seejuk watched the screens tensely. Kadeshi Needleships, cruisers and frigates were on a death grip match against the Kushan and Taidani major ships. He could not tell who is winning. The battles were so chaotic. There seemed to be a dogfight with a Swarmer in every square inch of space.

Beam Acolytes from the Kuun-Laen have hit the Kadeshi flagship, and a wave of Avengers and Thunderbolt heavy corvettes were close behind them. They joined Zha's strike wave trying to disable the siege cannon.

"Reaching firing position," the ensign said.

"All frigates into wall formation," Seejuk ordered. "All ion beam cannons, set your targets. Warning to all Mule strike force. Bombardment will soon commence."

"We are in firing position," the ensign said.

"Decloak and open fire," Seejuk ordered. "To all frigates, decloak and fire at will." The petals around the Mule's main ion cannon opened, and a beam shot out from it into the siege cannon section of the Kadeshi flagship. As the generators dropped their cloak, the captured Multibeamers rolled and opened fire at the cannon section. The Ion Array frigates decloaked, panels unfolded and beams shot out into the flagship.

As the Mule fired, Seejuk watched the screens as Kadeshi warhips turned to face the Mule and her frigate fleet. Ion beams pounded and pounded at the swollen structure in the Needleship.

"Scanners are indicating that the siege cannon is taking damage," said the ensign, excited at his discovery.

"It's working, sir!" He raised his fist in joy.

Seejuk was happily shaking his fist too. But his joy was short lived, as the Mule shook violently. Two Kadeshi Multibeamers appeared out of the darkness and raked the carrier with its beams. Screens were showing the enemy frigates, Swarmers and Pods, responding to the defence of the flagship, were surrounding the Mule and her task force. Beam and Assault Swarmers blasted the Mule and her frigates with beams and large caliber cannon fire, as Beam Acolytes and Attack Bombers pummeled the Kadeshi flagship in a tit for tat exchange.

His heart pounded. "Strike force! The Siege Cannon is damaged, I repeat, the Siege Cannon is damaged. But we are talking punishment and we cannot take this much longer. We need defence!" Seejuk desperately warned. "Get those Swarmers and Frigs off our backs, and I think we can kill the Flagship."

"Got you," Zha said, banking her fighter to strafe at a Kadeshi Multibeamer. The strike force turned their attention at the frigates and Swarmers firing at the Mule, destroying an Assault Pod and some Swarmers.

Seejuk could see that the flagship is on flames from the concentrated attacks. But it was one tough ship. His frigates kept firing at the flagship, but they are taking casualties from the Kadeshi frigates. Sooner or later the Mule or the Kadeshi flagship will blow. It's only a matter of time who will stay alive long enough to kill the other.

The ensign interrupted him again. "Sir, the hyperspace inhibitors have lifted! Hyperspace jump gates appearing!"

"What!" Seejuk exclaimed in utter surprise. In his screens, a huge hyperspace gate appeared and the Kadeshi flagship slipped through it.

Seejuk didn't know what to feel. He seemed to win a tactical victory but the flagship got away. The Kadeshi frigates were still there, blowing holes at the Mule, and if he does not get out soon, the Mule would be space dust.

"Ensign! Hyperspace Jump! Anywhere, just get us out of here. To all frigates, hyperspace! Jump before the inhibitors activate again!" Seejuk shouted at the top of his voice.

The jumpgate appeared and the Mule slipped through it. Her frigates joined in the hyperspace jump. They materialized near the position they had originally used to stalk and observe the Kadeshi fleet.

"Did you see that, all of you? The enemy ran! We saved the Kuun-laan. We saved all their sorry asses." It was Zha's happy voice in the comlink. The strike force could not hyperspace and was still heavily engaged.

Then there was a scream. It was the same voice. It was Zha's voice.

A sick feeling came into Seejuk's stomach. "Zha! Are you there? Answer me!"

Zha's Triikor was tumbling out of control. In one brief moment of joy, she lost her concentration and a Swarmer nailed her fighter.

She was struggling to remain control, then another Kadeshi ship loomed, a frigate, a Pod. The bottom of the Pod's appeared like mechanical claws. The mechanism was the tell tale sign of a modified Fuel Pod, a Kadeshi Grappler, or Salvage Frigate.

The engines could no longer ignite, and static filled the comlinks. Zha screamed and screamed as the Grappler seized her crippled fighter under a holding field. The screams stopped and there was only silence.

Seejuk's voice was in the comlink. "Zha. Are you there? Please respond. What is your position? Please Zha, answer me. Answer please. Oh by the Gods of Kharak..."

But there was no answer.

Chapter 14: The Pool of Dreams

The battle raged for hours, but it had degenerated into dogfights with strike forces. Large ship capital forces in both sides were heavily damaged, and avoided another toe to toe fight. Then the Kadeshi battlegroup faded out of the battle and hyperspaced. It was hard to tell who won or lost, but the best he can say it was a draw that heavily bloodied both sides.

Casualties were heavy. But there was one casualty Seejuk could never take off his mind. He thought he was battle hardened enough to shrug off all thought of death of his comrades. He stared at the empty captain's chair. He thought he would see her there, smile, chuckle, and even tease once in a while. But the chair remained empty. The bridge crew were mournfully quiet.

Damn, she said she promised she will come back. He sighed. Casualty reports were flowing in. Salvagers were out doing their thing, trying to recover anything that has value. Resourcers were out trying mine stellar material that they may use for repairs.

He can overhear one officer whisper. "Will the captain come back?"

"Let's face it, she probably won't," replied another.

"She's still so young!" said another.

"Too young to captain, too young to die either," replied another.

"What will happen to us?" asked one officer.

"I think after we return, they will send this ship back to Turan. The Inner Council of Lords will determine the ownership of the vessel. Unless the Kushans will buy this ship from them," replied another.

"It's going to cost plenty to fix this ship. There is so much damage here it's ready for the scrapyard."

"You can say that again, but I hope the Kushans will help fix this ship. I don't want to leave this ship, and the Kushan engineers fix this ship pretty good the last time. Our own Turan engineers are so incompetent. Hold on, I think I got a message coming in." Her voice turned loud for Seejuk to hear. "Commander Seejuk, it is for you. It is from the Kushan fleet."

"This is Fleet Admiral Ne'jar Sjet with Star Captain Sa'raak Somtaaw of the Kuun-laan. We would like to talk to the captain of the Turanic Raider carrier. We would like to send our eternal gratitude for the assistance you have given in this battle. Your diversionary attack against the Crusade flagship and its siege cannon helped save the Kuun-laan. The Somtaaw Beastslayer is grateful...the Kushan Kiithid is grateful...all of Hiigara is grateful."

Seejuk replied.

"This is Black Star Commander Seejuk Liirhra speaking in behalf of the captain, Her Highness Segura Zha Khor of the Turanic Lord class carrier, Arak-Na, also known as the Mule. We are

honored with your gratitude. But we have lost our captain in battle. The honor must go to her, and to the officers and pilots of her brave fleet. We would like to request the use of the nearest Allied facilities for the repair and resupply of the carrier task force."

The Fleet Admiral replied. "But of course. We will compensate handsomely for your services. Liirhra? Are you Kushan? A Kushan onboard a Turanic Raider ship?"

"Yes I am, and I have a few select personnel with me. We are from the Black Star wing of Hiigaran Fleet Intelligence. I am formally operating as an adviser, first officer and liaison to Her Highness Segura Zha of the Turanic Inner House of Khor. We are in a mission of reconnaissance of the Crusade Armada..."

The Admiral said, "...and that's when we popped up. Well, I do not know the strange workings of Fleet Intelligence, but I do know that your timely actions saved us. You, your Black Star people, your Turanic and Taidain crewmates all deserve a medal when we all see you back in base. I will give you the coordinates and the pass." He saluted.

Seejuk saluted back. "Sir," one of the officers said. "We have the data."

"Good," Seejuk said. "Set navigation to the coordinates given and prepare to hyperspace once the Resourcers and Salvagers are finished." He leaned back on his chair, wiped a tear in his eye, and sighed. He watched the damage reports on his screen and prepared a schedule of repairs for the damage. He thought, this might be his last duties on this ship. Like one of the officers said, this ship may be headed back for Turan, its ultimate fate to be determined by the Inner House. But the ship will be rightfully repaired first, her dignity restored. That's how Zha would have wanted it. Then he thought he would give a call to Fleet Admiral G'aas Paktu and take him up on the Liirhra assault carrier offer.

"We have a hyperspace signature coming in, Sir...." the ensign warned.

"Hostile? Kadeshi?," Seejuk asked.

"No sir," the ensign replied.

Seejuk did not need to ask for the identity of the ship that jumped in. It's enormous U-shape, glittering lights and sheer sense of awe, it can only be the ship of the Unbound.

"We are the Unbound," said the Bentusi.

"Yes, yes, we know, we can dispense of the formalities," Seejuk said. "You have...you know...anything you can give to us to fight the Kadeshi? They have been able to kick our hinds badly ever since they left the Nebula."

The Bentusi replied.

"We have been giving away technology that we should never have been. While our gifts solve a threat and save the Great Order, in time we see the unforeseen consequences of those gifts. Despite

our best efforts, as you have seen the Somtaaw, for example, were able to reverse engineer a good facsimile of our Beam fighters. We see the fighter drive we have sold to the Somtaaw became to be used in all fighters of the Known Races, and in the hands of the Kadeshi, the same drive have turned over the Balance of Power. It is our technology, that one Hiigaran uses to kill the other Hiigaran. As brother fights brother, sister fights sister, our sin was to have given the sword for them to kill. These are steps that we cannot undo, but in the long run, bring profound effects to the Balance of the Great Order of things."

"In millennia past, we gave the refugees of Hiigara, the ancestors of the Kushan and Kadeshi, a gift to help them defend against the Taidan atrocity. Now that gift had become the feared weapon of the Protectors, the Crusaders, the thing you call the Swarmer. Our colleagues in the Council, the Forbidden, the Tiamat, they have given those ancestors even more technologies---the compact ion beam, the hyperspace inhibitor, and the Needleship power generator needed to run the inhibitor. We sinned to save Hiigara, and now our sins have made one Hiigaran fight another Hiigaran. We have tampered with the Balance, and Chaos has risen."

"Your war is no longer with the Taidan. Your war is no longer with the Beast. Your war is among yourselves, Hiigaran. The gifts of technology will not win this war, and we see no need to give you the things you do not need. You need to change the heart of the Hiigaran. Even you know of this. There is no technology that can stop the spirit of the Crusaders from Kadesh. The power of the spirit is the ultimate weapon."

Seejuk asked, "So how will you expect us to change the minds of the Kadeshi? They are so bent in killing us, you know, the Unclean! The task of healing the mentally ill will be so much easier!"

"You have a female among you. One that is not of your race. But she holds the key to changing that heart. The one you know as the Starfarer," the Bentusi replied.

"But she is dead," Seejuk countered.

"She is not dead," the Bentusi said. "That is not to be the fate of this Starfarer. She has a long destiny that she has to fulfill, and it will not end here."

Seejuk's heart became elated at the words of the Bentusi. Zha still alive? That was wonderful to hear. There was so much gossiping in the bridge.

"But where is she?" Seejuk asked.

"She is among the ones you now call the Crusaders. You must retrieve her before she becomes corrupted by the Forbidden, corrupted like the Other, the Starfarer who leads the Crusaders," the Bentusi replied.

"A Starfarer leading the Crusade?" Seejuk asked.

"Your Starfarer had felt the Other's presence. The Starfarer whose name is G'yela. She is with her. To stop the Crusade, you must stop the Singer of the Stars, the Siren G'yela. You must remember, that the key to the present lies in the past. You must prepare for a new journey. The Starfarers will

be in the place you call the Graveyard. You must go there. You do not have time to lose. The proper destiny and order must be restored. Remember that the answer lies in the past."

With the last words, the Bentusi tradership hyperspaced. It was not the kind of meeting Seejuk expected, but it was better. There was hope. Zha was still alive.

* * *

They were all bound in the hands, just waiting for the ritual execution. The Grapplers don't just grab ships for salvaging, they grab victims to supply their idols with a continuous supply of ritual sacrifices. It's called the Cleansing, for the Unclean are cleansed to be made worth eating. After that, their bodies were thrown to the nutritional recycler where they would be processed to help create the nutritional food bricks that's part of the Kadeshi protein supply.

She was all dirtied and beaten, her uniform all torn. She was one of those who had resigned to their fate, as each of them were dragged to the altar, then in front of screaming crowds, stabbed to death.. She could hear the screams of the sacrificed, again and again. In the background, there was that song again, and it was terrifying.

The guard came into the cells, looked at her, then grabbed her by the arms. She resisted, and he hit her across the face. He hit her so hard she fell nearly unconscious, her mouth bleeding. The other prisoners tried to stop the guard, some protested verbally. They were all beaten back with a stick.

The guard dragged her limp body across the screaming crowds, who pelted her with whatever they could find throwing. As she was dragged, she started crying. Inside she was not the strong woman and heroine her race wanted her to be, what her station needed her to be. Inside she was damn scared of dying like anyone else. She cried and peed uncontrollably in her thighs and legs, as the guards hanged her arms at a horizontal pole, and let her body hang upright, an easy and presentable target to the final trust of the sacrificial blade. The crowds were shouting in the rhythm, the altar acolytes were humming their prayers, asking the Great Mother to cleanse their offering, to make it worthy of consumption.

It must not end like this, she thought. She wished that she had died in battle instead, instead of being offered as a sacrifice in this sick, psychotic ceremony. She thought of her father, his death, her adventures in the Mule and with her liaison, Seejuk Lirhra, who filled the vacuum her father's death left.

She dangled at the pole set in the altar. Then the crowds hushed into silence. This did not fit the patterns she heard before. Then she felt something, someone. It could only be the Other, for the first time ever, right in the same place where she was.

The Siren was beautiful, with her tall, lithe figure, silvery long hair, and deep penetrating eyes.. There seemed to be an aura, a presence around her. Zha never saw a woman anywhere like this woman.

"This woman is a leader of the Unclean, a royalty to their society, but her rank means nothing under

the Eyes of the Great Mother. But she has more value to me alive," G'yela said. "For even if she was among the Unclean, she is sacred to the Angels from the Abyss who can only determine her final fate. Release her at once!"

The guards seemed surprised, then quickly cut off the ropes that hanged her arms on the pole. She fell to the ground, unable to lift herself up.

G'yela bent beside her. "I had expected something more from another who is also a Siren of the Stars, and foiled my plans to destroy that Minership. You would have died in that battle, or died in the altar, but the Forbidden had another destiny for you, like the one they had realized for me. But in the meantime I am glad to finally meet you, to meet another one like me. This is for us only, a momentous occasion."

G'yela called her handmaidens. "She is a sacred one to the Council gods. I want her cleaned and prepared for ritual in the Pool of Dreams."

Zha could not understand and did not answer as the Handmaidens took her away. G'yela announced again that the ritual sacrifices will continue to the jubilant cries of the crowd.

The Handmaidens brought Zha to G'yela's private chambers, stripped her torn clothing, then bathed her clean. They massaged her skin, disinfected her hair, treated her wounds and bruises, then gave her tonic to drink. Zha was tired, thirsty and hungry, and the spoiled luxuries she was being treated with was a stark contrast to her treatment as a prisoner. The luxuries she saw her was even in stark contrast to the spartan lifestyle she had in the Outpost and in the Mule, despite her social status and command position. The Handmaidens smiled and snickered at the sight of Zha's thin nubile body. Like G'yela, they were all beautiful, handpicked from the best of the Kadeshi women, but they lacked her strange mysterious presence. Zha felt immature and inadequate compared to their fully blossomed womanhood.

They led her to the Pool of Dreams. They entered the water, which glowed with some unusual photoluminescent plankton in it. Everytime they touched the water, the waves disturbed the plankton, causing them to light up. They held Zha's arms so they can bind her hands to the handles in the walls of the pool. Zha resisted, rather weakly, the pleasures and the drugs taking effect in her body. They told her it is only a precaution so she could not hurt Her Holiness who would be joining them in the pool soon. The Handmaidens left her bound in the pool, as they lit the incense around the pool. The smoke in the incense were drugged, and they made Zha felt even dizzier. One of the Handmaidens took a flask with a glowing blue fluid, and poured it into the pool. There was a strange hallucogenic smell in that liquid.

Zha felt like she was sinking, her body becoming more limp. Only her bound arms kept her head above the water. She grinned, she snickered, she laughed. Everything feels so strange, so funny, so light. Whatever she was, it was all disappearing into the middle hole in the vortex. Then a new presence came into the pool. Zha looked up, and there was she again, the most beautiful woman she has ever seen. She has powers like her too, like the way she can sense the winds between the stars, hear the melodies in the tidal echoes among the stars, the moons, and the planets. The woman

gracefully walked into the pool, her lithe figure gliding through the luminescent waves.

"You look more presentable now," G'yela said, noting that Zha seemed properly intoxicated for the occasion. She bent slightly and kissed Zha in the forehead, both hands holding each side of Zha's head. "I can feel you have the power I have. Your aura is great. I see why the Angels want you. This is why you must meet them."

G'yela summoned her will, and both her and Zha seemed to fall into a black vortex, flying with its currents. There was no fear, only pure joy from the complete freedom of leaving their bodies, flying through the universe in pure spirit. Through the center of the vortex they went, gathering speed as they flew past the stars, whose lights streaked the blackness, through the belts of asteroids, pass the clouds of nebulas. Behold them is the giant spider ship, and into its great maw they entered. Inside, in the light and in the darkness, they could hear the thousand voices of the Forbidden.

Chapter 15: The Sin of the Father

The battered Mule and her task force hyperspaced shortly outside an Allied base. A Kushan task force awaited them, perhaps in caution and hostility at the presence of a Lord class carrier with a task force of feared Ion Array Frigates and captured Kadeshi Multibeamers. But the Kushan task force quickly deployed into a parade formation. Their weapons powered up, energy and plasma cannons shot into the empty dark spaces, creating a spectacular fireworks display. Fighters paraded, then rolled in various acrobatics.

They are being welcomed as heroes.

But Seejuk Liihra sees no joy in the welcome. He has promised the crew, who in turn, has sworn, for the return of their popular Segura captain and princess. Without Zha, the ship and its crew would be nothing. This would be the end of an Inner House. The ship would be assimilated to the other Houses, the crew disbanded and sworn to a different allegiance. This would also be the end of this ship and its spirt, the end of a place they also call their home.

For that and for their leader, they would be willing to brave the jaws of the Kadeshi again. The danger and the new purpose was what has given the Mule and her task forces a new lease in life. Like Zha, he has worked for these people long enough. Seejuk was born Kushan in blood and oath, but inside, he enjoyed the passion and independent spirit of the Raider. Life on his own Kiithid was structured and disciplined but the Raider life was always improvising, always on the edge. For years, Kushan media had portrayed the Raiders as bandits and demons. What he saw instead was a passionate freedom loving people, more like the old nomadic desert Kiiths in Kharak, with customs and cultures forged by a hard desperate life.

So what did the Bentusi said, that the key must lay in the past, in the change of heart? Even before the Exiles came, bloodshed had reigned throughout the Empire. The Empire has fallen, but wars still continued, one cycle of vengeance after another. The Beast was an aberration. Without it, there was only cautionary peace, and continuous wars with the Taidan Imperialists and their Turanic allies. The Beast broke the Imperialist back, forged the alliance between Hiigara, the Republic and many other outlying kingdoms, and will soon have independent houses of the Raiders to join in. In the long run, what the Beast did was good, because it helped forge friendships and federations that were not possible before.

The Kadeshi? A millennia old cycle of vengeance and retribution has gone full circle. A few millennium worth of exile and isolation has twisted the survivors of a noble people into a race of twisted fanatics. The innocent children of the once great Hiigara were now paying for the sins so perpetuated long ago.

In all this time, people's lives were being destroyed. People were dying. Seejuk had thought himself to be battle hardened. He had seen comrades die, he had seen refugees, he thought had seen them all. This was all part of duty, all part of war and winning. This is all for the species, all for the race. This would all be worth it if you win.

But the exception was, he never had someone truly close to him that died. He was never close to any member of his own Kiithid. He never understood the agony of the Sleepers who awoke to find their loved ones lost. For the first time, he felt that pain. That child Zha, even if she belonged to a different race, she was much like the daughter he never had. She had a mischievous smile when he did her favors. She shuffled in the thin line between irresponsibility and responsibility, and it was his job to rein her in, force her to follow the straight line. He watched her become responsible to her people and her ship, watch and taught her to grow into her stature and position. He was in the unique position to shape a child into a great person for her people. It gave him a sense of fulfillment that he never had.

He had that strange thing a life with the Fleet Command and Intelligence never gave him. A family. The winning would never replace the agony of that loss. There was no purpose, nor joy, in life if the sacrifice was too great. He could never live with himself if she had died. He could never live with himself if he had turned his back on her. The fate of the Crusade, the fate of Hiigara, he could not care less anymore, until he gets her back. By the gods of Kharak, he swore he will get her back.

"Commander," the ensign said. "We are in shuttle range of the base."

"We can park the ship and the frigates here. Our duties and opportunities are specific. We have duty detachments to repair the Mule and the frigates in a round robin order. Second we need to detachments to oversee the construction of new replacement fighters and frigates. We may try to purchase new frigates and fighters as that can lessen the production load. Third, we need to restock on ship parts, supplies and foods. We'll see if we can recruit new pilots. Fourth, those who are not work detail or any of the detachments can take a rest leave. We need crews fresh and rested before we undertake our next journey."

Keep them rested or busy, he thought. The sound of the specific orders seemed to give confidence and purpose to the crew. That's what they all needed now, he thought.

A Taidan shuttle took him to the base. The docking bay had some dignataries waiting for him. It seemed flattering, as he never had the royal treatment before. Fleet Admiral G'aas Paktu was there again. He didn't seem surprised that Admiral G'aas would be there. He gave his salute, and they saluted him back.

"We heard of your exploits. I'm sure you heard this over and over again, but if it were not for your timely distraction and attack on the enemy siege cannon, we would have lost the Kuun-Laan," G'aas said. "We regret the loss of your captain and princess."

"Give the thanks to her," Seejuk said. "She was the one who save the Kuun-Laan. If she did not held the Kadeshi flagship long enough, that cannon would have toasted the Somtaaw's pride and glory."

"We plan to make a small ceremony to present you a medal, Seejuk," Admiral Gaas said. "I'm also pretty convinced even more that you should be captain of the carrier Baal-Hasim."

"I am most thankful for your graciousness, Admiral," Seejuk replied. "But this is not the time. I do not deserve any medal. You are going to have to admit that a Turanic girl just saved all your asses,

and I don't care if that does not sound good with the Hiigaran news networks."

G'aas seemed taken aback and his face grew a big wide grin. "Ha ha, I like your refreshing frankness. You're not that old yet, Seejuk, not old enough to be corrupted into a bureaucrat by the system. If she had taken that bridal offer, she would have a home, I would have an easier time making a non-aggression treaty with the Raiders, and best of all she would still be alive."

"She's not your tool, Admiral. She is what she is, and if she did take that offer, the Kuun-Laan would be space debris by now," Seejuk curtly replied.

"You got me pinned, Commander," G'aas said.

"She is also not dead, Admiral, and we're coming back to get her," Seejuk said.

"Impossible, so who told you that?" Gaas asked.

"The Bentusi," Seejuk answered.

"They really said that?" Gaas asked. "This is crazy. What is their interest on one particular individual? The whole of Hiigara is at peril right now, and I swear by the desert god of Kharak, I think you are planning to rescue her, one tiny individual."

"One individual, that individual, is all that matters to change the entire universe," Seejuk said.

"And how do you plan to do that? One carrier with frigates against motherships protected with major capital ships? How do you expect your limited complement of fighters to go against overwhelming numbers of swarmers? You may be brave but you don't have to be stupid," G'aas said.

"But the Bentusi has been right before. They said she had to be retrieved, for I can't say the reasons for it right now. She can change the future..." Seejuk said.

"The Bentusi had been right before, but they have been wrong," G'aas said. "They are not infallible creatures. Remember during the Beast Wars? They had the power and the technology to flee the Beast. Instead they tried to cowardly flee the Galaxy, and even shoot at us when we tried to change their minds. They gave us the Super Acolyte, for only a brief time. But they had underestimated our ingenuity. Before they destroyed all plans and schematics in the computer banks, we had scanned and photographed into chemical print all the internals of the Super Acolyte, enabling us to develop the Beam Acolyte on our own."

"Commander Seejuk, you cannot risk yourself, that ship of yours and its task forces, and all its crew just for the Bentusi's hunch, that a single individual is alive, and even if that she is alive, you have to consider all those other people you have put on risk," G'aas said.

"But I swore, Admiral, in front of these people, that we would get her back," Seejuk said.

"You weigh the value of your oath, against the hundreds of people your oath has put their lives at stake?" Gaas countered.

"It's the oath of a Kushan, and one of a Liirhra," said Seejuk.

"Don't bring out cultural issues this time," G'aas said, totally unimpressed. "We are short of qualified officers. Your loss can have an effect in our battles to come. I have made the request to Black Star to relinquish you of your duties and move you to the command of the Baal-Hasim."

"You are truly persistent, Admiral," Seejuk said. "Am I really worth it? I think you overrate my capability. Our tactical successes aboard the Mule was due to a partnership. We could not have succeeded if me and the princess Zha Khor worked separately. We succeeded because we are a good team."

"Face it, Seejuk, the girl is gone. You would have to find your teamwork somewhere else, particularly, among your own kind," G'aas said.

"I cannot. Too much is at stake and I can see where this is leading to. Even if we defeat the Kadeshi, Hiigara would be so crippled by our Fleet and personnel losses that it would dramatically affect our capability to survive as a race altogether. That is if we defeat the Kadeshi. But what if we lose? No, we have been spilling our own Hiigaran blood. The Kadeshi are our cousins. We share the bloodline of Hiigara. This is not supposed to be our destinies, that brothers fight brothers. We can stand together in unification," Seejuk said.

"Sometimes you are naive, Seejuk, or if you have a short memory," G'aas said. "Remember that the Kadeshi turned down Karan Sjet's offer. We fought the Taidani Empire tooth and nail to gain back our Homeworld without the Kadeshi's help. We deserve that world for our own, and the Kadeshi can go to hell. Now they want Hiigara back? Isn't that too late? That 'Unclean' business they are having. That does not sound they want to share their world or want to do anything with anyone they call the Unclean. They may be Hiigaran in blood, but they are all psychotic whackos, and I think I would rather share our world with the Taidani before I would want some whacko as my next door neighbor. The Daiamid has already carved up the Hiigaran real estate among the different Kiithid. They are not going to redraw the borders just to accomodate the mentally insane! For the god Sajuuk's sake, there are reports that the Kadeshi are cannibalistic. No Kushan worth their body weight of desert salt would want them stepping on Hiigara itself!"

Seejuk replied. "We had thought that the Taidani were all evil people. We had seen otherwise. We had thought the the Turanics were all bandits. We had seen otherwise. I think the Kadeshi are not like what we think, and we can tell them we are not what they think. I am not a political dove, but I have to believe that there has to be an alternative. I may have to resign my commission then if I have to believe and pursue that path."

"You will do no such thing!" G'aas ordered. "Commander Seejuk, before you made an oath to anyone, you made a bloodoath as a Kushan first, and as an officer of Fleet Command. That oath requires you to defend the common good of all Kushans and Hiigara! The Oath of a Kushan is irrevocable."

"And so I see, I have no option then," Seejuk said, head slightly bowing down.

G'aas replied. "It is not that you have no option. It is that we, myself and all of Hiigara included, have no more option. It is time that we must stand our ground as a single people. I respect the courage of your princess, but she is gone, whether she is captured or dead. Put that behind you. Put the interest of your world in front of you."

"Commander Seejuk, you will still oversee the repair of the Mule and her task forces. All repairs will be on our bill. We will compensate for any loss of fighter, corvette and frigate the Mule lost in that battle by supplying an equivalent from our own. That is quite generous, that the Mule will be given an equivalent exchange of her ship loss with a Kushan or Taidan ship."

"But that will be your last official duties aboard the Mule. The Baal-Hasim is on its way for you to take its place on her. Right now, a great fleet is gathering outside Hiigara, the great might of Hiigara and her Taidan Republican allies. This time we will win, if not by technological superiority then by sheer force and numbers. We have installed a second Nomad Moon near the Mothership which has been upgraded into a satellite fortress. The Kuun-Laan is still in repairs but the Faal-Corum has been upgraded and fitted with a second siege cannon. The Taidani have sent an Empress class carrier with several Qwaar-jet heavy cruisers and smaller carriers. We got the largest assembly of Archangel dreadnaughts and Avatar heavy cruisers since the Beast war."

"The Kadeshi have won their battles, but they will lose the war. Our analysts have projected that the Kadeshi has themselves suffered severe losses among their ships and personnel. Their lucky streak will not go on forever. Our projections have indicated they now have a clear path to Hiigara itself, and we think this will be their next stop and final battle. This time, they will not have the element of surprise. This time they will lose for good."

* * *

Zha could not see the physical presence of the Forbidden and neither can G'yela.

"This is amazing," Zha said.

"The Starfarer can leave their physical bodies and move in space with only their corporeal form," G'yela said. "This is one of the beauties of our kind"

"Our kind?" Zha asked. "Am I not one of Turan and you of Kadesh?"

"Yes, Zha, but we are more than one of Kadesh and of Turan," G'yela said. "The Farers of the Stars have placed their seed among many races. In time, the seeds do manifest in few single individuals. During our battle, I have sensed you, and gave the order that you must be captured. I apologize for that inconvenience. It is so wrong in our destinies that we must fight each other. You must see who you truly are to see what your manifest destiny will be. That is why I brought you here."

Then a voice in the darkness. "It is our great pleasure that we meet you once again, the Siren G'yela. We all see that you brought a companion along. The one we have awaited, the Siren Zha."

Another voice lighted up. "This Zha seemed so young. She is growing, learning her powers, but she

is not there yet."

Then another voice said from the light, "She has not learned the truth yet."

"What truth?" Zha asked. 'Please speak to me. Who are you? What is the Forbidden?"

A voice from the darkness said, "We are members of the Council. We are the Tiamat. We are the Wheel of Fate."

"Who are the Farers? Why, they are our children."

"Eons ago, all the members of the Council were once a single great star faring race. We were all Unbound. Our powers were so great that we span across galaxies. To all inferior races, we were like gods. We dominated this galaxy, and the next and the next."

"But we have our differences, what you may conveniently call an "opinion". In time, our division was our failing. We split into different groups based on our beliefs, and each group became a race to itself. We, the great Tiamat, they the cowardly and hypocritical Bentusi, and there are others. The Council is the only thing that holds us together, the one relic that ties our past as a single people."

"But before we divided, there are among us who saw a new sentient and intelligent species that had arose in a beautiful blue world that no one in all the races have remembered, the forgotten and first homeworld of all the races. They were much like us. Their women were beautiful, like the both of you. Those among us were attracted to them. They committed the first sin above all, and to be in love with the Bound. They were rejected by our people, but they voluntarily accepted their exile. That power of love must be so great that they were willing to sacrifice all, including the immortality of being one of the Unbound. And so they died as mortals, they died as the Bound."

"But their powers--the powers of the Unbound--your powers--still lay with their offspring, like a gene. Their offspring became heroes and legends among the Bound. All of the Unbound have sworn that we will never interfere with the destiny and evolution of the Bound races. But the intermingling of the Bound and the Unbound have broken that directive, and has interfered with the evolution and destiny of all sentient races in the Galaxy."

"So when the Bound people left the first ever Homeworld, they had an unfair advantage. Despite their primitive instruments, there were those among them who were able to sense and sing with the stars and the spaces. They were the first Starfarers. For generations and generations, the Bound people spread quickly throughout the galaxy. Their strength gathered, their technology improved, faster and more powerful than any other sentient species."

"There was greatness among the Bound, but there was great evil among them too. Their trek to the stars were often accompanied with blood, the killing and extinction of other sentient species that denied them of their own destinies. The Bound has become a plague."

"We, the Unbound, saw this as our great mistake. We, the Tiamat, saw an obligation to correct things, to interfere and alter the fate of the Bound. Others like the Bentusi wanted no interference, but they have often gone back of their word, to interfere in behalf of the Bound, sometimes to even

trade with them."

"In time, the Bound too have divided into many races, and with their mortality, they would forget their long past. They would become the Kushan, the Taidan, the Turan, the Kadeshi, and so many races. Even among the Kushan, Turan and Taidan, there are divisions, so you have your Kiithid, your factions, your Houses."

"But the seed of the Starfarers would remain. A seed would blossom and rise in occasion to alter the destinies of a race. We, the Unbound, still love and care for our children, even the Farers of the stars. When the Bentusi detected the thoughts of Karan Sjet in the Kushan mothership, they saw one of their own. She had part of that power, which helped gave her the ability to guide the Mothership and the Kushan fleet back to Hiigara. But you G'yela, and you Zha Khor, you have powers in excess of Karan's. That is why G'yela, you are the Chosen to lead your people, like the way Karan Sjet did for the Kushans."

"What about me?" Zha asked.

A different voice replied. "The power of Turan was on the rise, opening the regions of the Outer Rims and on its way to form an empire on its own if left unchecked. But the Beast was the one external factor even we did not foresee. It altered the manifest destinies in ways we did not anticipate."

"You have a destiny of your own, the Siren Zha. It is not in our place to tell you of this yet. It will come to you. Unlike that of the Siren G'yela, it is not yet time for you. It will unfold to you like a flower, petal by petal. You are discovering this one at a time. This journey you see now, is but another step. It has been fated. Your coming here is part of your destiny."

"For you, G'yela. A darkening, coming storm awaits you. Behold..."

A globe appeared as a hologram. A planet. There were many hundreds of tiny lights around it.

"Hiigara," the voice said. "Look around it. The Kushans and their Taidani allies are building the largest fleets since the first Kushan-Taidan war three millennia ago. We have wanted to warn you. This may be beyond the capabilities of your fleet. This may be your greatest challenge."

"...and I may not live through this..." G'yela sensed and said. "Why now? After all you have led me, and after I have led my own people. All this only to a certain death? We have spilled so much blood, that of our own, and that of our enemy. For what reason? For a planet that has less riches than our Gardens and for one we cannot protect as easily? Was to fulfill this prophecy worth so many lives? Why is this? This thing is all out of control. The Crusade has taken a life of its own. We have so far crushed the enemies in our path but it cannot stay forever like this. Neither will this bloodshed end even with the taking of the Homeworld, as the Taidan will once again wage a continuous war against us."

"We are the Wheel of Fate, the Siren G'yela," a different voice replied. "Your final fate is decided by your own hands. This is not the time for you to falter in your faith. Before you are a cowardly

race hiding in the clouds, pouncing on the innocent and unsuspecting. Like a pack of bandits or thieves. Now, you are the most feared race in the Galaxy. They fear the name of Kadesh. What, you have no pride, Child? Your stagnation is your undoing, a living death. Now your people can truly live in all their rightful glory. Do not forget the spirit and passions of the people you lead, Child. Face your fear and face your death, if it comes to that, great Siren."

G'yela bowed down. Zha could sense her tremble, her fear and sadness even in G'yela's corporeal body. G'yela said, "Once again, I heed your word and I put my trust in the Wheel of Fate. Forgive me for questioning my faith. I know this is what the Great Mother wanted. I will not disappoint her."

"Yessss.... Your Great Mother..." said the voice. "Now begone. You do not have much time. Since you are warned, you can prepare. Go now. Consider this an immense favor from the Tiamat. Such blessings do not come easy from the Tiamat."

G'yela held Zha's hand. "Just follow me again," G'yela said. They lifted like feathers, and Zha again could sense the music of the cosmos, as they ride its melodies once again, away from the immense spider ship, past the starry orbs and rivers of nebula, back to their own bodies in the Pool of Dreams.

* * *

Seejuk met his own officers aboard the Mule as he checked routine repairs in that ship.

"Are we ready now?" Seejuk whispered.

"The Kushans have been patrolling heavily. They would expect a large ship like this to leave. But they would not expect this," the officer said.

"Good," Seejuk said, as he entered the docked Multibeam Frigate, one of those they captured from the Kadeshi.

"We had modified the controls so you could fly it. We installed the mimic holographic generators from the Demon interceptors. Your forces will never detect this, or suspect it," said the officer.

"Very good. As you know, I will take this task alone. Please take care of the Mule and all her crew. I trust in you. I will bring back your Princess. I promise," Seejuk said.

The officer closed the Multibeamer's hatch. Inside Seejuk tested the controls. The frigate was designed to be piloted by a few people, but they have modified the computer system to accomplish much of these tasks automatically, allowing a single pilot to fly the ship.

The Multibeamer slipped out of the Mule's docking bay. Seejuk could detect Kushan and Taidan patrols from the screens. He turned on the mimic generators, and the Multibeamer turned into an asteroid. Once he was in safe distance from the patrols, he turned on the hyperspace generators, and the Multibeamer disappeared into the hyperspace jump gate.

Chapter 16: The Four Warriors

Zha and G'yela woke up in the Pool of Dreams, the Handmaidens supporting their bodies so they will not sink or drown. They were given robes, and Zha was led to a special room. She was not allowed to leave it, but it wasn't a dirty prisoner's cell either.

"Please leave us," G'yela ordered the Handmaidens, who seem to have objected in their facial expressions but gave in to the orders anyway. "I will be safe. The prisoner will do no harm," G'yela said.

"What are you going to do with me now?" Zha asked.

"It is in the desire of the great Angels, the Tiamat and the Council, that I must keep you alive. To execute a Farer would bring great disfavor from all the Angels," G'yela said. "Besides I need you. For the first time I felt a kindred spirit. I hide this great secret from my own people, that I bear the power of a Farer. It is a great burden only another Farer can share."

"I had my father to share this before," Zha said. "I felt he was a Farer too, but not in the way and power like you have. I think he was just starting to realize this power and destiny before the Beast came and took his life. I hoped he died quickly and painlessly, not to be assimilated helplessly into the flesh of the Beast."

"I never knew my father," G'yela said. "He died a long time ago, before I was born. He piloted a Swarmer and died when he fought against a fleet of the Unclean that entered the Gardens. But I harbor no hate against the Unclean for his death. The Unclean is simply the Unclean. They deserved to be vanquished to make way for the Righteous."

"Who told you that?" Zha said. "Was it because your Gods told you this? Please forgive me. I am not the one who should question your beliefs. But who is to say who is right or wrong. There are many races in the galaxy that believe in their own gods, but they do not wipe out other people because of their beliefs. I heard you Kadeshi have stayed in the Nebula---the place you call the Gardens---for a very long time."

"We are the Raiders. We never had a home, a Homeworld or Gardens. We never even had a name to ourselves, until the Taiidani gave us our name after a region in space they encountered at us for the first time. We adopted the name they gave us, Turan, and that place became sort of our official homeland. We were all nameless wanderers, living destitutely, moving from one place in the galaxy to another. We battled every race we met, pirated every ship we can find. We started to become who we are, when as mercenaries for the Taiidan, they had given us the money, the resources and the technology. With that, we built bases, we built ships, and we built a society. It can be said that the first time our people met the Taiidani, was truly the birth of the people feared as the Turanic Raiders. We become proud of that name, and Turan has become our ceremonial home."

"As because we live among the stars, we see other people. In a way, we are alike, because we raid on other peoples, races that were bigger and richer. But we are also different. You confined yourselves in a small space, the place you call the Gardens. For us, we were spread homelessly

across the Galaxy. We know more of the different races than you do, perhaps more than anyone. Everyone has their legends and myths to tell. One cannot say their faith is wrong from another viewpoint. Our people learned that early. We never believed that we should kill just because we do not like another. We fight for a purpose, and often we fight just to survive. So we become mercenaries. We only kill what is required of us and for a due fee."

G'yela smiled. "It is nice that we talk. I am very curious about all these other worlds. Had I been born differently I would like to wander the universe. Maybe in a small ship. Your Raiders belittle death by making it a business. When we fight and when we kill, it is all an offering to our Great Mother. Every battle is a testament to our faith. Every battle is a sacred act."

"But you are fighting a fellow Hiigaran," Zha said. "Is that what your Great Mother told you? I only know that somewhere, somehow, you Kadeshi are tied in fate with the Kushans. You are all descendants of Hiigara, and I think your people also deserve a part of it. I am not a Kushan Kiith'sa to decide policy, but you should try to work it out before settling this in a way that will only lead to the destruction of both races. "

"Even if that is so," G'yela said. "I think it is too late for that. We have spilled their blood, and they have spilled ours. Brothers will fight brothers and sister against sister, for the sake of power and control. Doesn't the Kithid fight among themselves? Doesn't the Taiidani fight among themselves? Doesn't even your people fight among yourselves? We fight for an honorable cause. We fight to make the destiny of our race come true. The Gardens was our home that tended us, and protected us. But it is not our future. Like the child that has grown up, we have to leave the nest."

"Princess Zha of Turan, you have been a most noble warrior and enemy. We are enemies by fate not by choice, but we are kindred by the blood of the Farers that run in our veins. We are born from the Angels, the ones who call themselves the Unbound, the Council, the Forbidden, in all their various forms. I can feel you what is in your heart and mind, and you can feel me. I sense you have a fear."

Zha replied. "I fear you. I fear what you are doing to your people. You cannot fight the entire galaxy forever. One day, you will lose, and you and your people may die from it. I am still a prisoner of this ship, and unless a miracle happens, I will die with it and with you. I sense something from you too. A great emptiness that breeds hate. That will destroy you. That will destroy all of us."

"Believe me when I say I do not want you to die, after I discovered you," Zha said. "If circumstances were different, we can soar the stars together, do what our true destinies as Starfarers should do. I do not agree with the Tiamat, that we are destined to lead one people to ruin. I think we are here to open eyes and ears to the unknown, to go beyond and discover. I think we can change destiny so we can live like the way we want to."

"It all sounds too attractive," G'yela said. "But this is all a dream. The events I have set in motion is like an unstoppable wheel. I may die from what I have sown, but I will accept that as the Mother's will. I admire your spirit, Princess Zha, I can feel the desire and the will of freedom inside you. You soar the stars, doing what you wish, master of the skies and of your own fate. I am the Highest of all, Priestess Mother Superior of Kadesh, and yet I am chained because of what I have wrought."

There is so much blood in my hands now, and more will be spilled later. When I was a child I dreamt I wanted to be free and travel beyond to the stars wherever I choose. All this now, the Crusade, this is all my destiny, but this is not my dream. I envy you, Zha, for being free, when I am bound by my own actions."

G'yela said, "Sometimes when I am alone, I travel through the stars in my spirit. It is only the time I am truly free. Maybe one day I will teach of this ability. You deserve to know this. I ask you to come with me right now." G'yela stood up and Zha followed her. G'yela led Zha for a tour of the ship.

"This ship is the flag ship," G'yela said. "The entire Needleship is build around an ancient ship that first came to the Gardens long ago with another ship. The large ship is nearly of mothership class and is the source of all Kadeshi. We call this the First Ark, and it's sacred name is Khar'nak. The second ship which remains an ancient derelict in the Gardens is a smaller ship, a warship. It protected the First Ark, and because of it, we call it the First Protector. The Protector is the model for all Kadeshi Assault Carrier class. We first encountered the so called Kushan Imperator class carrier, we were struck by the similarity of the Imperators to our Protector class. The second ship was named Khar'desh, and from which our race is named."

"I believe the Kushans were equally struck by the similarities, as well as the similarity of your Khar'nak to their Khar-toba," Zha said, impressed with the knowledge.

"For generations, many ships came to be trapped in the Gardens. Many of these ships were from the Unclean races we know about, whose type we can capture consistently, such as that of the Taiidan oppressor. It is from these ships we acquire not only technology, but also a knowledge of the Outside. These ships are a window beyond our isolation."

"But there are ships that we captured of races we know very little about. Their technology, their relics, their text. We thought that someday the knowledge they have in them may be important, so we kept them in the bowels of the First Ark, hoping that one day, someone could unlock their secrets. We call them the Forgotten Dogma. The Orders preserved them for fear they had messages from the Gods and kept them hidden away from the people."

Their tour led them to the ancient ship structure. While the new Needleship component was clean and ornate, the ancient ship structure was stark and rusted. The air smelled of old incense.

"We are now in the First Ark," G'yela said. A massive icon stood before them, imposing in its presence. The features of the woman casted in the icon seemed alive, with an expression both merciful and all-knowing. "This is the Great Mother, N'ua, the First Mother of the Gardens. She led Khar'nak and the Khar'desh to the Gardens and defeated the Taiidan Oppressors who sought to destroy the first ancestors of our race. Her mortal body is kept under the altar next to her image. Her guiding soul however remains with the Kadeshi forever."

Zha could feel the power and presence of the image. There was always something about religious icons that gave her the creeps.

"She is beautiful, isn't it?" G'yela said, noting Zha's distraction.

"Yes she is," Zha replied.

"Follow me to these chambers," G'yela said.

G'yela led Zha to a small corridgor. The air was thick and putrid. Zha wondered if it was because of the incense, lack of circulation, or was simply the smell of the dead.

G'yela opened a room, dimly lighted. Zha could see various artifacts, mostly ancient. Some relics Zha thought she may be able to identify by race, others eluded her.

G'yela began to explain. "When I was first a novice priestess, I love to come here on my own. I started studying these artifacts. In them, I discovered more about the worlds outside the Gardens. The Orders had painted the Gardens as the only worthy home of the Kadeshi. The Outside was a terrible place, they said. Full of the Oppressors, the Defilers and the Unclean. Wars were always fought, and bloodshed was continous. We were safe by the blessings and protection of the Gardens. The Kadeshi was at peace."

"But in these relics I began to see an Outside that were different from what the Orders had portrayed. One of so many colorful races, each with gods and relics of their own. Everything in the Outside was continually changing, always in a voyage of discovery. Because of these I longed to see the Outside. It is because of this, I discovered the true beginnings and destiny of the Kadeshi. These beginnings and destiny had been so corrupted by the Elders of the Orders. It was my awakening. It was the awakening of the Kadeshi."

"I am now living a course that was set by these relics. When we first set course we were confident. We won many great victories but I see now the combined overwhelming resources of both our Taiidan and Kushan enemies. We may win our battles but it will only take one major defeat to destroy us. I fear that this journely will end in my death, and that of my people. I continually ask the Great Mother for guidance. In occasion, I ask the Angels of the Wheel of Fate as well. If that will be our ultimate sacrifice so be it. But I fear all these relics you see now may be destroyed with this holy war."

"There was a time that I could still find the solace and opportunity to keep studying these relics. But as our Holy War progresses, I find less and less time..."

Zha could sense G'yela's intentions. "So you want me to help you study these relics? You sure you want that? I am one of those Unclean things."

"That was precisely what I need," G'yela said. "I want someone with a clear mind, not someone whose thoughts were already colored by our faith. I needed someone from the Outside who had much experience from traveling all over the Outside. I needed someone who also was a Starfarer, for a Farer could not only sense the stars, but also the spirit that lay in a ship, and the ghosts that haunt their relics. I had used my abilities as a Starfarer to learn these relics. When I hold them, I can somehow feel where they came from, where the great journeys they have traveled. I could not

interpret all the words, but somehow I knew of their meanings, their intentions and their ideas. You could do the same. I will order my Handmaidens and my personal Guards to care and protect you as one of my own."

"I am your prisoner and I have no choice," Zha said. "But at the same time, you honor me with this privilege, and even if I had no option, this would be a wonderful pleasure and opportunity. In the back of her mind, Zha thought, this beats waiting to die in a dirty cell.

Zha said. "But I am not an archeologist. I have a partner who is very good in that, and I learn bits and pieces from him. If only I have his knowhow."

A jewel like orb sitting in a bracelet around G'yela's wrist pulsated with a glow and a soft sound. G'yela held it in front of her eyes, and Zha suspected it was really a communicator of some kind.

"I am being requested to go the bridge. We are in the midst of even greater discoveries. I want you to come with me. I want you to see them too," G'yela said.

"I am with you all the way," Zha said.

The presence of an Outsider in the bridge of a Kadeshi Needleship would have attracted unwanted attention. But G'yela made Zha wear the robes of an acolyte assistant to a priestess, and no one questioned or knew what she was. For the Kadeshi in the bridge, Zha was just another of their Mother Superior's many acolytes.

G'yela began to tell a story.

"Our legends tell us of the White Emperor whom our Great Mother once served. This was at a time when the Outside was a paradise. The White Emperor ruled the Outside with great compassion and wisdom. There was peace, beauty and happiness everywhere. But not all who lived were happy in the Outside. They became the Oppressors, the Defilers, the Destroyers, and the Unclean. They challenged the peace and prosperity of the Celestial Empire. The Unclean defiled themselves and raised monsters to destroy the White Emperor and the Celestial Empire."

"Great battles were fought. There was much death and bloodshed throughout the Celestial Empire. Our First Mother of Kadesh was a great warrior goddess in the service of the White Emperor. But the great monsters and demons that were raised by the Unclean took its toll among the celestial gods and goddesses. "

"So the White Emperor create four great Warriors of immense power and indestructable armor to defeat the monsters and hordes of the Unclean. The Four Warriors held back the forces of the Unclean, and won many battles. But ultimately the sheer numbers of the Unclean prevailed."

"In a great battle, the forces of the White Emperor was destroyed along with many gods and goddesses. Despite their valiant efforts, the Four Warriors sacrificed themselves with the White Emperor The Celestial Empire fell. There was blood and death as the Unclean defiled the Outside. The peaceful people of the First Gardens, the one we all call as Hiigara, were massacred. The Angels that made the Council requested mercy but it fell to deaf ears."

"This was then our Great Mother who survived the Final Battle, led the survivors of the Celestial Empire to journey that found safety in the Gardens. This was the beginning of Kadesh, and our role as Protectors of the Garden."

"Our First Mother made prophecies that one day, the people of Kadesh will return to the First Gardens. They will resurrect the Celestial Empire once again, and the Defilers, the Oppressors and the Unclean will be brought to justice by the Sword of Righteousness. She prophesied that the Four Warriors will return to help the Protectors of Kadesh in their mighty Crusade."

"We have found the bodies of the Four Warriors," G'yela said. She pointed to the screen.

Zha watched. What she was was something familiar, a place she had visited before. It was the Graveyards of Karos.

An officer in the bridge said. "The Guardian Dogs of the grave have been immobilized."

"Good," G'yela said. Zha saw in the screens that a massive gravwell generator has immobilized the Junkyard Salvagers and their autoguns, possibly using an extension field similar to those used with hyperspace inhibitors.

The screens showed four derelict ships, possibly dreadnaughts, Zha guessed from their size. Scaffolding covered the dreadnaughts. There were sparks and lights all around. Zha could easily see that there was a lot of repair activity.

"The Four Warriors are being resurrected, then restored to their full might. They will help us in the battle for Hiigara," G'yela said.

"Behold, the mighty battleships, Khar'kusha, flagship of the White Emperor, and her three sister ships, the Khar'osis, the Khar'ramsis, and the Khar'seth," G'yela said. "We finally have raised the Four Warriors from the dead. We have completed the Sword of Righteousness with which we will retake Hiigara."

Chapter 17: The Purification

The Multibeam Frigate materialized from hyperspace. The Bentusi had told him earlier to go to the Karos Graveyards. It made sense for Seejuk. Connect the points of Kadeshi encounter in a starmap and it seems headed for the Graveyards. But what would they be doing in the graveyards? Both the Taiidani and his own people refuse to send a fleet to engage the Kadeshi in the Graveyards. They fear the Junkyard salvagers. They fear the superstition and myths in the Graveyard. They fear its another its another trap.

The Kiith'sa had met and discussed that the best strategy now would be the one they have not played. Instead of being lured by the Kadeshi into a trap, it's time to lure the Kadeshi into their trap. The bait is Hiigara itself. There is no way the Kadeshi could spring a trap in the very space around the Homeworld. The great Mothership lies in orbit. The Kuun-Laan is undergoing repairs and would be fully operational but minus its siege cannon. The only other siege cannon would be in the Faal-Corum, which had been recently installed. A combined Allied armada was amassing, ready for the final battle.

There were none of the feared Junkyard Salvagers. His scans show an extended gravwell field with a new signature that Seejuk could only guess was another heavily improvised gravwell generator. The field caught the Junkyard Salvagers, and the Salvagers themselves were being salvaged by Kadeshi Grapplers. The Grapplers, based on the Pod capital ship chassis, were immune to the gravwell's field. It was clever for the Kadeshi to do that, to ingeniously apply existing technologies into new creative ways.

The Beamer cruised right into the armada. Seejuk wondered. In every recorded encounter with the Kadeshi fleet, they had not detected the massive Arkships the Mule detected in the first encounter outside the Great Nebula. The Arkships were not here either. Was the Arkships just a momentary figment of their imagination? Impossible, they had recorded those ships with their instruments. Whatever the Kadeshi was going, the Arkships themselves were taking a separate route from their main military fleet. They deliberately avoided all military encounters, and were probably harvesting.

His scans have identified the flagship. Detecting it was easy. It's sheer size separated it from the standard Needleship, and there was this odd structure in the stalk that used to be a Hiigaran transport ship. That transport ship itself was immense, as big as the largest carriers or dreadnaughts, that would suggest the sheer scale of the Kadeshi flagship itself.

What is this? Seejuk studied the scanners. There were four massive structures that appeared like derelicts. They must have been towed by the Grapplers, and a web of scaffolds surround them. The scans showed these derelicts must have been battleships, and the designs may have been early Hiigaran. Seejuk smiled. These ships would have been archeological treasures. The ships were being restored, right down to their weapons.

The Kadeshi must be insane. They were willing to send derelicts against the most modern capital ships of the combined Kushan-Taiidan might. They had brought to the war assault carriers,

destroyers and heavy cruisers that all resembled ancient Hiigaran derelict design, all of them with mixed results. But what amazed him was that these were all signs that the Kadeshi had preserved considerable amount of ancient Hiigaran technology, all probably in the derelict Hiigaran transport ship, and the derelict Hiigaran carrier in the Gardens. They had preserved more of that technology than the Kushans ever did. Seejuk wondered if all this meant that the Kadeshi had a greater claim to the soul of the ancient Hiigarans than the Kushans. Seejuk concluded even if they did, it would all be moot now, as they had turned into a race of psychotics, more deluded and bloodthirsty than the last Taiidani Emperor.

The Bentusi wanted him to come here, and he wanted to save his protege Zha dearly. But inside he had his own selfish reason to come here. Before him, in the midst of the Kadeshi fleet, lie the greatest archeological treasures of Hiigaran history. If he could stop the war, and save the Kadeshi from themselves, he could save these treasures.

The key is in the past, said the Bentusi.

Maybe the key to stopping this war lies in the past that needed to be revealed, thought Seejuk. This is the key to unifying the Kadeshi and the Kushan into a new Hiigaran state.

He had only one life to live. There was only one opportunity left. If the Kadeshi flagship was destroyed, the greatest archeological secrets of ancient Hiigara would be lost with it. In the long run, even the Kushans would suffer from that loss from all that knowledge contained in it. It may even contain the knowledge that leads to the very origins of the Hiigaran race. Knowing the past is the key to the future. The future of the Kushans may lie in the greatest irony of all, in the very ship that came to destroy them.

There was a fear in his heart. There was no turning back ever since he departed on this daring journey alone. He disobeyed orders. Not only was his career over his own people would brand him a traitor now. Small sacrifice to pay to find and save Zha, to stop the genocide between two Hiigaran brothers, to coming aboard the ancient Hiigaran transport that gave birth to the Kadeshi of the Gardens, the sister ship that gave birth to the Kushans of Kharak, and hope to see and discover the greatest secrets of Hiigaran history.

Small sacrifice indeed for the greatest opportunity. History will either revile him as the greatest traitor, or the greatest archeologist.

He turned on the comlink switch and began his broadcast.

* * *

Zha never felt so powerless in her life. She could only stare from the bridge of Khar'nak, as the Kadeshi restored four ancient Hiigaran dreadnaughts. She had no power to affect any outcome in future battles. Worst, she is inside the Kadeshi flagship itself, the Khar'nak, in the wrong side of things.

G'yela stood by her. "We look to recover more artifacts and derelict that we can use to boost our ship

numbers and technology. But the four warrior dreadnaughts are our main prize. In the course of our restoration, we are sending back the relics from those ships to the bowels of this ship. You will help me take a look at them and analyze them."

"Will the four battleships be enough to take on the full pride of the Republican and Kushan fleets?" Zha asked a rhetorical question. G'yela looked down and did not answer.

There was interruption from an officer in the bridge. "We are receiving a signal from a Multibeam Frigate that just hyperspaced. It is one of our ships but there is only one person on board. He claims he is a Kushan envoy and requests a private audience with the leader of the fleet."

"Scan the surrounding area," G'yela ordered. "This can be a trick from the Unclean."

"There is no other ships in the area. The Kushan is alone," said the officer.

"This Unclean has much audacity and courage to venture into our fleet alone. What does he hope to accomplish?" G'yela said. "Order him to stand down. Send Swarmers to intercept and escort him to the flagship. Shoot to destroy if he tries to escape or demonstrate any hostile action."

Zha wondered as to who the person would be. It's about time, she thought, that the Kushans should come to their sense and attempt to settle with the Kadeshi. "Follow me to the dock," G'yela said. "We will face this envoy from the Unclean and examine what deceit the Unclean plans for our demise."

The Mule was a huge carrier by Kushan standards, but the walk from the bridge to the docking bays were much shorter than in this Khar'nak. Zha had seen this ship outside in previous battles and it was huge. But inside it seemed even bigger, grander.

On G'yela's side, Zha watched the Multi Beamer docked. Armed guards surround it, and the hatch was opened. Suddenly her heart jumped with joy.

"It's you! You old lizard, it's you!" Zha jumped in joy and ran to Seejuk. There was a wide smile in Seejuk's mouth and tears from his eyes as he hugged Zha. "At first I thought you were dead," he said to Zha. "I thought you were dead. The Bentusi said you were alive, and wanted me to come here to save you, to save the Kadeshi from themselves. Sounds crazy huh, but there is no choice left. I need to talk to the top leader or the council of the Kadeshi themselves to stop this madness."

"She is right here. She saved me from execution," Zha said.

"She?" Seejuk asked.

"I would like you to meet the Highest Priestess of Kadesh, the Mother Superior G'yela," Zha said. She pointed to a young woman wearing glittering robes. Seejuk was struck with her appearance. This G'yela, this Priestess was only a young girl, still in her late teens and not much older than Zha herself. He had never seen Kadeshi alive before, only visualized that Kadeshi women would be like Kushan women. But this G'yela was strikingly beautiful by any standard. Long silvery hair framed a pale handsome graceful face that seemed serene, and she had a tall lithe figure with an equally

graceful stance. She had a radiance around her, an aura or charisma whatever is it called. Men can be drawn to her, but it was not a sexual attraction, rather the way a cult leader draws people.

Seejuk found it hard to believe that this beautiful girl had become the greatest terror of the Galaxy. She was not the wrinkled, corrupt Taidaii tyrant of an Emperor; she was not the monster that was the Beast. But this fatal beauty had a power over people that was more dangerous than the last Emperor or the Beast.

The guards rushed to him, knocking Zha down, and forced Seejuk to kneel. "You Unclean Filth," the leader of the Guards said. "You are not worthy to cast your eyes on our Holiness! How dare you that you come onboard the most sacred of ships! You will be sacrificed in the altar of the Great Mother, before your flesh and bones will be fed to the Recycler!"

Zha ran, then kneeled and kowtowed in front of G'yela, pleading for Seejuk's life. "Please your Holiness, spare this Kushan. He is my closest friend, the second in command of my ship. Do not punish him for his loyalties...." For Seejuk the sight was sad for a princess with the stature of Zha to plead and beg for his very life.

"He has come for an audience with you. The Bentusi, the Unbound, sent him with a message for you. They too are members of the Council, Angels as you speak of," Zha said. "Besides, he is the shipmate I told you about. He is trained to study the ancient tongues and relics. His coming here is not by coincidence. I think his coming here is by fate. That cannot be ignored. His coming here is to help us."

G'yela's eyes perked. She was uninterested at first, but Zha had a point.

"There will be no execution," G'yela ordered the guards. "Release him, but make sure he had no weapons." The guards let Seejuk stand up, and checked his uniform for any deadly implements. There was none.

"Come here, disciple of the Unclean," G'yela ordered. Seejuk brushed aside his uniform, then walked with dignity to G'yela and bowed before her.

"I am Commander Seejuk Liirhra of Hiigaran Fleet Command, and yes what she said is true. I work as second in command and adviser to the Princess Zha and her ship, the carrier Arak-Na, also known as the Mule. I am also a member of Hiigaran Fleet Intelligence, and my speciality is in engineering, archeology and ancient technologies. Me and Zha here were in the business of salvaging ships, including ancient artifacts. We have traveled to many areas of the Galaxy and discovered much."

G'yela nodded. She seemed impressed with the man. "I could sense the truth in you," she said. "You are sincere in what you said. I feel you have great, great knowledge within you. The gods have indeed sent you for a purpose. They have answered my prayers to help me in my work. Only those who have traveled much of the Outside can understand the secrets of the sacred relics of Kadash, secrets that have eluded generations of the Orders. Come all, and you too, Kushan, follow me to the hull of the Sacred Ark. Please call my Handmaidens to prepare the necessary Purification ceremony."

"Purification?" Seejuk wondered.

"Yes, Unclean Kushan. We shall prepare you and Zha to be made worthy in the sight and the work of the Great Mother. This is the final step. For generations, the Protectors of the Gardens captured the Unclean from the Outside. Many were sacrificed and recycled, but those that were deemed worthy were made to join as one with the Kadeshi. To make them clean again, you must undergo the rite of Purification. Your doubts must be cleansed, your faith strengthened."

"It won't get me killed, won't it?" Seejuk asked.

"No it won't. Those who failed will become the insane," G'yela answered.

"Now, that's quite a relief," Seejuk laughed.

"Those who come out of it will be stronger in spirit and heart," G'yela said.

Seejuk took a moment to absorb where he was. The excitement in the meeting had momentarily eclipsed the significance of the place he was now. He, Seejuk Liirhra, was now in the bowels of the biggest, baddest Kadeshi Needleship. He looked around him trying to absorb all the impressive engineering details. The construction of the Needleship was so elegant and simple in its design. It is build around a central cylindrical tube that serves as both the housing for the ship's engines and the generators for the hyperspace inhibitors.

As they walked, Seejuk asked. "Your Holiness, I have come to you humbly to see what we can do to stop this war. Regardless of what you think we are, we Kushans are your Hiigaran brothers and sisters. We share the same past and we can share the same future."

"Don't you think I know that?" G'yela said. "I already sensed that in you. But our destinies have already been written. Brother will fight brother, sister against sister. The wheel has turned and it cannot be stopped. But with your help we can save some tings."

As they walked, Seejuk could sense the awe within himself as he realized he had passed through the modern section of the Needleship and into the old section that was the ancient Hiigaran transport. Is this, could it be? Along with the musty smells of incense, the dry smell of poorly ventilated air, or rusting metal, and even decayed flesh, ah this is the most fragrant odor he ever smelled, the smell of the ancient history of Hiigara. He took one deep whiff.

"What are you doing," Zha wondered.

"Nothing, nothing," Seejuk uttered.

They entered what seemed to be its great hall. The giant image of the Great Mother, N'ua greeted him with its soulful penetrating eyes. Seejuk shivered at the stare of it.

The Handmaidens gave them some pale white robes. G'yela showed them the purpose the robes. "The robes represent the most simplest basic nature of all life. In the end, when stripped of our titles and ranks, the things our society has strapped into our beings, we return to the essence of things. In

the end, we are all nothing. We are not commanders, we are not priestesses, we are not princesses. We are plain living beings among the billions in the cosmos. In the end, we are only left with our soul.

Seejuk and Zha were allowed to change privately to the robes. When they came out, Seejuk uttered, "This is most interesting. I am excited to see what's next." His middle aged figure didn't seem to go well with the robes, while the robes flowed with Zha's small nubile figure.

"How do I look?" Zha asked.

"I guess much better than me, I suppose," Seejuk replied.

The Handmaidens lit candles and burned incense. They presented G'yela with a sharp knife, a shiny metal cup, and three bottles filled with some liquid.

G'yela took the knife and raised it in the air in front of the image of the Mother, chanting an ancient hymn. She turned around to face Seejuk and Zha.

"She's not going to stab me with that, I suppose," Seejuk whispered.

"Just shut up," Zha replied, much more serious and intent on the ceremony.

"Give me your left hands," G'yela proclaimed. Zha and Seejuk raised their left hands. G'yela took Zha's left hand first, and quickly made a cut across the palm using the knife. "Eeeow!" exclaimed Zha, before she tried to curb her expression quickly. G'yela then put Zha's hand over the cup, and let blood flow into it. After it reached a certain amount, G'yela wrapped Zha's hand to curtail the bleeding.

"Doesn't seem bad," Seejuk whispered. G'yela did likewise on Seejuk's hand, mixing both their blood into the cup. He showed no pain.

G'yela raised the cup to the giant icon of the Mother. "Witness the blood of those are Unclean who are about to be purified so they may be worthy of Your Service, Great Mother." She lowered the cup, and placed some liquid to mix with the blood. With a burning incense stick, she lit the contents of the cup, and a cool flame rose from it.

G'yela then took two bottles, and offered it to Zha and Seejuk. "You must drink this. As your blood is offered to the Mother, Her Blood is offered to you."

Zha looked at the contents of the bottle and drank it quickly. It seemed sweet and refreshing. Seejuk was more cautious, smelling the liquid. He noted there was something hallucogenic about the drink, but---what the heck---bottoms up!

For a few seconds, nothing was happening. Then Zha's eyelids began to quiver. She smiled as she fell limp into the floor. Seejuk could not seem to get a hold of himself. Seconds later, he became dizzy, his blood rushed to his brain, his vision blurred. He tried to say something before he passed out.

There was massive panic throughout the Outpost. Zha ran out to the corridors. She was wearing only her nightgown and clutching tightly her stuffed animal. The red alarms were sounding everywhere. Soldiers were running around.

"Daddy, Daddy," she cried. "Where are you?" There was panic in her voice.

A tall and handsome man lifted her up and hugged her. He had a strong frame and body, and the touch of it gave Zha a sense of warmth and security. "There you are, my daughter," her father said. "You should not be running away like that."

He had his flight suit on. "What's going on?" Zha asked.

"The base is under attack. We need to get you into safety!" Zerun urged. "I am going to put you in the Arak-Na, which will put you in a safe place."

"But what about you, Daddy?" Zha asked. "What about you?"

"I will be alright, I promise. We have to fight this monster that has come to destroy us. I will lead our forces against the monster in the carrier Horak-Na. I will slay the monster for you, and everything will be alright. I promise. Be Daddy's strong little girl," Zerun said.

Zerun led Zha to the docking bay of the Outpost. He gave her a long kiss in the cheek, and Zha hugged him back, tears in her face. "You promise, Daddy, you come back for me."

"I will," he said.

He gave her a strong manly hug as he placed her in the shuttle. As the doors closed, he gave her his thumbs up and shouted, "We Raiders, we always kick ass!"

She gave her thumbs up and waved goodbye. She could hear the soldiers urging her father, and saw him for the last time running to the other shuttles, no doubt bringing him to the carrier Horak-Na to fight the evil monster.

As the shuttle doors opened in the Arak-Na, Zha quickly ran to the nearest window to watch the battle.

What she saw was the most horrible thing she ever saw in her life.

A huge dark ship, ugly and limbs so menacing with evil, was coming towards them. She heard cries around her. "The Beast Mothership! It is coming for us!" There were screams everywhere.

Big black and red ships were opening fire at the Outpost, and she watched fire raged in the place she called home. The Ion array frigates tried to frantically defend the Outpost, beams lancing like spears against the unstoppable enemy. Brigands launch their thin wispy trails of missiles. Bandit interceptors tangled with the red fighters.

The Beast ship loomed over the flaming outpost, plasma cannons and ion beams lancing at its prey. Zha watched as her home exploded into a million balls of fire. Not even the explosion of the Outpost could not stop the massive Beast mothership, which had now turned for the Arak-Na.

The Arak-Na carried all the families of the Raider pilots that lived on the Outpost. Now, brother, son, sister, daughter, mother and father of these families, in the Bandit fighters, the Ion Array frigates, the Thief and Brigand corvettes will fight desperately to their families in the Arak-Na from the Beast.

The Arak-Na shuddered as plasma bombs and ion beams hit her. Zha joined the screams of many as the Monster ship approaches, firing at their ship. The infection beam smashed at the corner of the ship, and the captain of the Arak-Na ordered execution of the Naar Directive. Plasma was quickly vented to the infected areas, even if families were there.

The Raider frigates and fighters destroyed many of the smaller black and red ships. Everytime a monster ship blew, Zha cheered. Zha saw the other carrier, the Horak-Na, her father's ship. She waved at it, even though she knew her father would not see her doing that.

But as she watched her father's ship, she knew what it was trying to do. It was putting itself between the attacking Beast ship. She watched in horror as the Beast ship fired its evil beam on an ion array frigate, and it turned black and red like the other evil ships.

Beams from the Horak-Na destroyed a Beast frigate, and it has trained its weapons against the big monstership itself. But the monstership loomed over her father's ship. She saw the smaller Raider ships deliberately crash against the big evil ship but to no avail. Attacks from the other evil ships destroyed two Ion Array frigates right in her eyes.

She tried to cheer for her father to win the battle. Twin beams lanced out from the Horak-Na into the monster, and the beams were joined by those from other Ion Array frigates that have clustered around Horak-Na.

Then came the most terrible moment of her life. Evil beams from the Monster ship hit her father's carrier, and the black and red covered it, as the ship lit like a torch, burning to stop the evil plague. During the battle, she could sense her father's presence, like the way she could sense the stars and the cosmic winds, but now his presence was gone. The carrier disappeared in a blinding flash.

The stuffed animal she had been clutching tightly dropped to the floor. She dropped to her knees, tears flowing out of her eyes, her lips in bewildered silence, the stars collapsing around her, her entire world gone...

She opened her eyes, and G'yela was there. Her body and robes was wet in sweat. The Beast had gone long ago. Her father was gone long ago. But the pain still remained.

Zha watched G'yela's steely eyes. Then Zha curled her body up and cried uncontrollably in G'yela's lap.

Chapter 18: The Children of the Unbound

Was this but a dream?

The waves licked his toes as the soles of his feet grind the sand. The sea was grey, and Seejuk Liirhra knew where he was.

Here, long ago, Majiir Paktu ended the First Migration and changed Kharakian history for ever. Here he stood, in the shores of the great Majiirian sea.

On the sky above, like a new moon, orbits the Mothership.

He too was about to embark on his own great journey. As a child he saw the Mothership lit the sky like a new moon, and wondered where it would go and how it would be like. He built his own model ships, then lit a propellant under them to see them rush into the sky. He developed an interest in archeology and planned pilgrimages to the fabled Somtaaw temples in the Khontala mountains. He dreamed to see the legendary Star Metal Scrolls of the Somtaaw, which he was convinced was an alien artifact. He had been one of the most promising students in the Academy, specializing in ship engineering and archeology. One day, he will fly with the Mothership, as one of the precious few chosen for the journey.

His body was so much lighter now. His arms leaner but seem to have greater strength. Why does he feel like this? Why does he feel with so much energy now? He was in the body of young man about to begin his journey in life. The waves sang as they lapped the shores.

He thought he was much older, in a place so much farther away. He could not remember where that place and why. He thought that he had a companion, a girl, but again he could not remember who she was or what. Why does he think like this? Were these all dreams?

This, he thought, it all seemed real, so beautiful. He didn't want to leave it. He stripped himself down and dove to the waters. The water was so cool and refreshing, and underneath teemed with strange and wonderful creatures. His breath ran out and he broke the surface, propelled by his muscular arms.

"Seejuk!" A girl's voice shouted. Her voice was like music.

No, it was not the girl he thought he had vaguely dreamt. It was a girl in his past, one he thought who died and he would never see again. Why was he thinking like this again? She is here now, she is true, she is flesh and blood.

Hiraa Manaan.

"Hiraa! I am over here," Seejuk shouted to her, waving for her to go into the waters with him. Hiraa was a beautiful creature. Her skin was tanned like a desert nomad, but the color of her short hair was light and so were her eyes. She had a figure that was both lean and strong, and yet curved so smoothly. She dropped her robes as she ran, and her body sliced into the sea.

Their nude bodies met in an embrace, their lips against each other. Oh how much he missed her. He carried her with his arms and lay her back on the beach, still kissing. Their bodies rolling in the soft sand, washed by the waves, they made love for hours.

When it was all over, he stared at her face, trying to burn that image in his mind so he will never forget.

"I have some good news to tell you," Seejuk said. "I have been put in the Gold list for the Mothership!"

"I am so proud of you," Hiraa hesitantly said.

"Is there something wrong?" Seejuk asked.

Hiraa shook her arms, exasperated. "You are so thick! What is going to become of us? I'm sorry. I really should be happy for you. Not anyone gets to fly out into the stars. But I don't think I can meet another one like you, Seejuk."

"Nor will I, Hiraa. I love you very much, Hiraa. Let's do this. Let's get married before I go. We can have some time together before that."

Hiraa shook her head. "If you change your marital status now, they may kick you off the list. I'm sorry Seejuk. Save the thought when you come back. How long did you say the journey will be?"

"About one to two years, Hiraa. I may be sleeping most of the time in cryogenic status."

"One to two years?" Hiraa asked, one eye lifting its brow. "Are you going to miss me very much?"

"Oh yes, my dear Hiraa.."

"We can seal our love in marriage after you come back, Seejuk. By that time, you will be a big hero. You will have discovered the true origin of our peoples and a permanent place in history. I will have a husband to be proud of."

Hiraa placed her hands behind her neck and removed her necklace. She showed the gemstone on the end of the necklace to Seejuk. "On the end of it is a black gemstone said to from the mountains of Khontala where the sacred temples of the god Sajuuk, Jaakul, and the goddess Kharak lie. It has been with our family for generations. I want you to have this to remember me by. This will seal our bond as lovers and soulmates forever."

Hiraa placed the necklace on Seejuk's neck. Seejuk threw her down on her back again, his hands sensuously touching the curves of her body, caressing her smooth skin and soft flesh. The sun was starting to set; the grey waters lit in red fire. He wanted to make love to her again, and she invited him with a long kiss in his mouth.

Suddenly he woke up. The white lights were blinding, and his pale black and bluish body was cold, cold...cold. The nurses helped him lift his naked body from the cryogenic capsule and placed a robe

over him. "Welcome to Hiigara, Sleeper."

"Am I? Am I really here, in the Homeworld?" Seejuk asked.

"Yes you are," the nurse said. "There are so many things that have happened since you were asleep. The staff will brief you as soon as you are ready."

When they deemed he was both physically and mentally ready, he was brought with all the other waking Sleepers into a room. There they were briefed what happened.

It can't be, Seejuk thought. His voice and thoughts were drowned in the mass of anguished voices faced with the horrible reality that their loved ones, their families, their homes, everything they knew, were destroyed in the firestorm over Kharak.

Despite the objections of the staff, he quickly ran out of the room as fast as his still feeble legs could carry him. He stumbled, got up and ran, stumbled again but kept going. He didn't know where he was going and couldn't care. His family, his home...and Hiraa. Oh, not Hiraa! His dearest Hiraa...

He fell for the final time, tears streaming down his eyes. As he clutched the area near his heart, he felt something. It was the necklace, with the black gemstone from the Khontala mountains. Feeling it, he cried even more. The staff rushed down the corridor to retrieve him.

"Wake up, wake up!"

Seejuk saw a girl's face amidst his teary eyes. "Hinaa? Is that you?"

"No! It's me, Zha! You have been shouting this Hinaa's name for hours! It was getting annoying frankly. Who is this Hinaa?"

Seejuk took moments to regain his senses. "She's none of your business, Zha. Later I may tell you, but this is not the time. Let us just say she used to be a lady I liked a very much a long time ago and got a lot more class than you..."

"Ohhh...sounds like I touched something personal here," Zha said. "How come I never heard of her for all this time?"

"Somehow I thought I had forgotten her," Seejuk said. "Plus my life is not an open book for you teenagers to nose around."

G'yela's serene face watched over them. "It looks like you passed the rite. So many have become insane for it. I would have to congratulate you. You have faced your greatest pain and fear once again, the pain that still resides in your hearts. This is the rite of Cleansing, to cleanse your hearts."

"That is one way to put it. I wish you could have told us ahead. By Sajuuk's name, that is one hell of an experience. Does it mean, when we passed, we're honorable Kadeshi now?" Seejuk said.

"You can put it that way," G'yela said. "It also means you have become worthy to be in the lowest rank of the Orders, the rank of Acolyte. It is the rank needed for you to be able to do the studies on

the relics I require, to maintain and protect them. One final thing and you are done. You will now be required to recite the solemn oath as the Protectors of the Mother."

Seejuk and Zha followed G'yela's words as she recited the pledge. They were sworn to protect the Mother and all her sacred relics, and uphold Her teachings and principles.

"We have prepared special quarters in this sacred Ark for you two to stay and accomplish your scholarly work," G'yela said. "The Handmaidens shall lead you to your new quarters. The Salvagers will also bring new relics from the Graveyard ships and the four derelict warrior dreadnaughts for you to study. I will expect your results from time to time."

"I have not been stoned like this," Seejuk said. "What do you have in this Mother's Blood?"

"Secrets that the Kadeshi have kept for generations," G'yela said. "In the millennia, some of the ships that became trapped in the Gardens were either farm ships, or carried agricultural produce. We have learned to harness what we captured, and we developed agricultural facilities in the arkships and made farm ships of our own. The drug was extracted from a plant whose ultimate origins in the Outside we do not know."

"By Sajuuk's name, that is one potent drug," Seejuk said. He noted that the effects were not fully over.

"I still feel stoned..." Zha said. She seemed to have problems maintaining her balance. Seejuk noted that she had a much smaller and frail body mass and a younger age with more active hormones. The drug may have a stronger, more prevailing effect on her.

"I have spent enough time here and other issues await me now." She gracefully left with two of the Handmaidens.

As they walked to the new quarters, Zha broke down, fell to the floor and sob uncontrollably. "This happens," one of the Handmaidens said. "The effects of the Rite sometimes linger."

"Well, it's lingering pretty strong now," Seejuk observed. "She's having a complete relapse." Seejuk tried slapping Zha's face. "It is better to carry her first to her quarters," the Handmaiden said.

Seejuk lifted Zha, her face over his shoulder, and like a primate, Zha wrapped her arms around Seejuk's neck in a tight squeeze. She was still crying heavily, and her tears were soaking his robe. In her tight hug, Seejuk felt a sharp metallic pain in his chest as she pressed her chest against him. He ran his hand to his chest, and felt the necklace he had carried for all this time. His fingers followed the chain to the orb at its end, and he grasped the black gemstone from Khontala.

"Are you alright now? Seejuk asked.

Zha shook her head, running her fingers in her hair. "I think so. That was one powerful potion. If we can get the formula for that..."

"And run afoul with the law enforcement of thousands of habitable worlds? No thank you," Seejuk retorted.

"Just a thought, okay, forget it," Zha said.

Seejuk shook his head and buried it in the tons of work in front of a crude terminal. There were various small relics in his desk which he would occasionally lift in front of the light to better examine them. "Speaking of thoughts, you should start to get to work now, Zha. The stuff they have been keeping here in this ship they call the Khar'nak has to be one of the greatest archeological collections in the entire galaxy. This ship is practically a museum itself. It houses not only a lot of Hiigaran Pre-Exile artifacts, but ancient relics that may be long to the Taiidan and other races as well. There are things that even defy our known catalog of races. For generations, the Kadeshi trapped ships that may have come from all over the galaxy, and then kept what they perceive are the valuable and interesting things they would find in those ships."

"G'yela is one smart person. She would have known that these relics defy interpretation by the best scholars of Kadesh. Only one from Outside of their Gardens could be able to put these relics in their right historical and racial context. There is another thing. The Orders have deliberately hid them away from any Kadeshi, because many of the things here could have profound effects on their religion. Some of the things here could easily lay basis for heresies and with it, civil wars. Thus no scholars or their own scientists would dare touch them. We are allowed to study them simply because we are not Kadeshi. We are not expected to go out and spew the things we find and alter their religion when we discover something. Yet for generations, the Orders collected and kept these relics. Why? It seems that they are themselves fearful of them. They were afraid that these relics came from the gods themselves and destroying them would incur some wrath. So they kept them, afraid to incur divine wrath yet unable to understand them."

"Wonderful analysis, Seejuk," Zha said. "I didn't say this before but I deeply appreciate you coming to my rescue here. I hope you have a plan to get us out of here."

"To confess to you, Zha, I don't," Seejuk replied. "The Kadeshi and the Kushan races are in a collision course that may eventually destroy each other. If I escape, I am afraid I won't have a home to escape to. We have to see this to the end. We have to change that collision course."

"How do you propose to that?" Zha asked.

"Plan B---We will improvise something," Seejuk replied.

"By your god Sajuuk's name, I oughta---," Zha shook her fists. A thought came to her mind. Seejuk would never want to leave this "museum". All he ever worked for when he wandered the galaxy in the mule...all he ever dreamt...they were all right here, in a single collected place. No one would turn their back when the treasures of history were dumped right in front of their laps. Instead of getting out, he would try to save them anyway he can.

That leaves her, somehow stuck, with no conceivable way of escape. She sighed.

Seejuk seemed concentrated on his work. But he couldn't "feel" the relics like she could. The things here, they still echo the cosmic winds they rode on and the ghosts of the people who use them. If she had the time, she would want to feel them. Why does she feel they're running out of time? Seejuk was right; the place is a treasurehouse, the sensations and the music of an entire galaxy collected.

"Our high priestess G'yela seemed fond of collecting and studying items pertaining to a certain theme," Seejuk suddenly intervened. "They pertain to an ancient race of voyagers---"

Zha interrupted. "---the Starfarers, I know. The Tiamat---one of the Unbound---revealed them to us. Before there were the Raiders, the Hiigaran and the Taiidan, before there were races that traveled the stars, there was the Unbound. They soared the cosmic winds and the vast spaces of the stars. Until they came to a planet---the one they say is the real but forgotten, the First Homeworld, of all races. They fell in love with the beautiful women they saw in that world, and intermingled with them. They committed the cardinal sin and broke the directive that the Unbound observed for generations. They were banished and became one with the Bound and mortal."

"But their children would have the abilities to sense and travel the stars. As the race of the First Homeworld traveled to the stars, the Children spearheaded the expansion to the stars. They would become the Starfarers. In time, the primal race would split into different races. The Unbound as well, would become many---the Bentusi, the Tiamat---they are just two of the many races of the Unbound. The Unbound has continued to watch over the children."

"Tiamat?" Seejuk asked.

"That is what the name they revealed to me and G'yela," Zha replied.

Seejuk explained. "The Bentusi has been the most encountered of all the Unbound you speak of. In fact, we had believed the Bentusi is the Unbound, with no idea that there are other races of the Unbound as well. After the Homeworld wars, we had access to records and histories from Taiidan allies. It is revealed that there is another mysterious race, that like the Bentusi, had been playing strings with all known races. The records reveal an incomplete name---"

"T-MAT."

"The Taiidani consider them to be evil. This is wonderful, and you have provided their complete name," Seejuk said. "You have encountered the T-Mat, or Tiamat, as we shall call them now?"

"It is hard to explain," Zha observed.

"Try me," Seejuk replied.

"Before you came onboard, me and G'yela seemed to have met the Tiamat through spiritual projection. It seemed our spirits traveled through space to meet them. I know it sounds incredible..." Zha said.

"Why does it seem incredible?" Seejuk said. "There were myths that with the ancient Somtaaw, the priestesses of the ancient Oracle of Tala were said be able to transcend their spirits beyond their bodies, enabling them to talk with the gods and commune with nature not possible with their physical bodies. I've heard this with other myths of other races. Unlike some scholars, I keep an open mind to all possibilities, something we need now as we are faced with the greatest rush of discoveries. Did you see anything about the Tiamat?"

"Only voices," Zha said.

"Nobody ever saw a real Bentusi too, so I am not surprised about that either," Seejuk said. "If they were able to mingle with human form long ago, they must have had human bodies at a time, but were capable of transcending their senses and spirits from their bodies. I think this is what they mean by the Unbound. Not only have they become enigmatic and nomadic, but they are capable of transcending their physical bodies. After the Homeworld Wars, the scientist Baa'mut S'jet wrote that our present form we are not truly interstellar races as we are physically bound to our bodies and its worldly requirements. We are still bound to Homeworlds. The next stage of evolution would be a true interstellar lifeform, unbound from the requirements of planetary worlds, adapted to live in interstellar space. That is what he hypothesized the Unbound was. They have approached that stage of evolution."

"Zha, you said the Unbound watches over their children?"

"Yes," Zha replied. "The Starfarers are the Children of the Unbound. Me and G'yela are Children of the Unbound. Does it sound incredible?"

"When you disappeared after that battle, we thought you were dead," Seejuk said. "Until the Bentusi came and told us to look for you. It was they who told me to come to the Graveyards. The Bentusi would not do this over a single individual unless for the reason you said, that they care for the Farers they call their Children."

Seejuk flashed some text screens in his monitor. "G'yela knows this too. She left her own studies completely open for us to look at, as if she wanted to. There is something about her---maybe the religious part in her---that requires her to seek the ultimate truth, no matter where it leads. She has been researching, looking for clues, where the First Homeworld was, and if there, is still such a thing as the First Race as she calls them, the ones who provided the human half of the Starfarers. It is not Hiigara, and this is a quest that will lead way beyond the boundaries we know."

"I also have been find out a lot of things too. It looks like the Unbound have been poking their nose into the Kadeshi affairs. Look here, this looks like Bentusi text, which was introduced to Kushan eyes during the Homeworld Wars. The Bentusi text was for guess what? The Swarmer schematics. No wonder there is some similarity between them and the Acolytes, the most important feature being the spinal support structure that ends with a tail behind the craft. That was why it was easy adapting the Bentusi drives on the Swarmers. Now these text here are similar to Bentusi, but are not Bentusi. Who could have they been?"

Zha looked at the text, and there was an instant sense of familiarity. "I have a strong feeling this is the Tiamat."

"Could be, could be..." Seejuk commented. "Whoever gave mini ion beam, hyperspace inhibition and Needleship construction was one of the Unbound, but it wasn't Bentusi, who would never pass weapons technology. I would go with your suggestion that it was your Tiamat."

"They seem very interested on Kadeshi affairs, from what I recall with our strange meeting," Zha said. "You seem to find out a lot. What about the Multibeam frigates?"

"Ancient Hiigaran design, not much different from Kushan corvettes, only much larger. They went and fitted the mini ion beam cannons where the turrets are supposed to be," Seejuk said. "The Pods came from yet another race whose ships got trapped in the Nebula much later."

"That's not all, Zha," Seejuk added. "There was something I found out about their Great Mother. It was something the Orders have suspected and kept hidden away from the Kadeshi people. When they encountered the Unclean Kushan for the first time, that something, that fear was revived. When the Kushan fleet offered the Kadeshi to join them in their odyssey to the Homeworld, the Kadeshi refused and attacked them instead, on clear explicit orders from the top Kadeshi religious order. Do you know why? "It was something I suspect for sometime now. This is something I have been digging up in the relics and interpretation of their texts."

"The Great Mother is a Hiigaran."

3000 years ago...

They squirmed in the sheets, their naked bodies tied in tight embrace. In the climax of his passion, he came between her thighs, as her legs clutched his back, eagerly wanting his seed.

"Captain Jakuul Pangu't, where do you learn to make love like that?" asked the woman. Jakuul turned to her, eyed her soft streamlined curves that run from her head to toe, then turned to her eyes and flowing hair.

"Well Commander N'ua Helan, how did you become to be so good?" he told her. "One of these days, our encounters can be embarrassing if the people find out. You are commander of the fleet and I'm one of the captains. That's kind of a conflict of interest, won't it?"

"Proud Captain of the Khar'toba," she said. "If you are in uniform and married, that will be kind of a conflict. But we're not right now. We are man and woman. Who knows what our future will be? If we die tomorrow, at least we find some love and desire today. If we live tomorrow, then we're doing our duties to procreate in the name of the race." She kissed his chest.

"That's a funny way of putting it, N'ua," Jakuul said. "But your commander, and I follow."

Their solitude was interrupted as N'ua's portable comlink flashed. "I guess your job is never done,

Commander," Jakuul said.

"Your too, Captain," N'ua said. "This is a priority red signal we have here. Possible enemy ships. I better hurry." Her naked bodysilhouetted from the background light, she quickly put on her uniform. "Coming right away," she uttered to the com link.

She took the shuttle from the Khar'toba to the carrier Khar'desh. In the docking bay, the officer await her.

"We detected a few Taiidan frigates on patrol," said the officer. "But we got the new frigates ready."

"Excellent," N'ua said. The new frigates were based on current Hiigaran frigate design, simple and functional, its curved angular surfaces designed for maximum deflection of enemy fire.

"And the new fighters?" N'ua asked again.

"They're ready too, but I wasn't satisfied with aspects about their fuel range," said the officer.

"Range is not important for defensive purposes. Speed of interception and sheer firepower is," N'ua retorted. "I will be in the bridge and get ready to launch them!"

The officer saluted, as N'ua ran for the bridge. On the bridge, she watched the screens, as the ship captain notified her of the progress of the enemy frigates.

"If they're not stopped, they would engage us," he said.

"Everyone is tired of Taiidani harassment. It's time to pay them back, courtesy of the new technology given to us by the Council. Launch the new frigates and fighters now. Intercept and destroy the enemy fleet. Terminate with prejudice," N'ua ordered. "It's time to pay them back."

The first ever Swarmers launched from the docking bay of the Khar'desh, as the Khar'toba and the Khar'nak fell into rear formation of the last Hiigaran functional major warship still in existence. Then the new Multibeam frigates took formation, and headed out.

N'ua watched the screens eagerly. The Taiidan frigate fleet never knew what hit them as the Swarmers went for the first pass. The Swarmers maneuvered for a second attack run on maximum boost, and the enemy turrets were not fast enough to keep their aim up. The cannons from the Swarmers peppered the armor away from the enemy frigates, and after a few attack runs, the Swarmers disappeared, heading back to the Khar'desh to refuel.

The surprise shock attack left the enemy weakened and in disarray. Then coming out from the edges of sensor screens were frigates aimed at their direction. From each of the frigates, four ion beams lanced to their targets. In less than a minute, the battle was a rout. N'ua never seen a frigate vaporizing another frigate so quickly. She leaned back on her chair, sighing with a big wow. Her officers watch the scene with their jaws agape.

'Looks like the prototypes pass the first test of combat in flying colors," N'ua said. The new ships

gave them new hope. If they were able to fight back, they can survive this journey. No, not only this journey, but in any new home they can come to. N'ua dreamt of even greater long term possibilities. In the long run, with power like this, yes, they can even retake back their empire, and Hiigara itself.

3,000 years later...

"Here she is, your Great Mother, Lt. Commander N'ua Helan of the Hiigaran Imperial Navy," Seejuk flashed a screen image for Zha to see. "I have been reconstructing the records deep within the Khar'nak. This terminal here is an ancient relic that is still part of the Khar'nak's computer system, which still functions. Either the Kadeshi maintained this ship very well or they don't build ships like they used to. The Kadeshi has been very respectful of dealing with the ancient computer banks, but it was easy for me. The computer system used in the Mothership and used throughout the Kushan fleets was modeled after the relic found in the Khar'toba. Which is to say, it's pretty much the same as the one in this ship, the Khar'nak. A key here and a key there, wallah. I got the computers fully running. Even some of the commands resemble the ones used in the Kushan computer systems. Plus the fact that the Kadeshi never had a brilliant computer genius like me. "

"If the Kadeshi ever found out that their Great Mother was a blood and flesh Hiigaran, their entire religious system would collapse right there. That was why the Kadeshi fleet were ordered to attack the Kushan fleet in the Homeworld Wars. They fought to keep the truth from coming out."

"You are a genius, Seejuk," Zha said. "Is there no limit to what you can find out? But the Kadeshi people, don't they deserve to know the truth?"

"Yes they do," Seejuk said.

"Does G'yela know this?" Zha asked.

"I think she does," Seejuk said. "She is too smart for such an obvious thing to miss. She knows this, and I can sense she carries the burden of knowing the truth and the need to hide it from her people. One of these days, the Kadeshi people will know, and it will be the end for her and their religious Orders."

* * *

M'jor had been looking for G'yela all day. He found her in the ship's official altar in the new section of Khar'desh, as the sacred images and icons in the old derelict section has been closed off.

She was prone on the floor, weeping, wearing not her priestly robes, but only in a simple pale dress that barely concealed the lines of her figure. She would look like an ordinary poor girl in one of the Arkships, if it were not her ethereal beauty and presence.

He dared not question her for what she was doing. He went ahead with the report.

"Holiness most high, I have come for our daily report. As you have known, we have sharp encounters with our auxiliary forces against Unclean Taiidan fleets. The Taiidans are using a new tactic that have brought great losses against our Swarmer formations. They have been pairing

Defense fighters and Defense Field Frigates with their Missile Destroyers. These fighters and field frigates have a way of neutralizing our Swarmer attacks while the Missile Destroyer finishes our fighters off with a missile salvo. We found however the field frigates could not stop ion beams and missiles. We managed to beat the attacks off using our Beam Swarmers, but the supplies of ion beam cannons to make more Beam Swarmers compete with the production requirements for Multibeam Frigates"

"So we have developed new tactics and improvised new ships. One of this is the Missile Swarmer. We based this on the Advanced Swarmer chassis, removing the cannon bays for a missile racks. We will use the old Advanced Swarmer Drive, as the Swarmer is expected to make a few attack runs only before it must return to refuel and reload its missile racks. It will be supported by a new Missile Pod ship, that can refuel and resupply these swarmers. A missile rack on these Pods can be used for the self defense of the Pods as well as to attack on its own."

"Excellent," G'yela said, struggling to find her voice.

"I learn well because I have a great teacher. I learn from you, the Mother Superior, the way you improvised new ships to deal with the ever changing tactical problems the enemy presents," M'jor said.

G'yela stood up, troubled. M'jor always kept his eyes low, trying to avoid his stare at her. "You can look at me now, M'jor. You learned well. I am thankful that you have been a great bishop and leader of the Kadeshi. How much do you love your people? You can look at me."

M'jor stared at the face of G'yela. "What do you see, M'jor?" G'yela asked.

"I see the Holiness," M'jor replied.

"You see only a foolish girl," G'yela said, "who managed to lead her entire people across a galaxy to possible ruin and destruction. I have sinned the sin of pride in front of the Great Mother, M'jor. Our last battle will require the greatest sacrifices and the outpouring of spirit from the Kadeshi people. It has been prophesied---and it is my penance---that the Deliverer will be part of the ultimate sacrifice. I will not live through the last battle."

"But your Holiness, you are our spirit and guiding light," M'jor objected. "You saved us from the stagnation of the old Orders and brought us new hope and pride. If we prevail, not only do we stand in the threshold of a new, powerful order of Kadesh, but even a new empire. It is all because of you. You will stand with us in the final battle."

"I will stand and sing with you in the final battle, M'jor," G'yela said. "But there I will make my final sacrifice. All these have been foretold. All these have been irrevocable. You shall be promoted as Cardinal of Kadesh. When I am gone, you will abolish all the old Orders and beliefs. A new Kadesh must rise from these ashes, one that may even join with the Kushans to form a new Hiigara. You will lead our people not because of our old beliefs, but on the principles you believe what is right. That first of all, is the welfare of our people."

"The old systems can bring us to ruin. I have been blind and I have been misled. The day will come when the Truth is revealed and the Kadeshi will be liberated. I must pay the ultimate sacrifice for it."

Chapter 19: The Forsaken

It's been days and Zha was starting to get restless. "I'm sure all these relics are interesting but, a girl like me has got to find a place to breath! It's all stinky and musty here and I'm getting bored." She made all sorts of whizzing founds trying to imitate the zoom of a star fighter. "I miss my custom fighters."

Seejuk shook his head. "The fate of two worlds are about to collide, thousands of people about to kill each other, the secrets of the Universe staring right under your nose...and you miss your joyride? You are incredible, Zha, you never cease to amaze me."

She was getting testy. "You know Seejuk, you are old. Old, old old. You like old things. I'm sure you like it here, but I will go crazy!" She pranced up and down the ancient hallways. "I need fresh air! I need space!"

"...and I got work to do, so shut your trap!" Seejuk shouted, heading right back to his analysis.

Zha pouted and crossed her arms. "I am a prisoner here and you are too."

"Yes we are, Zha, yes we are," Seejuk replied. "By the way, I need to ask you something. When we first encountered the Kadeshi armada, we saw huge massive ships, ships so big they must be housing the main Kadeshi population."

"Yes somewhat like your Kushan mothership, only bigger. Much bigger. Like small moons shaped like a diamond," Zha said.

"Do you ever recall seeing them after that?" Seejuk asked.

"Come to think of it, no. Never after that," Zha answered.

"The terminals refer to them openly, like it's part of the Kadeshi way of life," Seejuk observed. "Yet I never saw them after that encounter. This all means something, and it can be, the forces we have encountered so far, are only an extension of the main force. They are up to something, I know it. These ships, the Arkships, as they call it, are on a different course, from the advanced forces we have been encountering. These advanced forces, including this flagship, have been attacking not only to weaken allied forces, but to distract them away from the true course of the Arkships."

"Why would the Kadeshi do that?" Zha asked.

"To protect their main population, industrial, research and ship building centers," Seejuk replied. "Centers that are capable of building and unleashing the true main Kadeshi forces. I suspect they have been saving their forces for one decisive battle."

"Over your planet, Hiigara, no doubt," Zha added. "I won't want to be there right now."

* * *

Aboard the Mothership, in orbit around Hiigara....

"We got hyperspace anomalies, sir!". The Sensors officer seemed unusually excited.

"Anomalies? What do you mean?" asked the main officer in charge.

"Big...huge...like hyperspace jumps but much bigger. I never seen anything like it. Ships coming out of the gates, and it's bigger than this Mothership!"

"Go into red alert, notify all fleets," the officer said. "Get an image lock on those ships, and try to get me the admiral!"

"We got images sir! There are 12 of them that hyperspaced around Hii gara!"

The screen view showed a massive ship, like two pyramids joined on the bottom to make a giant diamond. The screens flashed to show each of the 12 ships.

"What are they?" the officer asked.

"There is something coming out of them Sir!" the sensors officer remarked.

Small ships flowed out of the massive diamond ships. "Magnify on the small ships," the bridge officer said.

"Swarms, sir, lots and lots of swarms!" As the sensors officer watched, more ships emerged from the sensor fog--Needleships, beam and pod frigates, swarms in massed linear formations...

"Damn! Go into full battle alert, and what's taking you so long in getting the admiral!" the officer shouted.

"We have massive communications interference, sir! The Kadeshi are trying to jam us. Hold on....our sensors detected full hyperspace inhibitor fields on. They are all around Hiigara. Nothing can get out!"

Fleet Admiral G'aas Paktu had been conferencing with the other Fleet Admirals when the news came in. He had been promoted to Four Star Admiral, and because of his advanced views on ship concept design and planetary defense, the Daiamid had designated him in charge for the overall defense of Hiigara. This was a major privilege but heavy burden as well.

He thought to himself, why now? That Seejuk Liirhra, he would arrest him for disobeying orders and going off into your own personal crusade. With the Kadeshi at the gates of Hiigara, it looks like Seejuk Liirhra's personal quest had failed miserably. The Kadeshi probably roasted him by the now.

"Gentlemen," G'aas rose from his seat. "It looks like our guests have arrived, and we should properly welcome them to our party." Each of the admirals--both Kushan and Taiidani--in the table would lead separate task forces.

"The Kadeshi wins by always changing the rules to their favor. It looks like they have done so just a while ago. The mysterious motherships that Black Star Intelligence have theorized to be their main

population ships have materialized outside of Hiigara and are now deploying a massive fleet. But they have not attacked yet. We will wait as well. It looks like our defense plans must continually face improvisation. We cannot be headstrong and overconfident as we were before. We had been drunk from our victories against the Imperialists and the Beast, but our enemy now is more cunning. We will watch their move closely and we will countertrust."

"Why don't we attack them right now?" asked one of the admirals. "They are still preparing. They are still in a vulnerable position. We don't have time to waste."

"Patience is a virtue thought by the teachings of Sajuuk," G'aas lectured. "We do not know fully what the Kadeshi is up to. Before they hyperspaced to Hiigara, Kadeshi forces were spotted in the Karos Graveyard. Our analysis shows that the Kadeshi have built ships copying from ancient Hiigaran derelicts, like their assault carrier or their heavy cruiser. I expect that they were researching in the Graveyard. So we do not know exactly what surprise they will pull up this time. Every battle we have fought with them, they came up with small little surprises that they take us off balance! It's all because of our vast underestimation of the Kadeshi. We knocked their Fuel Pods in their Nebula during the Homeworld Wars, they keeled over, and now we think we can consistently beat the crap out of them? What we saw, Gentlemen, was merely the tip of a huge hidden asteroid in terms of what they can do. Just because they are fanatics and psychotics does not mean they can think! For Sajuuk's sakes, they are Hiigarans too by nature, and thereby they are cunning, resourceful and ingenious. They would have the same values and initiatives which we Kushans have exploited to defeat the last Taiidan Emperor and return to this planet. But this time, our roles are reversed. We are in the seat of the Taiidan Emperor and they are the ones coming to kick our butts off this planet! We will not end up in all irony like Riesstiu IV."

"Your haste, gentlemen, has been what the Kadeshi needed to kick our butts!"

"See the deficiencies in our tactics. In previous battles, we got our frigates in walls going head to head against their Multibeam frigates. Result, our frigates are toast. So screw the wall formations. Our Ion Beam frigates don't play well against their Multibeam frigates, but this time, let's use our Assault frigates and Dervish Multibeam frigates. They cannot match the firepower of the Kadeshi Multibeam ship, but they have a superior coverage rate. So our frigates must try to turn around to the Kadeshi ship's rear, avoiding the limited range of fire of the Kadeshi ship, and allowing the superior coverage of our ships to bear!."

"Generally, their ships are weak in strike craft defenses. They do not use gravwells because it affects their own Swarmers. So we will send strike craft to take out their capital ships. Expect massive swarms of Swarmers as their main defenses, so our strike forces will have a tough time out of it. But that will pin down their Swarmers, and let our large ships take care of their battlefleet. Our Archangels, Deacons, Qwaarjets and Avatars, are superior to what their derelict clone large capital ship fleet can handle, and then we'll take care of the Needleships. The siege cannon onboard the Kuun-laan and the Faal-Corum are operational. They will provide long range support."

"Speaking of siege cannon, what about their flagship? The one with the siege cannon? Has that been detected yet?" asked one of the admirals.

"I expect it to hyperspace shortly. We need recon patrols and wide area sensor reconnaissance to find it. When the order is given, we will strike the head of this creature and cut it off," G'aas proclaimed, echoing the strategy the Mule used before.

* * *

"Regarding about not wanting to be above Hiigara, I think I spoke too soon," Zha said. "I can sense it. We just entered hyperspace and we're coming out of it now."

"Just now?" Seejuk asked. "Amazing, you can feel the space beyond the walls of this ship."

"It's not just that. We're near a planet...Fleets surround this planet...mothership?" Zha sensed.

"Damn, by Sajuuk's name. This can only mean we're outside of Hiigara," Seejuk exclaimed.

"That's not all, I can sense, the ships you were referring to, the Arkships. The inhibitor fields have been activated and all around us now," Zha said.

"We don't have much time to lose, Zha, we got to stop this insanity!" Seejuk said.

They ran to the hallways towards the new section of the Khar'nak. Guards stopped them. "We need to see the Mother Superior, " Seejuk demanded. "It is urgent that we see her now."

"You cannot, Acolyte," said the guard. "We are in the eve of battle. Her Holiness is in the midst of last minute preparations for the final conflict. We shall prevail; the Unclean will be destroyed. But the Mother Superior will be here in the most sacred of altars shortly. Then you can speak to her."

Seejuk raised his arms up in frustration. "This is crazy; it can't end this way. Zha, let's go back to the terminals and find some way to end this madness."

* * *

The Mother Superior wore only a simple pale dress that barely wrapped her figure. Her expression was troubled, her face wore the marks of days of fasting and intense prayer.

"It is the time of Judgement now, to see if we, after all the generations, we the Kadeshi, are fit to enter the First Garden and touch the Homeworld of the Mother," G'yela said.

"I am ready to offer my spirit for this final test." G'yela lowered her head, both hands clasped in prayer.

"But Mother Superior," M'jor said. "You will not die in this, for us and for Kadesh. We will triumph over the enemy, over the greatest battle the Protectors will fight."

"Cardinal M'jor, you know what to do," G'yela said. "We will go through the battle plan once more. You will take command of the Khar'kusha and the other three Warrior dreadnaughts. This flagship, the Khar'nak, will draw the enemy like scavengers to a dead carcass. They will focus their efforts and attack me here. That is when you will drive the Four Warriors and the main battlefleet to their

heart."

"This is my tactical preparations, your Holiness," M'jor said. "The enemy has ringed the planet with a combination of gravwell generators, Repulsor Moons and defense field frigates, with Supply Frigates and Repair Corvettes repairing them. They present a formidable barrier to overcome. But we have solutions to meet their defenses. You were correct in your interpretation of the Gospels of N'ua. The Swords of Righteousness carried by the Four Warriors were siege cannons. We have restored the siege cannon in the Khar'kusha by removing the one in this flagship Khar'nak, which was taken from the Khar'kusha long ago. Khar'kusha has been returned to her former glory. The siege cannons in the Khar'seth, Khar'osis and Khar'ramsis are also all operational. We have greater total firepower from these four cannons than the Kushans which only have the Faal-Corum and the Kuun-Laan."

"We will use siege cannon bombardment, then followed by waves of Probe and Pod bombs to take out the Gravewells, then the Missile and Beam Swarms against the Defence field frigates, and finally the Assault Swarms against the Repulsor Moons. They will be supported with synchronous attacks from Multibeam Frigates, Assault Pods and Missile Pods. I will expect that they will counter with massive strike forces, which we must counter with the vast majority of our Swarms. As our Swarms finish engaging their strike forces, they will turn to support all capital ships that will be engaged with their capital ships."

"Your plans are simple, but everything hinges on coordination," G'yela said. "The greatest weapon is confusion. With the 12 Arkships around the planet, the enemy will not know where to defend and where to strike. They never expected the Arkships, nor the Four Warriors. But our task will not be easy. I can sense they have amassed their greatest fleets, both the Kushan and the Taiidani Unclean. They have brought their very best, their newest fighters, their most powerful battleships. They will be a great loss in Kadeshi life. You cannot be overconfident, M'jor. Do not let our past victories blind you."

"I will be careful, your Holiness," M'jor replied. "Our forces are currently in deployment and we have not attacked yet. We are in a positional stalemate as we survey their forces. Our scans show they are equally as diligent surveying our forces. They probably have a capable commander in their hands. We will study them carefully before we make our move. I realize that we cannot make any room for error now. But we will win because of the Blessing of the Great Mother and the power of your Song."

G'yela turned her pained eyes to M'jor. In a surprise move, she kissed him in the cheek, then hugged him. "Thank you," she said, "for your loyalty and caring. Your heart has been true for me and the Kadeshi people. I will sing and pray for you when you battle, my most noble warrior. Now you must go. You will take everyone aboard this ship, including my Handmaidens, and leave only the barest crew. The course of this ship has been set. It cannot turn back."

M'jor stared at her with a teary eye. There were so many things in his heart that he could not tell her then and even now. His duty was calling, and so was hers.

"I know the Great Mother will protect you, your Holiness," M'jor said. "She will not forsake you."

"From this moment, I am not your Mother Superior anymore," G'yela said. "My name is G'yela, a humble servant of the Mother."

G'yela watched M'jor's back as he turned around, departing the bridge with the majority of the crew. "You too," she said to the Guards. "Your purpose aboard this ship is over. You will not be needed here anymore."

With only a few crew left, and much of the ship in automation, G'yela walked alone to the derelict section of the ship, staggering in the hallway, her legs weak.

In front of the ancient giant image of the Mother, G'yela lit incense and some candles, and then knelt and prayed. She sensed a presence in her back.

"I am sorry that your work will be cut short," G'yela said. "But you can save some of the data and bring them with you. I have ordered that a special Swarmer will be prepared for both of you to escape this ship, with some of the important relics and knowledge. I suggest you need to get ready, Kushan. This ship and I will be on its final path."

"What do you mean, your Holiness, G'yela?" Zha asked. "Are you just letting us go now?"

"Yes, I am letting you all go. I want you Zha to save whatever you learned about our heritage of the Starfarers and bring them with you. You still have your destiny to fulfill. Mine has ran the end of its course. I no longer deserve to be called Holiness," G'yela said. "I have sinned the greatest of all sins. I have lied to my people, and they will die because of the secret I kept."

"And what is that one?" Seejuk confronted the kneeling pale girl. He noticed the robes she wore. It was the pale white robes from the Purification rite, the plain pale colors which she said symbolized death. She was preparing to die.

"Is that the secret, G'yela, that your Mother is not really a God, but a blood and flesh Hiigaran, a Hiigaran like the Kushans you killed?" Seejuk told her.

"Sooner or later, my people will know," G'yela wept. "They are beginning to understand now that the Stories of our Gospels is that of a war long past, that our gods and demons were starships, captains, and emperors. The Forbidden Gospel held most sacred by our Orders for generations, is nothing but an ancient logbook of a ship officer. Our religion was a fake, conceived by the Orders to force our people to live with the greatest of discipline and unity to survive in the Gardens. Our Gardens, just a massive cloud of gas that has become a prison. With this greatest revelation, my people will be destroyed, the Kadeshi will be no more."

"...and it is I who is to blame for..." G'yela sobbed, streams running from her eyes.

"...we have been the greatest of fools..."

Then a voice spoke from the darkness. The voice hissed.

"I applaud you Priestess," said one voice of many. "You have turned the Wheel of Fate in its irrevocable path. You have served our purpose. The Kadeshi has served our purpose. Our intervention is complete."

Seejuk looked around, but could not see who was speaking. "Who?..."

Zha remained stern, for she knew who it was. Turning to Seejuk, she answered, "Projection. This is one of the great powers of the Unbound, to be able to let their consciousness travel well beyond their bodies." Zha turned to the voice. "Tiamat! Tiamat! What have you done? Is that what you desired?"

Another voice answered. "It's you, the little Starfarer. So little you know, so little is the appreciation of your capabilities and birthright as a child of the Unbound. What we have desired, little child, is to set Hiigaran against Hiigaran."

"For what, may I ask," Zha shouted to the darkness. "What do you desire from the sight of death? From the sadness of the living?" Then Zha knelt to put her arms around the kneeling, groveling figure of G'yela.

A voice in the blackness replied. "We live as the Unbound. We care no more for the Bound beings of flesh, bone, and blood. Our passion for life is long gone. If you have lived as one of us, our very being, our own immortality and separation from life itself, is but a curse we bear forever. We live in a state of what you might say, little child, of eternal boredom. The universe becomes a theatre which we entertain ourselves. You are all mere players in the stage, for the amusement of the legion of voices of the Tiamat. "

"But the death of thousands and millions..." Seejuk interjected. "Are you not satisfied?"

A voice from the darkness hissed. "A Kushan! Like all Hiigarans, your presence reeks. Your sight is an abomination to all Tiamat."

"Our presence reeks?" Seejuk asked, facing the darkness. "Doesn't the Kadeshi reek too? Why do you hate us so much? If you hate us so much, why help the Kadeshi, who shares our common Hiigaran bond?"

A different voice answered, "All Hiigarans are an abomination to the eyes of the Tiamat. You are like all humans---a plague to the natural order. You expand throughout the galaxy, consume its resources till its dry, then move on to another fertile patch, then consume again. Every asteroid rock eaten, every organic molecule consumed, affects the destiny of life in the stars. All these, because some of the Unbound have broken the Directive and let your kind get a headstart to the stars. Of all the galactic empires, the hypocrisy of the Hiigaran and the pretentious of the Taiidan reeks the greatest abomination to the sight of the Tiamat. Every ship lost, every life killed, returns the elements to the cosmos, and restores piece by piece, the universal balance that allows for recreation."

"3,000 years ago, when the First Taiidan emperor defied the ban order of the Council to exterminate

the Hiigaran, the Unbound were given the directive to assist the Exiles, knowing the one day, they will rise again and restore the balance against the Taiidan. The Bentusi gave the Exiles nothing but a token gift of a small fighter chassis intended for the self defense of the Exiles. It was not enough to ensure the survival of the Exiles, only enough for the cowardly Bentusi to maintain their earlier directive not to share not to pass weapons technology to the Bound. But we, the Tiamat, the Thousand Voices of the Wheel of Fate, saw that this token gift is not enough, and we also saw an opportunity to keep the conflict between the Taiidan and the Hiigaran alive. We gave the Exiles weapons, such as the one that can bend space, that will not only help them survive their journey, but would one day, be used against the Taiidan, kill their millions and bring an end to their Empire. These weapons while ensuring for the survival of the Kadeshi for eras, will ultimately lead to their downfall."

"But even the Wheel of Fate is not infallible. We could not foresee the accident and the events that separated the Khar'toba from the Khar'nak and the Khar'desh, and that a separate race of Hiigaran would rise from it. That you Kushans would undertake the journey to your Homeworld first and bring about the end of their Empire."

"The Taiidanis consider you as evil," Seejuk said, 'the Messengers from the Darkness, the Void."

The voice from the darkness replied. "Indeed they do fear us. They feared what our intervention with the ancestors of the Kadeshi would bring in the generations to come. For generations after the first Kadeshi were born in the Great Nebula, the Taiidan sent fleets into the Great Nebula to exterminate all Kadeshi. But every one of the fleets failed, and every defeat heightened the fear about the Exiles that hide in the Nebula, waiting for the opportunity of revenge. Then the day came the Taiidan could not send any more fleets, for the fear has become so great. They know when the Exiles in the Great Nebula would leave their Gardens, is when the Empire will fall."

"That prophecy---" Seejuk grasped. "That prophecy wasn't really meant about the Kushans in Kharak---it was meant for the Kadeshi in the Gardens!"

"Now your dim mind has seen the light, Kushan," said the voice.

"But the firestorm,. the holocaust in Kharak---" Seejuk's voice staggered.

"All because the energy signature of a Hiigaran ship with a hyperspace jump would have been the sign that the Exiles--mainly from Kadesh--would have begun their Homeworld odyssey. Taiidans came to investigate the signature, but did not find the Kadesh exiles nor its fleet. Instead they chanced upon your world, a secret hidden by the Bentusi for generations from the Taiidan. So not to take chances, they burned it. If the Taiidans truly known about your planet earlier, they would have destroyed you without hesitation."

"Hiraa, Hiraa—" Seejuk cried, clutching the black gemstone at the end of his necklace.

"I feel your rage, Kushan," said the voice. "And it is a delight. The anger, the passion for another of your species, for another of the Bound so insignificant, so mortal. The part we most enjoy is the futility of such an anger against the Unbound. There can be no greater futility than anger against

Fate itself."

The voice turned its hate to the girl in pale robes and in her knees. "You and your Kadeshi race are ultimately an abomination in the eyes of the Tiamat. And you, especially Priestess, for you not only have the flesh of the Hiigaran, but the blood of the bastard Children of the Unbound. You, the Priestess G'yela, you are but the greatest abomination of them all."

G'yela staggered in her knees, sobbing. Zha protectively wrapped her arms around G'yela, her robes wet from the tears of the once proud priestess.

"I cannot believe this," Zha shouted to the voices. "Tiamat, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you..."

Another voice replied. "The little bastard speaks. She dared raise her voice against the Tiamat, who are gods. The road ahead of you, little one, your fate, it will be of great pain. We, the Tiamat, we will take satisfaction in watching you. Remember us in the depths of your pain, little child. It is in the Wheel of Fate that you too, like the Priestess and your kin as a Siren, will suffer."

Zha frowned defiantly at the voice. "I am not scared of you. I am not scared of any of you. I don't care how powerful you are."

"You have no comprehension of your Power. We are the Wheel of Fate," said the voice. "We are Tiamat."

Another of the voices in the dark turned to G'yela. "We have given you the great gift of the Siren. It is the only thing you have now, Priestess. Use it, use your calling. The forces of your irrevocable fate awaits you."

And the voices were no more. There was only Zha's voice, her eyes wet in rage and sadness, screaming, "I hate you...I hate you..." Seejuk clutched Hiraa's gemstone, the metallic edges biting painfully against his palm.

The face of the Great Mother in the giant icon looked sad and forbidding. G'yela struggled to creep up to Her feet.

"O Great Mother, why have you forsaken us?" G'yela cried, arms outstretched.

"She's not your Goddess, G'yela," Seejuk said. "You have the power to end this insanity."

"No...no..no! I have no power and it is the end," G'yela shouted. "This is what it must come to be, my punishment...my death. Kushan and my friend Zha, leave this ship, for I am condemned and the ship is with it too. Save whatever you can save from the relics and the findings. The escape Swarmer awaits you."

Zha looked around the hall, sensing something. "What have you done, G'yela? What have you done with this ship?"

G'yela answered as she stood in front of the Mother's image with the last bits of pride she had left.

"The Kushan fleet will target this ship as a bait. They will try to destroy it as any commander needs to destroy the enemy command center, try to destroy the siege cannon which is no longer on this ship, but is returned to its original owner, the ancient battleship Khar'kusha. If the Kushans failed to destroy this ship, then the Khar'nak will head on its automated course..."

"A course that will collide with the Kushan mothership."

Seejuk's face was one of shock. "You want to destroy everything....why?"

"To the last breath of my life, I will strike at the heart of my enemy, Kushan," G'yela said. "I will destroy this ship along with it. Look at this ship, Kushan. This ship is the very center of our Faith, a Faith that is a lie. If I destroy it, I can save my people from discovering this lie or they can end this Faith for a new one. Either way, it ends right here."

"The two of you, leave me now, save what you can, but leave me now," G'yela shouted. She turned the comlinks intended to magnify the voice and be heard throughout the fleet.

Seejuk and Zha watched as G'yela began to sing, her voice amplified by the comlinks, joined by a choir of thousands across the Arkships.

"What in Sajuuk's name is doing? She is completely out of her mind," Seejuk said.

"No, she's not," Zha replied. "This is the Song of a Siren, the greatest power a Starfarer can ever have. She is channeling the senses of the Unbound, the ability to hear the melodies of the cosmic winds, into the song she sings. When the senses are carried in the song, and when it heard by others, they too can hear and feel the winds. She is sharing, transmitting, sending that power across her fleet, to all her pilots and crew. It is the song that empowers them, not just their spirit and courage, but heightens their senses, their reflexes, their awareness. With the song, they become one with the ship and the cosmos."

"...and driving them crazy like superior pilots at two hundred percent," Seejuk added. "I get the picture. I have been hearing this strange music whenever the Kadeshi fleets are in battle. I thought it was some kind of inspirational battle music. Zha, I think she's determined to end this the worst way. We must try to save as many of our findings as we can and escape in that Swarmer." Seejuk pulled Zha's arm and they headed to the room they were using in their studies.

G'yela has begun to sing, and the notes reverberated across Zha's body. The music a Siren sings touches the very core of every Starfaring Siren. For a moment, Zha wanted to stop and join in G'yela's singing. But this was not her time yet. "Come on," Seejuk urged. "We don't have much time to waste."

G'yela's notes filled the hall. Across the space around Hiigara, huge formations of Swarmers await in linear formation, waiting for the signal. A Swarmer pilot twiddled his joystick nervously. Then the song came and filled his comlink. He began to drift with the wonderfully hypnotic song. His heart was touched and he felt more alive in that second than he ever felt in his entire life. The world ahead of him, the First Gardens, was a beautiful exquisite glove. It is the Homeworld of the Mother,

the Homeworld they have come to reclaim for her. He began to sing too, joining his voice to the multitude of hosts across the great Kadeshi fleet, singing for the glory of the Mother, for the glory of Kadesh.

It is time, it is the second they have awaited. The probe bombs have begun moving ahead. For the greater glory, he turned on the boosters, all of them, the Swarmers, at the same moment like a wave. The formation began to move, ion trails behind the Swarmers, going faster and faster, then into full speed. Their voices joined in a multitude, the skies streaked with the lines of the great host of Swarmers, heading for the fleets, their lives, hopes and dreams into the maw of their enemy.

Chapter 20: The Last Song and Planetfall

The songs filled the hollowed rooms and reverberated across the ancient walls. M'jor stood in the deck of the Khar'kusha, the music inspiring his spirit, calming his tension, doubts and fears. The Holiness sings for Kadesh once again. He hoped it would not be the last time.

He thought, was this the very bridge the White Emperor stood millennia ago as they face the hordes of Defilers? If this was so, these decks were the most sacred places, yet there was a sense of mortality in them. The White Emperor was not much different from him, to have stood this very same bridge, won his victories and to finally end in defeat. If the White Emperor was not much different from him, then so was the Great Mother that served in His Service. He must not let these blasphemous thoughts filled his mind--the battle is ahead, faith must be strong---yet the doubts linger. He wondered indeed if Her Holiness the Mother Superior G'yela knew anything about this.

"We got the coordinates for the gravwell defense line. They got gun pods and repair corvettes covering the Gravwells." said the sensors officer.

M'jor studied the screen. The defense line would stop all the probe and pod bombs on their tracks, and would massacre the first wave of Swarmers. Already the enemy gunpods have detonated several probe bombs from the first wave.

"Prepare to fire all Siege Cannons on the defensive line!" M'jor ordered.

"But your Supremacy, if we fire the cannons we won't have anything to hit their capital ships!" one of the officers said.

"If we don't breach that defense line, they would have neutralized our greatest advantage---our Swarmer assault waves," M'jor replied.

"We got coordinates and ready to fire, Your Supremacy."

"Fire," M'jor ordered. A brilliant ball of light came out from the Khar'kusha, then three other balls from the Khar'ramsis, Khar'seth, and Khar'osis. The balls sped past the first wave of Swarmers and into the defensive line of gravwells and gunpods. The shockwaves tore huge holes across the defensive rings orbiting the planet.

"Swarmer wave penetrating the first line of defenses, Sir!" the tactical officer shouted from his console aboard the Assault Carrier Baal-Haasim .

"By the name of Sajuuk, damn!" shouted Four Star Admiral G'aas Paktu. "And cut that infernal music!"

"I can't, Sir, the Kadeshi are drowning our com wave frequencies with it! Sir, the Swarmers are targeting our Supply and Repair ships!"

"Get Defenders and Sentinels of Delta Wing to cover these ships!" G'aas ordered. "If we lose them, we're going to die easy."

"We got coordinates for the enemy Siege Cannons, Sir!" said the sensors officer.

Damn, the enemy has not just one, but four Siege Cannons this time. G'aas had no time to speculate where they got the cannons, but the Karos Graveyards would be a good guess. Elimination of the cannons were the priority.

"Send the coordinates to Strike Wing Alpha, and tell them to hit them now!" G'aas ordered.

Aboard a Beam Acolyte, the pilot got his instructions. From his left and his right, the rows of Beam Acolytes extended as far as the eye an see.

"Alpha Leader, Alpha Leader, coordinates acknowledged. Standby for engagement," the pilot replied. He flicked four red switches in his panel, and the turbines whirled, gathering revolutions.

"This is Alpha Leader. Beta, Sigma, and Gamma wings, cover us. I repeat cover us!"

"This is Beta Leader, acknowledge Alpha Leader." Beta leader watched over shoulder, as the formation of Triikor Mark IIs powered up their engines.

"This is Gamma Leader, ready when you are, Alpha Leader." The Acolytes widened their parade formation, as they shift into a delta formation.

"This is Sigma Leader, we're ready to party, Alpha Leader." The Blade Mk. 6 Interceptors powered their engines, and moved close to Alpha Wing.

"Alpha Wing, this is Alpha Leader. it's time to rumble!"

"Yahoo!" shouted the Beam Acolyte pilot. He pushed up the short slick lever, and the engines poured. As the blue ionic trails left the fighter, the pilot's back was forced strongly against his seat. More of the Beam Acolytes fired their engines, and the whole formation gathered speed like a giant wave. Behind them, the line of Acolytes fired their engines, and then Blade and followed by the Triikors, all leaving long trails of glowing ions.

"This is Alpha Leader, we got boogies at six o'clock."

"This is Beta leader, turning to engage." The Triikors banked, heading head on against the formation of Advanced Swarmers. The two formations met each other so fast that several fighters collided with each other, exploding into balls of flame. Below them, the Acolytes were already engaged in furious furball with a formation of Swarmers.

"This is Alpha Leader, we got target on sight. Heading into attack run." The Beam Acolyte banked, followed by its wingmate, and then the entire row in delta formation. The massive ship loomed ahead, looking more like a Kushan battleship than a Kadeshi Needleship.

"This one looks more like one of ours than theirs," said one of the pilots in the comlinks.

"This is Alpha Leader. There is no mistake in the the coordinates given and that is our target." The

Beam Acolytes dived into the ancient battleship.

"Boogies 12 o'clock," warned one of the pilots, as Advanced Swarmers dived into their position.

"Hold on course," said Alpha Leader. "Beta Wing will take care of that."

Beta Wing was a bit late as the Swarmers cut three of the Acolytes into flaming balls. "Hold steady," said Alpha Leader, the hull of the Khar'kusha looming in his sights. "Steady...steady...now!" He pressed the trigger and the ion beam latched at the hull. Smoke and fire spewed out where the part of the armor was vaporized. More beams connected to the hull from the Beam Swarmers.

"AAAAH---!" screamed a pilot as his riddled Acolyte smashed into the battleship's hull, a Swarmer close behind it.

Looming from a distance were ion trails from a fresh attack wing. "This is Kappa Wing Leader. Target on sight, target on sight." The Taiidani Kaark Attack bombers rolled, then dived into battleship, discharging their bombs. Explosions marred the whole length of the massive ship.

"Wingman, wingman, down!" cried one of the Attack bombers. "There is a Swarmer at my six! I can't shake him off my tail! Aaagh!"

Alpha Leader barreled rolled, putting the Swarmer in his sights. He squeezed the trigger and the beam connected to the hull of the Swarmer, vaporizing it instantly. "Thank you! Thank you!" said the pilot in the Kaark, as he rolled away. But suddenly there were three red dots in Alpha Leader's screen, in standard Swarmer trinary formation. "This is Alpha Leader, I got boogies in my tail. Requesting assistance."

"We got you, Alpha Leader," acknowledged a pilot as his a Triikor Mark II rushed to his position. "Count me in!," said another pilot in a Blade Mk.6.

Alpha Leader twisted and turned skillfully as the three Swarmers fired at him, the shots narrowly missing under the Beam Acolyte's belly. "Got one!" shouted the pilot in the Triikor Mk2, as triple railguns blasted through the Swarmer. "Smoked one boogie!" shouted the pilot in the Blade Mk6, as a careful placed energy cannon shot crashed through the second Swarmer's hull.

But the third Swarmer was a tough one. An Advanced Swarmer, it kept gaining on Alpha Leader despite the Acolyte's full boost. It's four cannons rippled its fire, and the shells tore through the belly of the Beam Acolyte. The Acolyte rolled uncontrollably, Alpha Leader screaming, then burst into a fireball.

Not far away, the Baal-Haasim shook as Beam Swarmers raked its thick armor with mini ion cannons. Turrets from the carrier took out two of the Beam Swarmers. Pests! G'aas thought.

Elsewhere, there was evidence that G'aas new defensive strategem were not working as he thought. Missile Swarmers straddled a helpless Field Frigate assigned near the carrier, the field ineffective against the new missiles and beams the Kadeshi strike wings were equipped with. With the Kadeshi focused so much in eliminating anti-fighter defences such as Gravwells and Field Frigates, the

alternative to battling their main strike forces was to directly use strike craft in head to head battle.

The Field Frigate blew into thousands of debris. Its destroyers, a pack of hungry Missile and Beam Swarmers, rolled to begin their attack run on their next target---the Baal-Haasim. Suddenly three of the Swarmers exploded, as a pack of Taiidan Heavy and Multigun Corvettes ripped their gunfire across the Swarmers' path. The rest of the vengeful Swarmers turned their attention on the Corvettes with high speed strafing passes.

Oblivious to the chaos outside, G'aas watched the immense main battlescreen. More and more of the strike force reserves were being committed, and the main capital ship fleets were about to converge. "I need that flagship. Find the enemy flagship!" G'aas ordered.

Aboard the mix of Taiidan and Kushan ion beam frigates, crews watched their sensors tensely as packs of Multibeam frigates appear from out of the sensor fog.

"Steady, steady, don't fire just yet," the commander of the Allied frigate wall said, watching the enemy frigates creep into firing range. The commander watched the brow of the leading enemy Multibeam Frigate, and he swallowed a lump in his throat. It is as if aboard that other ship, the enemy was staring at him just as intensely. He mustn't let his fear get to him...must concentrate. "Four...Three...Two..One...fire at will!"

The Kadeshi Multibeam frigates and the Allied Beam frigates fired nearly the same. In seconds, the Allied command frigate was incinerated and so was the lead Kadeshi frigate. The commander did not even see or feel the moment of his disintegration. The frigates continued to exchange at point blank range, some even ramming each other.

The second wave was a much looser formation of mixed Kushan Vengeance and Taiidan Kudaark Assault Frigates, with Dervish multibeam frigates. Assault Swarmers came upon them, subjecting them under devastating fire, but Defenders came in the nick of time to fiercely fight them off. They streamed past the first wave of Ion Beam frigates, heavily decimated by a fresh wave of Pod Bombs. The enemy Multibeam Frigates and Assault Pods were in packs of two and three, and converged on their formation.

"Keep firing and head for the rear maximum speed!" ordered the Commodore of the Allied formation. The Kadeshi Multibeam frigates torched a few lead Allied Frigates, but as the Allied ships fell beyond their cannon coverages, they barrelled rolled. In the meantime, the Allied frigates maintained their full speed to the enemy rear, the excellent coverage of their cannons able to maintain lock on their targets, the continuous fire raking a heavy toll on their enemy. "Maintain the running battle," the Commodore ordered, executing the so called G'aas tactic, a much more favorable method of dealing the formidable Kadeshi Multibeam frigate than with head on wall tactics.

Swarmers continued to harass the Allied frigates, but a third formation of Hive Frigates have launched a massive wave of Swarmer drones that quickly decimated the Swarmer strike wings. The drones turned their attention on the enemy Assault and Fuel Pods that were attempting to cover the Kadeshi Multibeamers. Now a bit wiser, Swarmers and Advanced Swarmers engage their namesake

drones in a dogfight, as the Assault Pods turned their attention on the Hivers. The Hivers were not without teeth of their own, and opened their own potent medium mass drivers against the lethal medium cannons of the Assault and Fuel Pods in a gun to gun battle.

This is shaping to become a massive battle of attrition, G'aas thought. They got superior technology and firepower but the Kadeshi seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of Swarmer strike craft. Even if they win this, their fleets would be so scarred they would be unable to defend themselves should another enemy arise. He is watching the cream and the heart of the Kushan and Taiidan fleets being destroyed. The need to strike decisively against the heart and soul of the enemy became more urgent every passing minute.

"We got Needleships coming in Sir!" said the sensors officer. The huge screens focused on the edge of the sensor fog, as the Needleships emerged from the mists ominously.

"Have you found the enemy flagship yet?" G'aas asked.

"Not yet Sir! The Needleships are coming into formation with the enemy derelict dreadnaughts, carriers, and cruisers. I think they're going to rush us!" warned the tactical officer.

"They're getting desperate!" said G'aas. "Order all Cruiser and Destroyer Fleets to engage the Needleships". In a lower planet orbit lay the greatest accumulation of capital ship power since the war with the Beast. There were formations of Deacons and Archangels, Qwaar-Jets, Skaal-tels and Skaal-fa, Avatar cruisers with Revelation and Perdition destroyers. Their massive engines began to rumble, as they slowly head to their looming, ominous targets.

This is finally the time of Judgement, thought M'jor, the time of Armageddon. Damage from the determined enemy strike wings have incapacitated the siege cannons, but the rest of the four Warrior dreadnaughts armaments were still capable and formidable. Fierce local defenses from Swarmers decimated the enemy strike wings, and they were hurrying to repair the siege cannons. What they need is time, but the cream of the enemy capital ship fleet is heading to their position.

Yes, we will end this in glory, he thought. The Mother Superior's song still reverberated in their ears, so holy and glorious. The sheer power of their spirit will make them prevail. O Holiest and the Most High, we offer our spirit in battle for Your Name, M'jor prayed. Into the maw of death we face, we shall emerge worthy and victorious, for the Unclean will be stricken with Your mighty sword.

"Order reserve strike wings to engage the main enemy capital ship fleet!" M'jor ordered. From the Needleships and the assault carriers came more Assault, Beam and Missile Swarmers--modular Advanced Swarmers fitted with respectively a single medium cannon, a mini ion beam cannon or a missile rack. These three new Swarmer types were innovated during the Holy War for the need of greater anti capital ship striking power, first to supplement the conventional Advanced and standard Swarmers, eventually to replace them for that purpose. The Advanced Swarmer and standard Swarmers were relegated to anti-strike craft defense and harassment.

The strike Swarmers formed into a loose formation, then lit their engines in three massive waves, their pilots singing, chanting and praying their glorious song, heading fearlessly at the huge capital

ships, the might of the enemy. Furious defences took an immeasurable amount of their number, yet they bravely pressed on, unleashing their deadly cargos on the giant ships.

G'aas watched mesmerized on the battle screens when the sensors officer crudely interrupted him. "Sir! I finally got it. The Flagship!"

"Triangulate its position!" G'aas ordered.

"We got it, and on the screens, sir!" the officer replied.

The giant Needleship slowly emerged out of the sensor fog, menacing, with a light escort.

The tactical officer completed his calculations. "I think it's heading for the Mothership, Sir! I think it intends to destroy it."

"Prepare Omega wing. Pass the coordinates to them. When they are ready, unleash Omega," G'aas ordered.

Behind the Baal-Haasim was a massive formation of Mimic corvettes, packing Quantum explosives, with Avenger corvettes right behind as escorts. The new MCVs were not piloted by Sleepers, and instead, with a new droid AI technology that are controlled by the weapons officer of the escorting ACVs.

"This is Omega Leader, roger that, we got the coordinates. We will take care of the target for you." Below him, the weapons officer flicked a series of switches, and the MCVs came to life, turbines starting to rev.

"This is Omega Leader once again. The Mimics are flying...the Mimics are flying." The primary wave of ACVs boosted, and the waves of MCV followed them.

Aboard the Baal-Haasim, G'aas announced a second set of orders. "Contact the Kuun-Laan and the Faal-Corum. We're going to play our best hand now. Tell them to intercept the Kadeshi flagship and destroy it with siege cannons if Omega wing should fail. As we have cut off the head of the Beast, and now we will cut off the head of the Protectors of Kadesh!"

* * *

Zha was frantically helping Seejuk download as much information from the terminals into the backup modules. But Seejuk seemed to have caught some other things of interest.

"Look at this, Zha," Seejuk observed. "I think I finally got access to the Khar'nak's floor plans, navigational, control and engine systems. It's amazing the Kadeshi have preserved this derelict in near working order. This thing can literally fly even without the exterior Needleship structure."

"Are you still playing around, Seejuk? If we don't hurry, we will die here. It's all too late for that. This ship is going to crash into the Mothership, if your forces did not destroy it before hand. I don't want to be around for that," Zha complained.

Seejuk clutched the bag with the backup modules, then looked at the smaller relics around his desk. "It would be sad to leave all this. In the long run, we will suffer from the loss of all the knowledge hidden within these things. What a waste." Carrying their load, they ran out the door and into the hallway.

Explosions rocked the ship, and Zha fell. "We are under attack," Seejuk observed as he helped to lift Zha on her feet. Zha tended the pain in her knees, and she ran with a limp.

In the great hall of the ship, under the magnificent statue of the Great Mother, they saw G'yela. She was kneeling in her plain pale gown, arms outstretched, her prayer and her chant combined into a troubling haunting song that explored deep within a soul. Tears streamed down her eyes, as she threw her remaining strength and spirit to her song and prayer.

Zha was amazed at what she saw, and she dropped her bag.

"I...I can't leave her like this...I can't leave her knowing she would die..." Zha told Seejuk.

Seejuk rolled his eyes at the ceiling. This girl deserves to die for all the things she did, and she's ready for it, Seejuk thought. He sighed. But Zha was right....

The Khar'nak shook with more explosions. Statues and pillars fell. The statue of the Great Mother shook, then tilted, then fell at G'yela's direction.

G'yela screamed just moments before Seejuk leaped and pulled her away, both of them falling to the floor nearby. The statue crashed, breaking into stone and dust.

Seejuk felt G'yela's frail body tightly hugging his. He could feel her quiver, shake with great fear of her own, a fear she had been defiantly hiding. "C'mon girl, you're going to get away with us," he assured her.

"Leave me be, my fate is to die," G'yela said.

Seejuk slapped G'yela hard across the face. "You better wake up. Screw that fate thing. It is up to you to decide your fate. What do you really want?"

G'yela sobbed, hugging Seejuk's chest tightly. "I don't really want to die, I don't really want to die..."

"Now you have made the first real choice in your life, something that someone did not made up for you..." Seejuk told her.

"Tsk ts...I think we got a problem," Zha interrupted. She pointed to the fallen pillars that block the entrance.

"Is there another way to get out of here?" Seejuk asked G'yela.

"Through the bridge. Not the bridge of the Needleship, but the bridge of the old Khar'nak ship," G'yela said. She pointed them the way. G'yela seemed hurt, and Zha placed G'yela's arm around her

shoulders, even though Zha was limping.

They entered the bridge, and Seejuk was pleasantly surprised that the bridge did not hold much of a difference from modern Kushan warships. "I have an idea, and I need all your help." Seejuk went to the captain's chair, and pressed a few buttons. The terminal screens lit up.

"What are you going to do?" Zha said.

"I think we can save this entire ship, the Khar'nak. The derelict seems to be in maintained working order, we can turn it around and prevent the collision," Seejuk said. "I'll take the captain's chair, Zha you take the tactical console."

Seejuk turned to G'yela. "I know you planned to erase this ship and all its memories to hide the truth. But you have kept the truth long enough from your people and to deny the truth from them forever by destroying this ship would curse them for all eternity. They would be hurt if they knew the truth, but only for a moment. Your people are resilient. They will survive the loss of their religion, but if they have greater faith in themselves, they will become even stronger with the truth. That is what a real faith should be based on. If you really want to save yourself and your people, you should let them know the truth. This is the last and most important thing you can give them."

G'yela lowered her eyes and nodded.

"Now help us turn this ship around," Seejuk said.

The screens flickered, then opened to reveal the battle outside. As the ship shook with explosions, the three of them watched as the wave of Mimic drones smash into the ship. But a last ditch defense from a Swarmer wing destroyed as many of the Mimics they can intercept, despite caught in a dogfight with escorting Avenger corvettes.

"I got two large ships coming our way," Zha warned, watching her tactical screens. She magnified the view.

"It's the Kuun-Laan and the Faal-Corum, heading our way," Seejuk said. "I got energy readings that looks like one of them got a siege cannon ready to fire. Oh by Sajuuk's name..."

He spoke too late. A massive fireball was coming their way.

"Brace yourself everyone!" Seejuk warned. "If we make it through this..."

The massive Needleship shook violently. The siege cannonball missed the Needleship from a direct hit, but the shockwaves send great damage throughout the hull of the ship.

"There is enormous damage in all decks of the Needleship, but the Khar'nak derelict is intact," Seejuk sighed with relief. He noted that the ship within a ship concept of the Khar'nak is what's keeping the derelict intact, and was keeping them alive as well. The blast has cleaned out what was left of Omega wing and the Swarmer defense wing, leaving the Khar'nak alone.

But the second ship, the Faal-Corum, was powering up its siege cannon.

"We're not going to survive through this. Zha, I think you better go. Take G'yela with you," Seejuk said. "That Swarmer can hold only two people at the most, and that's going to be cramped for an aging fella like me."

"You what? Nobody is leaving not without you!" Zha shouted.

"You damn bitch, get out of here. I am not going to take a chance for all of us to die. If the worst someone must still be alive, and I would rather that it be you rather than be. I can still save this ship, and you can save yourself," Seejuk argued. "Hurry!"

"You old asshole, you..." Zha cried. Seejuk was right again. "You promise me you are not going to die, you old asshole, you promise me you're not going to leave me. You're promise you're going to come back." For a moment, her thoughts lay with her father, for the last moments he was with her. He never came back, and the deep fear and agony of the moment gripped Zha's heart and her voice quivered and sobbed.

Seejuk clutched Hiraa's gemstone in his necklace. "By the memory of my beloved Hiraa, I will come back I swear. It will take a lot more than a couple of siege cannons to kill this old Kushan husk."

"I cannot leave," G'yela said. "You need me here to save this ship. It's my final duty, and the last I can do for my people. Besides, you can only override the codes with my voice. Zha, you have no time to argue with us now. The legacies of the Farers are with you, and they must survive with you. We will be alright." There is a strange calm and peace in her voice.

"Zha, there is a short cut from this bridge to the docking bay," G'yela pointed to a small door and then a schematic in a screen. "Just follow this."

Zha rushed and hugged her, and G'yela hugged back. "It was good to know you," Zha said.

"It was good to know you too," G'yela replied.

Zha took one last look and exited through the door, some tears in her eyes. Her heart was heavy, but she ran as fast as her injured legs could move her. An Advanced Swarmer was waiting on a launch rail, and as she entered the ship, she noticed that its weapons bay was deliberately emptied to allow another passenger and various artifacts to fit in. But there won't be any passenger to fit inside. She will fly this alone.

Inside the emptied compartment, some relics have been placed ahead by crews following G'yela's orders, relics that would have pertained to the heritage of the Farers and the Sirens, relics that G'yela wanted saved but never had sufficient time to study. The work was left with Zha now.

Every Swarmer was intended to be easy to fly, and this was no exception. She lowered the cockpit door herself, toggled the joystick and flicked the engine ignition.

"I got you, Zha," Seejuk's face flashed in a small monitor. "We're ready to launch you." Seejuk made

a thumbs up in the screen, a gesture hauntingly similar to the one her father gave before he left to face the Beast.

"The Faal-Corum has fired its siege cannon! Launch now!" Seejuk urged.

Zha pulled the lever, and the Swarmer zoomed on the launch rails, the G-forces pinning her back. There was a terrific whoosh as the Swarmer was flung through the launch tube, and suddenly there was the darkness of space. There was only light in the stars, the flashes of the battles, and the phosphorescent glow from the Swarmer's instruments.

Zha glimpsed the sensors. The fireball is coming! She kicked the boost in the Swarmer, and G-forces pinned her back once more against her seat. The fireball missed direct impact again, but she can only glimpsed the shockwaves tearing the Needleship structure. She can sense the shockwaves coming behind her, ravenous, totally ripping this ship if she got caught in the wave.

In a race against the wave, the Swarmer boosted like she never boosted a fighter before. Lightened by the lack of a passenger and weapons, the Advanced Swarmer was a little faster than a loaded example. For a moment there, the wave of death was about to overtake her, and as she was about to be engulfed in its hug, the wave suddenly faded. There was only a cloud of debris chasing the Swarmer.

She sighed a sign of relief and laid some grateful patting on the Swarmer's dashboard. Damn, she thought, this was one fast fighter, the fastest she has ever seen and so fast it saved her life. She looked at back to see if the Khar'nak was there.

The vast Needleship was all in flames. Sections of it were exploding, stripping away. It was a horrible sight. Then she felt something, something that only a Child of the Unbound can perceive, and that is presence of another. If G'yela was still alive, then so was Seejuk. Zha shouted with glee.

The Needleship structure began to strip away. Then the last bolts holding the burning Needleship structure blew, and the vast Needleship disintegrated. As the debris fell off, something moved within it, and from the cloud of junk and debris emerged a ship.

It was the old derelict Khar'nak, moving on its own power after all the millennia.

"YES! YES!" shouted Zha at the top of her voice, never was she excited or awed by such a sight.

"Hmm, like I said, they don't build ships like this anymore," Seejuk observed at the bridge of Khar'nak. "What did you say?" G'yela asked. "It is our sacred duty to maintain and protect the Mother's great ship to the best we can."

"We got good ship construction here, and you all did a fine job in keeping this ship. But we're not through yet. They will still try to repeatedly blast us with those siege cannons until there is nothing left of us but nuclear particles," Seejuk said.

Then an idea came to him, a desperate one, one that may save the ship and stop the war at the same time. Let the truth finally save us all, he thought.

"Seejuk, G'yela, are you alright?" Zha's screen flashed in front of the monitors.

Seejuk gave a thumbs up, and Zha smiled. Seejuk had another reason to smile--the Khar'nak's ancient communications system was still working, and surprisingly compatible with both Kushan and Kadeshi systems. The communication boosters G'yela used to sing to her fleet was still operational also. If he can link the two...

He took a backup module and inserted the interface on one of the terminal consoles. He then linked the Kadeshi and Kushan language interfaces, and began to play an ancient recording.

* * *

G'aas watched the screens in total disbelief. The strange looking enormous Needleship shedded its outer hull to reveal an inner structure that turned out to be what his science officer described as a self moving ancient Hiigaran derelict. He wondered if they should continue to fire on an ancient Hiigaran derelict, but he will not take the chance.

The battle was not going well for him but neither for the Kadeshi. His sensor reports that the four Kadeshi ancient dreadnaughts have gotten their siege cannons repaired and were positioning to blast them with such. The main Allied capital ship fleet was deeply engaged with their opposing equivalents.

He finally played his ace card. Three Taiidani task forces, each led by an enormous Empress class carrier, dematerialized behind Kadeshi positions. The Kadeshi inhibitors prevented ships from jumping out of the battlespace, but there was nothing said about new forces jumping in. The carrier task forces began sending strike ships and capital ships against the Arkships. The Arkships themselves have poor defensive armament, but were fanatically defended by large Swarmer wings.

The position was like two opponents with daggers on their necks. The Kadeshi have the ability to wipe out the Allied fleet, but the Allies have the ability to wipe out the Kadeshi population ships.

G'aassigned. It would be unbearable to his conscience to kill the Kadeshi civilians, but this was total war.

"Sir," the communications officer interrupted G'aas' thoughts. "We got something in the comlinks. It's coming out from the derelict and its being broadcasted in both Kushan and Kadeshi frequencies. Some woman..."

"Screens!" G'aas ordered.

The handsome, yet dignified face of a woman appeared. Her graceful features looked Kushan but not quite desert raised, with the scholarly look of a S'jet or Kaalel. She wore a strange military uniform, and beside her stood what seemed to be her ranking officers.

"This is Commander N'ua Helan of the Hiigaran Imperial Navy in the carrier Khar'desh. If you can hear this, this is addressed to the survivors and maybe even the children of the ship Khar'toba. I don't

know if you can ever receive this, but I pray that you will, somewhere, someday...."

"....As you all know, our convoy was stalked by a Taiidan carrier task force under orders by their Emperor to defy the Council edict and exterminate every living member of our race. Just outside the Great Nebula, the Taiidans unleashed their forces to exterminate us all. But we prevailed, thanks to the new ion beam weapons and Swarmer fighters the Council has provided us...."

"...But during the battle our ships were heavily damaged. As the Khar'toba drifted, the enemy carrier moved in to destroy the Khar'toba and all her survivors. The Khar'nak came between the Khar'toba and the enemy carrier and fired the siege cannon we obtained from the Emperor's flagship, the Khar'kusha. The blast destroyed the enemy carrier, but drained the Khar'nak's energy systems, damaged her navigation and propulsion systems. The Khar'nak drifted into the Great Nebula, drawing fire from the remaining Taiidan forces, as the Khar'toba fled safely. This was the moment of our separation. The carrier Khar'desh followed the Khar'nak into the Great Nebula, fighting a running battle to protect the people in the Khar'nak..."

"...From then on, we never heard of you, and you were all lost to us, as we are to you. We managed to fight off the enemy but the Khar'nak's engines were heavily damaged. The battles have left the carrier Khar'desh heavily damaged, and I fear she would not be habitable much longer without heavy repairs. We are stranded now in the Nebula, and outside of it, the Taiidani has sent forces to hunt us down if we were to leave the Nebula. They occasionally sent forces to hunt us down inside the Nebula. In some occasions they failed to locate us, as we hide in the Nebula's clouds, which protect us, and whose resources we gather for our survival to repair our ships and build replacements. In some occasions they would find us, and we would battle them, and destroy every single one of them so no survivor is left to report our position..."

"...As we remain trapped in the Nebula, we wonder about the fate and well being of brothers and sisters in the Khar'toba. We hoped that you have a safe journey and would find a safe home away from the Taiidan oppression..."

"...One day, we hope to find you...or if you may, find us..."

"...One day, we hope to be united again, and in unity, we will claim back our beautiful homeworld of Hiigara, and reclaim our empire and birthright from the Taiidan oppression. No, this is not a hope---this is my prediction. This should be and will be the goals of both our children, the children of the Khar'nak and Khar'desh, and the children of the Khar'toba, should we fail to survive to make our dreams true..."

"...Inside your ship, and the Khar'nak, we carved from the memorial stones of these giant ships, a map of where we came from and of our common heritage. Should our computer systems will fail, the stones will serve as a guide and a reminder of who we are. On that one faithful day, on the death of Hiigara, there were many more ships of the Exiles that left. We will also find all the other Exiles and join them to restore the brother and sisterhood of Hiigara..."

"...My other message is a personal one. It is for the one I love and of whom we are separated forever. This is for you, Captain Jakuul Pangu't of the Khar'toba, if you can still hear me or if ever receive

this which I pray that you will. My heart pains from this separation like a curse. It is like a hole inside me. But you like to know something? Yes, you are a father now. I am pregnant with our child. This is not the best of circumstances to have a child, barely surviving in battered transport and warships. But like all those who were born during the journey, they represent the hope for Hiigara now. Our children. To reclaim the right of our past for our future. I will raise your child and I will make him remember his father. I hope the children of our children will not forget us, our sacrifice, and our dreams. If I cannot return to Hiigara, then our child will, and if he or she did not, then their children..."

"...It pains me to make this message, with all the uncertainty about our future or even to receive this message... I hope you have a safe journey. I hope we will all return to Hiigara some day. Let the gods be with you... Long live Hiigara...I love you all..."

The image of the woman faded, the message three millennia late finally delivered to the children she had laid her hopes for.

G'aas stared at the screen, totally bewildered. There was nothing but an eerie silence in the bridge of the Baal-Haasim. G'aas was the first to break the silence.

"Get me the Kadeshi fleet commander, directly," G'aas ordered the communications officer.

"He is already here, Admiral. He is requesting for an immediate ceasefire on both sides."

"He has read my mind," G'aas replied. "Tell him, we will grant truce and ceasefire. Relay it to the rest of the fleet immediately."

* * *

"It is done," G'yela said. "It is the end of our Faith. To know that our Great Mother, our Goddess was but a mortal Hiigaran."

"She is not Goddess, and never was. What she was, is a heroine. Without her, the Kushan and the Kadeshi people would never have started. It is never too late to learn the truth, even if it is three millennia late. That was our Kushan history as well," Seejuk said.

"For the first time, I feel free," G'yela said. "The Mother did prophesy that in the end of the days of Kadesh, the Orders will be no more, and a new world will be born again. This was the prophesy the Orders feared most, and why they hid this truth for so long. But it had come true."

"But I remain the condemned. I have caused so much lives across the Outside. So much Kadeshi, so much Kushan, Taiidan and Turanic lives. What will be done to me?" G'yela asked. Her note turned to a depression.

Zha's voice was excited as it cracked in the comlink. "You done it, you done it. There is an immediate ceasefire."

But there was no joy in Seejuk's face. Instead there seemed to be one of extreme concern.

"There was something your Great Mother said about the state of this ship," Seejuk said. "The navigational and the control systems were damaged, right? That's why the ship was trapped in the Nebula. Were they ever repaired?"

"Not that I know of," G'yela responded. "I only keep the Gospel. I don't keep repair records 3,000 years old."

"Well whatever this thing is running on," Seejuk observed. "It's running out of pure inertia. It's still headed for the Kushan Mothership. We got to find a way to stop this thing."

"The ship is still headed for the Mothership?" G'yela asked. "Then it is indeed inevitable. My fate is sealed with this ship. It is unchanging."

"Cut the crap, girl, you're not going to die," Seejuk said.

The screen fizzled, and Admiral G'aas face appeared on it. "This is addressed to the commander aboard the derelict ship."

"Hi Admiral," Seejuk greeted.

The Admiral's face was in shock, as if he could not take successive surprises.

"You! Seejuk Liirhra. What are you doing in that ship? By any means, were you responsible for that outrageous communication display? Was all that true?"

"Yes Admiral," Seejuk replied. N'ua Helan is a true person, the so called mother goddess of the Kadeshi. I found all these records here, in the bowels of the old derelict ship she once commanded. Come to think of it, she was alive, 3,000 years ago, right in this very bridge. I think this is awesome, to be in the very same bridge of the person that saved the ancestors of Kushan and Kadesh."

"Is this the purpose you defected?" G'aas asked. "You disobeyed an order and a duty. You can be court martialed for it."

"Not really defected, but to convince," Seejuk replied. "Small price to pay to save two races from killing each other. My only regret was I didn't do it soon enough. I would do it again if I have to. But right now I have other problems. The derelict is a runaway. The ancient repairs done on the navigation and controls were superficial and untested. It will collide with the Mothership and there is no hope in getting out."

"This is Zha, in the Swarmer," Zha interrupted. "Can I land and pick you people up?"

"Negative, Zha," Seejuk replied. "After the last siege cannon blast the dock bays are non operational. We are trapped here."

An officer whispered to G'aas in the screen. G'aas looked again at Seejuk. "I think we might have a solution. The Somtaaw are going to send some Heavy Tug frigates to ram and push the derelict ship away from the Mothership."

"That can work," Seejuk agreed. "Communications seem faulty. We can't maintain contact long. Energy levels running low here." He thought, I guess nothing is really perfect.

Four Ramming Tugs appeared, heading for the derelict. There was an enormous thud as the first Tug made contact on the Khar'nak's hull, followed by another. The crescent shape of the Mothership loomed, and Seejuk knew there was not much time to waste. The Khar'nak shook and creaked as the Tugs rammed and pushed. Odd noises creaked through the old structure like an ancient monster awaked from its sleep.

"Looks like it's working," Seejuk shouted excitedly. "Yes, it's working." He watched the nose of the Khar'nak derelict veered away from the crescent Mothership.

Then his wide grin turned sour. He made immediate calculations, and his face hung a strange concerned expression. He watched the window as the nose of the Khar'nak turned into blue orb of Hiigara itself. The Tugs could only push, but not in a precise direction.

"I can sense where we are going," G'yela said. "This ship is going to crash into the planet itself. It has been prophesied that the Great Mother will return to the First Gardens in a blaze of fire. Nobody understood what it literally meant. Was it conquest like I thought it would? Now, Her great wisdom is revealed. She will fall from the Heavens as it was said. Now I know what it all truly meant. My fate is still sealed. Everything remains the same."

"Will you ever shut the hell up?" Seejuk desperately grasped his hair with both his hands. "Let me figure this out."

"While you do the figuring, I will do the praying," G'yela said, leaving the bridge to pray among her fallen idols in the Great Hall.

Seejuk frantically keyed the terminals, searching for a way in the ship's systems. "There's got to be an emergency retro landing system somewhere."

Zha's voice was in the comlink. "Seejuk, what are you still doing there? The derelict is going to reenter the planet's atmosphere-----" The static interrupted her voice.

Outside, the nose of the giant ship started to turn red from the heat, as the Khar'nak sliced through the upper molecules of the Hiigaran atmosphere at an incredible velocity. The blue orb grew bigger in the screens, but the scene became engulfed with fire, as red flame swept through the length of the ship. The screens turned black as the external cameras failed. The giant ship shook with an eerie vibration, and the walls filled with a mournful moaning sound, as the ship burned and melted.

3,000 years ago, the Khar'nak departed from the surface of Hiigara, and now it has returned, a falling star streaking across its skies.

* * *

She awoke, her face in the sand, her body wet from the blue waters of the sea. It was so bright, she

had never seen a sun, a star so close that the air became blue.

Her thin pale dress, wet from the sand and the water, clung to her lithe figure. She had no shoes, and her bare feet buried into the soft sand. It was an interesting sensation for the small pebbles to slip between her toes, and the lapping waves of water lap her feet. Above, flying creatures sing, then probe the water for food. Many small creatures teemed the waters and the sand. It was indeed the Sea of Life as it was foretold.

It was so beautiful, so beautiful. She never dreamt it was like this. Aborad the Arkships as a child she dreamt what it will be on the surface of those starry orbs they called worlds and planets. Now she is here. Is this Homeworld? The First Gardens? It was truly beautiful, as the Mother called it. To see all this once again, this was the Mother's quest. Now she was seeing it for herself.

Her silvery hair flew with the winds. She never felt a wind like this before, touching her skin, her eyes, and her nose. Every step she took, she staggered holding to her balance. The gravity seems stronger, the air warmer, hotter.

Is this all a dream? Is she dead?

A child was running towards her and for a moment she saw herself in that child. A man and a woman followed the young girl.

"Did you see to that? Did you see that?" said the young girl, pointing to horizon. "A star fell from the sky."

The man said, "They said there was a huge battle in the sky. Some of the junk are falling out of it."

The silvery haired girl looked at the horizon where the child pointed. There was a smoke plume rising from a large burning hulk.

The man noticed that this new girl in the beach seemed odd to the utmost. She was delicately beautiful, yet serene and strangely quiet, unsure of every step she made, always curiously examining her surroundings. "Are you alright, Miss?"

The strange girl looked at him, smiled and nodded, not saying a single word. The young girl smiled and the strange steely eyed girl smiled back at her, her silvery hair blowing with the sea winds.

She was alive, she thought. Death wasn't her fate. The Mother rewards in mysterious ways.

With only her thin pale dress, she began a new journey across the beach, leaving her frail footsteps across the sand.

Chapter 21: The Needleship

It was the eve of Unification. There were still so many social issues to be worked out, but the Kadeshi and the Kushans have agreed in principle that all issues will be resolved without military force. The Kadeshi wanted land to settle on Hiigara, but the Kiithid are unwilling to share the real estate. It was then the Galactic Council intervened. Seeing the potential for a long term political crisis, the Council decreed that a percentage of the Homeworld must be shared to the Kadeshi. The Somtaaw argued that if Hiigara is to be shared with the Kadeshi, the Somtaaw should have mining rights to the Gardens. The Kadeshi diehards were inflamed by the proposal, but moderates argued that if the Somtaaw scheme was accepted, a percentage of the mining profits and resources would go to the Kadeshi welfare fund. They still continue to argue.

The vastly underpopulated Kiithids saw an opportunity to recruit members of the disenfranchised Kadeshi population into their ranks. Purists denounced the move, claiming it would taint the Kharakian bloodline. Pragmatists saw, that after successive wars, the Kharakian bloodline threatens to be an endangered species. They saw an opportunity with the compatible Hiigaran bloodline of the Kadeshi. Most of the pragmatists were from the smaller Kiithid, which desperately needed to swell their ranks to improve their political stature, military and economic power. A scheme was hatched by the supposedly Liirhra vassal Hraal Kithid to bring promising Kadeshi engineers to their ranks, a proposal the Liirhra saw the potential and objected. For some of the Kiithid, they saw an opportunity in the large Kadeshi underclass as a source of cheap labor for the industries growing in Hiigara all over and the factory ships that began to teem in space. For the ever opportunistic Somtaaw, the Kadeshi seemed an excellent human resource for cheap mining labor.

The 12 Arkships orbit around Hiigara like 12 small moons. After the Ceasefire, riots in the Arkships broke out, and mobs desecrated the temples. As G'yela had predicted, the Orders were no more. Cardinal M'jor vanquished the religious orders and his own title. He led a power grabbing coup with the more moderate factions of the Kadeshi Holy Fleet, bringing the moderate faction into power. Instead of the religious symbols of the Orders, M'jor lifted the now powerful image of the old Hiigaran Imperial Banner, images of whom were preserved in the Hiigaran derelict warships. Along with the flag, the M'jor faction, which had completely seized the Kadeshi government apparatus, took upon themselves to redress their uniforms into the old Imperial Hiigaran uniforms once worn by their Great Mother.

The Taiidani Republicans were offended by the Imperial flag, claiming that long ago, it was the ancient atrocities perpetuated by the Hiigaran Emperor against the Taiidani kingdoms that led to the Taiidani rebellion that destroyed the Hiigaran Empire and led to retributionary atrocities. The Taiidani argued that the Kadeshi—and as a warning to the Kushan Hiigarans as well—that no dreams of empire will be entertained or accommodated. Government must be council based or it must be a democracy, the model of government the Taiidani had been advocating. Impossible, the collective voices of the Kiith-sa said, we do not let the mob rule. The Taiidani countered, it is better that the people rule instead of tyrants. Liberals among the Kushan sided with the Taiidani, denouncing the old Kiithid system, their political hegemonies, and their economic monopolies, wrote a constitution for a new democratic government for Hiigara.

The Daiamid denounced the radicals and their Constitution as "insane", but the radicals had quick support among the Kadeshi masses, the small weak Kiithid, and the Taiidani intellectuals who joined their ranks. The radicals were all adamant in the pursuit of the UDRA—United Democratic Republic of Hiigara—as well as workers and minority Kiith rights in the Manaani Enterprises, Kaalel Software, and the Liirhra Shipyards. They declared the abolition of the Kiithid system and the Daiamid, and there were injuries from the protests and riots. The Daiamid strained the Hiigaran-Taiidani Alliance by urging the Taiidani not to interfere with "internal matters". The Republican government countered that the Taiidani intellectuals in Hiigara were there in their own accord and by invitation of the Hiigaran radical democracy movement.

Some of the disenfranchised among the Kadeshi wanted to return to the Gardens and go back to the old ways of life. They formed an organization with the task of getting one of the Arkships and return it to the Gardens. The M'jor faction denounced the new group, saying that their fate is with Hiigara now and to building a new progressive society. But the faction will have a new concern as to who will lead the "new progressive society" M'jor touted, as the infectious ideas of democracy from the Taiidani has filtered to the Kadeshi underclasses, starting a new radical movement.

G'yela? Wanted by all Authorities, including Taiidan and Hiigaran, they never found her, nor her body was ever recovered from the wreck of the Khar'nak. She had faded into an urban legend, and popularity cults grew around her. There were sightings that she was still alive, but the authorities dismissed them as popular hysteria surrounding a legend. That a young frail girl was able to lead a vast fleet that scarred half the galaxy and nearly toppled the best military forces gripped the imagination of even the Hiigaran and Taiidani youth, who saw in her, the rebellion of the young against the establishment. Her disappearance, the reported sightings, add to an atmosphere of myth and cult around the figure of G'yela, who remains disturbingly popular among the Kadeshi as well.

Equally contentious were the strange songs and hymns G'yela sung during the Crusade to stir up her troops. Recorded by Kadeshi soldiers during the war, they were preserved for safe keeping. But Hiigaran and Taiidan pilots who were exposed to the songs during the battle became mesmerized by it. The recordings of G'yela's songs became a hot item in the black market, and they spread to the Hiigaran and Taiidani youth enamored by her cult. It was said that who ever heard her songs could hear the songs of the star themselves. Authorities remain distressed about the popularity of this war criminal, but the ban on the recordings only added to the stature and legend of G'yela.

It did not take long for the Turanic Raiders to see where the new winds were blowing. The Raiders as mercenaries, never had a long standing loyalty to any benefactor, such as the Imperialists. As the Imperialists grew weaker, they shifted from an asset to a burden for the Raiders. Increased technological advances on part of the Kushans and Taiidanis have made piracy more difficult. As their fleets grow larger, their societies become more structured and sophisticated, and began to require new economic resources that piracy and mercenary activities cannot sufficiently provide. The Turanics needed new sources of incomes, new friends, and perhaps, new employers. The first Turanic-Hiigaran cooperation treaty was signed during the Crusade, and the other Turanic houses followed suit. The treaties allowed safe passage of Hiigaran ships in Turanic space; mining of resources in Turanic sectors with percentage of the proceeds going to the Turanic House; purchase

of surplus and obsolete Hiigaran warships; escort protection of Hiigaran trade, exploration and mining vessels at an agreed fee. The treaties would have a double edge effect on it, as elements of the new Hiigaran underworld would also take the opportunity to hire Turanic mercenaries for their dirty deeds. Some of these deeds, it turned out, included harassment against the new found democracy and worker union movements. The Turanic mercenaries welcomed their new employers as eagerly as they did with the last Taiidani Emperor, and did their dirty work just as well. All that matters was that they got paid.

* * *

It was days after the Crusade Ceasefire, and the signing of a new Turanic-Hiigaran agreement. As part of a cultural sharing program, her Highness, the Princess Segura Zha of the feudal Inner House of Khor was asked to sing the Turanic ceremonial songs to honor the dead of the last war and send their souls to the heavenly warrior kingdom. The thick, glittering ceremonial robes and the ungainly headdress were a burden to her small petit body, and she struggled not to trip on the ends of the robes. She was tired, but she was stirred from the sight of the symbolic gravestones of the pilots who died, and among them, pilots from her carrier, the Mule. No effort will be spared to honor them.

The high notes of her voice filled the hall, her hands and gestures following a rhythmic graceful dance. Ceremonial dignitaries from both sides were lined behind her back, but she was the only one who can boast of conveniently having the bloodline of an Inner House. It was precisely that reason why she was requested---perhaps obligated---to perform the ceremony.

As she sang she saw a familiar face. He was in civilian clothes, all bandaged up, in a crutch. Despite his injuries, he kept his stance. Their eyes met, and he gave a thumbs up. Zha smiled as she continued her high note chant and the slow ceremonial rhythmic dance.

After the song, despite the robes that seemed to overwhelm her body, Zha ran to the stranger. She jumped and hugged him, and the combined weight of her robes against his weak injured legs, sent both of them crashing embarrassingly to the floor.

"I hope you're not singing my funeral, Zha. This old husk is not ready to go yet," he said. "I think you just broke the rest of my bones."

"Seejuk!" she cried. "Thought you were dead!" She helped Seejuk to a chair and they both sat together.

"I got a promise to keep, remember?" Seejuk replied. "Not going to turn my back on a pretty lady, ha! I'm as tough as that old derelict ship."

"And G'yela?" Zha asked.

"They never found her or her body. Do you think she's alive?" Seejuk answered.

"I can still feel her. She's still alive somewhere," Zha said. "What will happen to the Khar'nak?"

Seejuk explained. "Scientists are examining the derelict, but the hardline Kadeshi are demanding

the immediate return of all sacred artifacts. But the Academy wanted to study the relics more, as it can shed light to the origins of races, and perhaps even find something of decisive value to our futures. The M'jor regime leading the Kadeshi now seemed moderate and pragmatic. After the discovery of the true nature of their goddess Mother, they're more opened minded about the significance of the artifacts and have as much to gain from the study of these things with the scientists. They will agree to a scientific cooperation."

"Do you know I'm forced to resign from Fleet Intelligence and Black Star now?" Seejuk revealed. "They cited disobedience in regulations despite showing outstanding courage in crisis. But don't worry, the pay and the benefits sucked anyway. I got a new employer now."

"Who?" Zha asked.

"The Academy of Archeological Research--a joint venture between the S'jet and Kaalel Kithids--hired me to continue the work for deciphering and studying the artifacts. They thought they may have some leads to new archeological discoveries," Seejuk said.

"This is good," Zha said.

"Actually, Zha, its more like a "we". We got a new employer now. The AAR wants to hire you too. They need a well protected vessel that they can use a mobile base for research on the outlying Frontiers. "

"Adventure and treasure hunting" Zha sounded with excitement. "Fees good? When can we sign up?"

"As soon as possible I guess," Seejuk said.

"But before we go, Seejuk, I got a business problem that requires the assistance of you, my Business Adviser, can help resolve."

"Shoot," said Seejuk.

Zha explained. "The Somtaaw has approached me for mining and travel rights in the Khor sector, my father's House sector. They wanted escort rights, a base of operations, and I get a percentage. But there is something about them I don't trust, and I'm not good with contracts. I want them to provide me an outpost, since I don't have one."

"Sounds like its up my category," Seejuk smiled. "I want to give the Somtaaw a hard time on the bargaining table. They're business animals--the Beast in the business world. If you're not careful, they will 'infect' you and drain you dry. Let me read the contract and we will make necessary adjustments to slay this Beast."

* * *

3,000 years ago...

N'ahil Henan watched his aging mother, who stared intently into the bright pinkish and yellowish glowing clouds of the Nebula. Her body has become weak and feeble, but her spirit and her eyes remained as strong and determined as ever.

For a generation, his mother had fought back the Taiidani incursions in the Nebula intend on stamping them out. With resourceful management, she brought back the Exiles from the brink of extermination to the verge of building a new modern fleet. They judiciously exploited the resources of the Nebula, captured Taiidani ships and resourcers, recycled the scrap from destroyed ships. They have already begun the construction of a new home, a larger ship to move the survivors and children of the Khar'nak and Kha'desh. The carrier Kha'desh itself has suffered the scars of a hundred battles, and they are finishing a grand worthy replacement for the old heroic warship that will protect them from more Taiidani incursions. Maybe one day, in fulfillment of his aging mother's dream, the new warships will be the main weapon and sword that will lead a new race of Hiigarans to return to Hiigara and bring down the Taiidani regime.

N'ahil watched the massive scaffolds,, partly obscured by the mists of the Nebula. He could see the silhouette of the new ship. Day by day, he watched every section of the ship put together, and he marveled about its ingenious construction. Now the new ship was ready to launch.

"Are you proud, Mother?" N'ahil asked.

N'ua replied. "Yes son, I'm very proud." She had tears in her eyes.

A new generation of young officers joined them. Born aboard the ships, they never set foot on Hiigara or any planet at all. N'ua wondered and worried if this new generation would have the same fervent desire to retake their Homeworld as her aging generation would.

In deep respect for her, this new generation also called her 'Mother'. It was as if the entire new generation were like her own offspring and family. She felt proud and warmed in her heart that they have all grown to be such fine, heroic beings. She felt the light of hope.

The officers toasted the launch of this new ship. "What do you think, Mother?" asked one of the officers. "Isn't she beautiful?"

N'ua watched the masterpiece of a ship. The main sections were cylindrical and circular, like a cap, followed by a very long stalk.

"She looks like a giant needle," said another of the young officers.

"Attention, attention please," N'ahil said, ringing a glass. "We will make a toast to my mother, our mother, for it wasn't for her, this great day would not be possible."

"Yay..yay..." the audience shouted and clapped. N'ua raised her hand to acknowledge their cheers.

N'ahil made a new announcement. "The new Khar'desh is about to launch now!" He then walked to his mother's side.

They watched as the scaffolds one by one disengaged from the huge needlelike ship. When the last scaffold was disengaged, there was an uproar and much clapping.

"The Khar'desh is now on her own power," N'ahil announced and the roar of the clapping increased. N'ua ignored him, her attention remain riveted on the giant ship, as it began its first powered maneuvers. She remained that way, transfixed on the ship, as the party went on.

When the party was all over, N'ua was still there in the window, watching the first ever giant Needleship continuing her first trials.

"Mother, it's late already," N'ahil said. "It's time to go home now, time to get some rest."

N'ua smiled at him, then turned to watch the Needleship as it began to make its first journey. "Yes, time to go home," she said.

*** * * THE END * * ***

Appendix

From Jee'nan's Fighting Ships Journal

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I. Ships of the Kadeshi Crusade Armada

During the Homeworld Wars, the first contact between the Kushans and the Kadeshi led to the discovery of the Khar'toba sister ship, the Khar'nak within the Great Nebula, called the Gardens by the Kadeshi. That encounter revealed what turned out to be only part of the immense Kadeshi fleet and society that resided in the Nebula.

After the destruction of the Kadeshi fleet, it was assumed that the Kadeshi were completely destroyed. That proved to be not the case. One assumption that proved wrong was that the Needleships were motherships that housed the main Kadeshi population. Critics called this official assumption erroneous, as the Needleships had to be created by much larger structures, which in turn meant a much larger population needed to man such structures. Once you have this organization, there must be a society, a civilization that would back this up.

During the first encounter, five Kadeshi ship types were revealed--the Needleship, the Multibeam Frigate, the Swarmer, the Advanced Swarmer and the Fuel Pod. Scans also detected a Hiigaran transport derelict ship and a derelict carrier. The transport ship proved to be the sister ship of the Khar'toba, and originally brought the ancestors of the Kadeshi to the Nebula. The technologies for the Hyperspace Inhibitor and the mini ion beam cannon were ahead of anything the Taiidan was able

to make. Although the Taiidan did develop Hyperspace Inhibitor technology, they required far larger structures and had greater power requirements than the Kadeshi inhibitors. The efficiencies exhibited by the Kadeshi inhibitors revealed that this technology was not derived from the Taiidani. The same argument can be given to the small but powerful mini ion beam cannons, whose power cannot even be matched by the mini ion beam cannons developed by the Somtaaw and Paktu for use on the Dervish Multibeam Frigate. The presence of such high technology implements in a regressive society had analysts looking for answers.

One popular theory was that they were captured from alien ships that ventured and trapped in the Nebula. But that begs the assumption, who were the races of these alien ships, and if they were technologically superior, why were they not able to use their superior know how to escape? The Taiidani documentation of known races also showed that all the known races neither had superior inhibitor nor mini ion beam technology similar to what the Kadeshi were using.

When the Bentusi loaned the design of the Super Acolyte fighter, it opened a clue to analysts of another theory that eventually proved true---that these technologies originally came from the Unbound themselves.

As soon as the Kadeshi left the Great Nebula, they were immediately faced with tactical burdens of their fleet nature. The nature of their fleet had been a defensive one that subsisted on fast raids and piracy. However, such a fleet is inadequate for a full military campaign, and soon as they left the Nebula, the Kadeshi showed the typical Hiigaran ingenuity and improvisation, developing new ship types to face the vastly greater and more complex tactical requirements of a full offensive fleet.

Another assumption that proved false was that the Kadeshi never left their Nebula. This false assumption never disappeared despite the clear and tangible evidence of Kadeshi Multibeam Frigates caught by the Ghost Ship well outside the Gardens.

The Needleship—It was originally believed that the Needleships were motherships of their own. This assumption would prove erroneous. The Needleships as it turns out, was an advanced assault carrier design of immense proportions, designed to house the Hyperspace Inhibitor generators, its power source, a whole battery of offensive and defensive weapons, and strike craft/frigate size ship building facility with hangers. The whole ship had nearly the firepower of a destroyer and yet support a strike force worthy of a large carrier.

During the Crusade, it was revealed that the Needleships themselves had variations in size and capability. The large Needleships such as the ones encountered during the HW, provided the main striking power of the Crusade Armada, but there were smaller Needleships that were seen leading reconnaissance and resourcing task operations. Fleet Intelligence determined that they represent an "Escort" subclass of Needleship.

The most impressive Needleship was the flagship of the Crusade itself, the Khar'nak. The whole Needleship was intentionally built around the Khar'nak derelict ship that brought the ancestors of the Kadeshi to the Nebula. It was designed this way to provide spiritual inspiration for the Kadeshi fleet, in much the same way as ancient kithiid armies bring religious relics in the forefront of armies

to inspire them for battle and to bring the blessings of the gods for victory.

The Flagship itself housed a Siege Cannon, another derelict from the ancient Hiigaran Imperial era. The output of the Siege Cannon is a port on top of the Needleship's mushroom structure. The whole structural needle stalk itself served ingeniously as a barrel for the cannon. The cannon had greater power than one used in the Kuun-laan and Faal-Corum, but required a longer recharge time. It was noted however, that the armor around the Cannon proved to be thin and weak, due to the need for excess energy dissipation requirements.

The Multibeam Frigate—They represent the main striking power of the Crusade capital ship fleet, despite the introduction of the Assault Pod. These MBFs are a vital threat to any capital ship fleet and a small pack can devour even a heavy cruiser in less than minute.

The MBFs are based on an ancient Hiigaran frigate design that were adapted to use the mini ion beam cannons. As such it had a simple, functional chassis design. Its drawback is the poor coverage of its cannons. This makes it difficult to use in wall formations. In order to keep its guns at the target, the MBF had to perform a barrel roll. Such a maneuver is unusual for a ship of its class.

To deal with the MBF, the so called G'aas Maneuver was developed, named after its inventor, Four Star Admiral G'aas Paktu, who led the defense of Hiigara against the Crusade. Essentially it is a running, flanking tactic. An Assault Frigate or Dervish MBF engaging a Kadeshi MBF would try to out turn and head for its rear. This would force the MBF to turn to the limits of its agility, but during the maneuver, the frigate is temporarily unable to keep its sights on the Assault or Dervish frigate. With the greater coverage of the weapons in Assault and Dervish frigate, the Assault and Dervish frigate would be able to sustain fire upon the Kadeshi MBF.

Another disadvantage of the Kadeshi MBF lies with its vulnerability to strike craft, due to its poor weapons coverage. This however, is typical of any Ion Beam Frigate (IBF) including the Turanic Ion Array Frigate.

Pod Class of Frigates----This chassis design seemed neither Hiigaran or something the Kadeshi developed themselves. It is speculated that the design was based on a captured transport from an unknown alien race. Whatever its origins are, the Pod chassis proved to be a versatile design.

Improvisation had been the trademark of the Crusade engineers. With no time and limited technological resources to develop all new ship chassis, Kadeshi engineers relied on adapting existing designs. This meant lower cost and easy production at the expense of superior specialization of what a from-ground-up design could deliver.

The main Pod type encountered during the Homeworld Wars was the Fuel Pod. Despite its non combatant nature, the Fuel Pod packs a mean medium cannon that could do severe damage to any opposing frigate, making it better armed than a Supply Frigate or Hive Frigate. Despite its vulnerability, a pack of Pods could well destroy a Destroyer.

With the introduction of newer, more efficient fighter drives to the Swarmers, the numerous Fuel Pods faced obsolescence. Not wanting to waste existing inventories and a proven design, Kadeshi

engineers improvised new types that gave a new lease in life to the otherwise obsolescent Fuel Pod. The better days of the Pod chassis would prove to lay ahead.

a.) Assault Pod---Removing the refuel equipment for the Swarmers, the Pod was fitted with a second medium cannon, doubling the firepower. The result is effectively what experts called a Gunship. The Assault Pod proved to be an excellent backup to the Kadeshi MBFs. The shortage and demand for ion beam cannons also made the Assault Pod a valuable substitute.

Its disadvantage lies in the poor weapons coverage that makes the Assault Pod vulnerable to strike craft. Particular targets of Assault Pods are Gravwell generators that were used often in an attempt to neutralize Swarmer swarms.

b.) Grappler Pod---This is in fact, the Kadeshi Salvage ship, or Salvage Frigate for that matter. Analysts had long speculated for the Kadeshi to pirate transports, they must have a salvager ship somewhere. During the Homeworld Wars, these ships were not found, and only with the Crusade was the mysterious Kadeshi salvager revealed.

The move of the Salvager role from a Corvette to a Frigate seemed unusual for most analysts, but it had its advantages. The Grappler is invulnerable from gravwell frigates. It packs the same formidable medium cannon used in the Fuel Pods, and its extra compartments meant that a boarding crew can be housed. It has strong thick armor that gave it a high survivability rate in battle. The Grappler mainly uses gas to incapacitate the crew of a captured ship. The use of gas has its advantage---the Grappler can decide if they want to kill the enemy crew or capture them just by choosing either poison gas or sleeping gas.

c.) Bomb Pod---One of the more cynical designs, it is really a pod filled with quantum explosives. Intended for suicide attacks, the sheer magnitude of the explosions caused by these ships would send shockwaves that damage or destroy ships in neighboring areas. The Kadeshi has no end to the supply of fanatics willing to pilot such ships. However, they thought that if someone is to make a sacrifice, it must be worth a big bang. This is the reason why the Kadeshi never resorted to using fighter designs for suicide ships, but choose a large frigate chassis instead.

d.) ResourcePod--Another false assumption was that the Kadeshi relied purely on piracy to sustain themselves. However, most analysts relying on their common sense speculated that the Kadeshi were protecting the Gardens because they themselves harvest it like a farmer protecting his fields. The large sophisticated societies that the Kadeshi revealed would have required larger resources than what piracy could allow by several times over.

The Kadeshi do have their own indigenous resourcer, but also would use captured resourcers. The Resourcer Pod was an improvisation to bring a cheap, maneuverable design needed to harvest asteroid belts that were more prevalent outside of the Gardens. It must be noted that the Kadeshi Resourcers were optimized for gas collection, leading to huge, expensive designs, whereas the Resourcer Pod was better suited for resourcing rocky debris and asteroids.

It is observed that the Kadeshi Resource Pod allow for docking and refuel of Swarmers.

e.) Missile Pod—When the Kadeshi developed the Missile Swarmer strike craft, there came a need to provide a frigate that can continually supply these fighters with missile stocks. The Missile Pod is essentially a Fuel Pod that also contains a small assembly line for missiles.

The Swarmer—This fighter is not only the main strike craft of the Kadeshi, it is the most feared weapon, and the most devastatingly effective of all. The huge swarms of these craft rushing towards your ship have become a terrifying symbol of certain death. The Swarmer combines the performance of a Scout, the hide of a Defender and the firepower of a Heavy Corvette in a small package that cost cheaper and faster to make than any known fighter. The unusual structure of the Swarmer, with a spinal cord that ends with a tail, echoes the same structural design philosophy as the Acolytes. This has led for some analysts to believe that the Swarmers, like the Acolytes, were originally from a Bentusi fighter design. However, the Swarmers do not have the same linking technology as the Acolytes.

It is remarkable that of all known races, the Kadeshi never required a Corvette class strike vessel. The enormous firepower of a Swarmer—equal to a Heavy Corvette---would take care of that. But most importantly, the reliance of only a single strike chassis meant that the Kadeshi had pure advantages of production volume. This meant that the Swarmers could be built in lower costs and faster time than any other fighter. This is also crucial in the light that the thin Needleships do not contain enough ship building capacity to build a variety of ships. The lessons here are now being studied by both Hiigaran and Taiidan Fleet Commands, discarding the entire corvette class with the goal of building a single inexpensive unified fighter of heavy firepower and great performance that can be built by a new class of small inexpensive carriers. A partial implementation of such an idea has already taken place with the Somtaaw's Acolyte.

The superior attributes of a Swarmer did not come with a cost. The large armament and overpowered engines leave little room for fuel capacity, and the range of the Swarmer is only a third of that of a Kushan Scout. This poor range is sufficiently only for a defensive interceptor but not a ship raiding vessel--the Turanic Bandit has almost six times the range. This odd attribute laid a question to most analysts' minds about the original purpose of the Swarmer, that it was originally primarily a defensive craft.

The poor range meant that Swarmers have to refuel often, and the fuel supply ships known as Fuel Pods have to be drawn closer to the battle front where the Swarmers can dock and refuel. This vulnerability was exposed during the Homeworld Wars, when Kushan strike forces targeted Fuel Pods for destruction, leaving Swarmers drifting in space without fuel.

In view of the poor fuel capacity, the Kadeshi designed a second chassis with a more efficient drive and increased fuel capacity. This would become the Advanced Swarmer. The AS increased the size of the lower pod structure to house even larger armaments and fuel capacity. The more efficient drive and increased fuel only incrementally improved fuel endurance, but some analysts insist that the improvements were insignificant. It seemed that the increased mass of the fighter meant that the Advanced Swarmer drive had to power harder to retain the same level of performance as the standard Swarmer. This increased fuel consumption, negating the advantages of an increased fuel

capacity and more efficient engine.

The main advantage of the Advanced Swarmer was the switch to a quadruple cannon array from the standard dual cannon system used in the Swarmer. The smaller cannons sacrifice punch, but double the amount of shells they can throw into space, increasing rate of damage and probability of hits.

Compared to the mass drivers of Kushan and Taiidan fighters, the ones in the Swarmers seemed primitive and inefficient. While they have a superior firing rate over other fighters, they also have a much shorter range, despite their long barrels, considerably longer than the ones used by Kushan and Taiidan fighters. This does not seem to hinder the Kadeshi somewhat, as they prefer to come in close to their targets before shooting. But the poor technological quality of the Swarmer cannons were in contrast to the advancement represented with the mini ion beam cannons used in the Kadeshi MBFs. This further reinforced the suggestion to analysts that the ion beam cannons had an alien origin.

Shortly after the Beast War, an event would happen that would dramatically alter Swarmer evolution and made it the formidable offensive weapon seen in the Crusade. The Kadeshi were able to capture a Somtaaw Acolyte, and with it, access to the technologically advanced highly efficient Bentusi engine, also known as HE. In the grand tradition of technology cloning and copying the Kadeshi had established a reputation for, the drive was adapted to the Swarmer design.

The result was an upgraded, "Super Swarmer" that greatly increased the endurance of the fighter without performance sacrifice. This meant that the Fuel Pods can stay further back from the battle, or even eliminated at all, as the Swarmers now can return directly to the Needleships and assault carriers to refuel. With the surplus of Fuel Pods, the Pods were modified to adapt to new tasks for the fleet. Hiigaran Fleet command never came up with a new designation for the upgraded Swarmers and Advanced Swarmers, and still refer to them by their original name.

As the Crusade went on, the demands laid for the Swarmer became heavier. No longer just capturing mere transports lost in the Gardens, the Kadeshi have to fight full battles against Turanic, Taiidani and Kushan capital ships. Despite the already impressive firepower in existing Swarmers, the Kadeshi religious hierarchy wanted a more powerful strike craft against these capital ships, and they do not have a true corvette. However, they do not have the time and luxury to come up with an all new strike ship design.

With a tradition for resourcefulness, and improvisation a true Hiigaran race is known for, the Kadeshi chose the potentially versatile Advanced Swarmer chassis as the basis for a new line of Strike Swarmers. The large lower pod provided enough space for differing armaments.

The first is the Assault Swarmer. This is basically the AS fitted with the deadly medium caliber cannon used in the Fuel Pod. This gave a little fighter an almost frigate like punch. The design drawback is that the firing rate of the cannon meant that the ship is not as good tackling other fighters than older Swarmers. This requires Assault Swarmers to be escorted by other Swarmers. This is essentially, the first of the Strike Swarmers that filled an attack bomber role for the Kadeshi. Disadvantages of this type includes the higher cost and longer building time than required for an

ordinary Swarmer.

The second type is the Beam Swarmer. This is an AS fitted with the mini ion beam canon found in MBFs. The Beam Swarmer was brought about by a change of Taiidani tactics. At first tactics to neutralize Swarmers centered on Gravwells, until the Kadeshi learned to target gravwells with Assault and Bomb Pods. The Taiidans shifted their defensive tactics to Field Frigates and Defense Fighters, which greatly neutralized the Assault Swarmer's firepower.

Seeing that ion beams are not affected by Field Frigates and Defense Fighters, Kadeshi engineers placed a mini ion beam cannon in the weapon compartment of the Advanced Swarmer. At a slightly greater cost in weight, the Beam Swarmer proved to be a formidable strike craft, handling the same role as the Beam Acolyte was for the Somtaaw fleet. The ion beam however, made the Beam Swarmer an inferior anti-fighter ship, and other Swarmers are required to escort Beam Swarmer wings. Another problem is its high cost relative to other Swarmers, and like the Assault Swarmer, seemed subjected to the same long production time.

To deal with the problems brought by the Beam Swarmer, a third type was conceived---the Missile Swarmer. Supplies of ion beam cannons proved to be limited, as demand proved to be high for MBF use. This cut down the production for Beam Swarmers. Along with ion beams, missiles proved to be able to pass through Field Frigates and Defense Fighters. Using technology from captured Turanic Missile Corvettes, a missile rack is placed on the weapons compartment of an Advanced Swarmer and the Missile Swarmer was born. The Missile Swarmer also proved to be capable of its being its own escort, as missiles deal with the fighter opposition surprisingly well.

The disadvantage of the Missile Swarmer is its limited hold. It must return to a new dedicated ship, the Missile Pod, dock with it and reload. Because it needed to reload anyway, the Missile Swarmer used stocks of old Advanced Swarmer Drives instead of the more advanced HE (High Efficiency) Acolyte derived drive. This lowered the cost of the Missile Swarmer and its production time. Nonetheless, there were plans to use the HE drive on Missile Swarmers, but the end of the Crusade came before these were implemented. Despite the ceasefire, it is believed that such ships are undergoing trials. The Missile Swarmer proved to be an effective supplement to the Kadeshi strike wings.

Spy Swarmer—Little is known about this ship, and even after the Ceasefire, the Kadeshi refused to provide details or even acknowledge of its existence. But analysts were speculating that the Kadeshi were using spy ships scouting areas ahead of their main formations. Analysts have taken liberties to portray how a Spy Swarmer would be like.

The ship would be based on an Advanced Swarmer using the HE drive. The weapons are removed for sensory equipment and for more fuel capacity, and it is possible that mimic or cloaking generators may be onboard.

Kadeshi Assault Carrier---Little is known about this type. It is apparently based on the derelict Hiigaran Empire era carrier found in the Gardens. As the Needleship is based building around a hyperspace inhibitor, some compromises have to be made with the ship building and docking

capacity of these ships. The Kadeshi also needed something that can produce quicker than a Needleship. The Kadeshi Assault Carrier, which is similar to a Kushan Emperor carrier, filled that gap. Towards the end of the Crusade, the proportion of Assault Carriers to Needleships have grown in favor of the ACs, a reflection of their obvious tactical value.

Kadeshi Heavy Cruiser--As adaptation of the derelict carrier chassis, the Heavy Cruiser was supposed to provide punch to the Kadeshi armada, as the Kadeshi adjusted to the requirements of a fully offensive fleet. However, analysts consider the Kadeshi HC to be inferior to the Taiidani and Kushan HCs like the Qwaar-jet and Avatar, a reflection of the Kadeshi inexperience on building major capital ship design and their reliance mostly on strike craft.

The Arkships--The Kadeshi were originally thought to place their population on the Needleships. But some analysts disputed the original Fleet Intelligence observation that Needleships were motherships, and the bulk of the Kadeshi population had to be in ships even far larger. Two issues damaged Fleet Command's theory, and they inevitably proved to be true.

The first is that the Needleships had to be built by a far larger structure. Second that structure had to be manned with a much larger population.

Similar to the newly discovered nomadic L'hosh race, the Kadeshi developed huge motherships, each nearly three times as big as the Kushan mothership. Called Arkships, each can hold up to a maximum of 1 million souls, and the Kadeshi after three millennia, made 12 of these ships. The Arkships contain farms for food production, temples for worship, factories for chemical and resource synthesization as well as ship building factories. It is observed that they seem poorly armed for their size.

After the Crusade, Kushan observers cited the slums and poor living conditions in the Arkships, which seemed in a state of deterioration. There was much sympathy for the Kadeshi population, the majority of whom seemed to live in abject poverty. There was speculation that indeed, if Arkships continue to deteriorate, the Kadeshi indeed would need to migrate their population to a planet.

Kadeshi Resourcer--Little is known about this type, but it seemed to be based on a captured Bentusi barge design. The Resourcer seemed optimized for gas collection in the Nebula, and its thick destroyer class hide was meant to resist the dangerous radiation and rock streams in some parts of the Nebula.

Probe Bomb---This is indeed a cheap weapon. This is a one shot probe fitted with quantum explosives that can send shockwaves to damage targets nearby. The Kadeshi often use this to preempt gravwell based enemy defenses.

Excerpts from Page 2: "Interview with Engineer Qu'haar Somtaaw, Designer of the Beam Acolyte."

Q: When you were aboard the Kuun-Laan, the Bentusi had given you the Super Acolytes but told you that they would remove all knowledge of the craft after it's purpose was done, what thoughts were running in your head?

A: Well, we know that the Bentusi had advanced computer technology so they could tap into our computer banks and erase the data. We also know they, as the Unbound, had some sort of telepathic power. So we cannot trust that information in our minds and computers. For a while, we have been working on a Beam Acolyte of our own before the Bentusi loaned us the Super Acolytes. However, we had encountered cooling problems when we were trying to adapt the ion beam cannon from the Dervish into the Acolyte chassis.

When we got the Super Acolytes, I took my camera and quickly photograph as much of the internals as we can possibly can in the short time we have. I also got my audio recorder and made a voice recording as we quickly explored the internals. Of particular interest to us was the cooling system.

You see the key in producing power in an ion beam cannon is to keep it cool. The cooler you can keep it, the more power it can generate and sustain. There is no limit of power you can build inside an ion beam cannon, but if you can't cool it fast enough, the damn thing will blow.

Suffice to say, the Bentusi gave us the amnesia treatment, but the we had the photographs and the voice recordings that provided us with the breakthrough that led to Super Acolytes of our own, the Beam Acolyte. The only thing we could not master is the Beam Modulation technology the original Super Acolytes had, that particularly tuned the Ion beam frequency against the Beast's defenses. But even if we photographed that, we still could not grasp the principles behind it, so that part was clearly unattainable.

Q: Did you ever had the chance to study the Kadeshi equivalent, the Beam Swarmer?

A: Yes we did through a captured example. We also have captured samples of the Kadeshi MBF. The Kadeshi worked out their beam cooling systems long ago and perfected it to a tee. The Beam Swarmer also had a larger weapons compartment that allowed for a larger cooling system to be installed. We did not have that luxury, the space inside an Acolyte was quite compact. We even had to remove the Linking equipment to make room.

Q: Are you satisfied with the performance of the Beam Acolytes so far?

A: Oh yes. The Beam Acolytes have performed magnificently in battle. We were using Beam Acolytes against evolved fragments of the Beast and with pockets of Imperial resistance, but the Crusade was the first real test of the fighter to be deployed in a mass, decisive scale. By then we have an upgraded version that resolved production issues and flight handling bugs.

Q: So what is your next project?

A: We're developing a pulse ion cannon. As you know, we shoot big beams off the cannons. That sucks when it comes to rate of fire and that's not good against small, fast fighters. Here, we divide the energy into a rapid series of pulses, sort of like a rapid mass fire cannon, but using ions. We will be soon fielding the prototype into test trials.

Q: You know you are up to the award of the Star of Sajuuk?

A: I am grateful and honored to be nominated by my peers and the members of the Daiamid.

Excerpts from Page 12, "Interview with Four Star Admiral G'aas Paktu, the brains behind the Baal-Haasim, Hiigara's first true new Assault Carrier."

Q: What is an Assault Carrier?

A: Simple. It is a carrier with the firepower of a destroyer. Our previous carrier designs have poor capability against capital ships. Because of this, they have be escorted by large numbers of frigates or destroyers as they go into enemy space. To maintain such a fleet is itself an expensive proposition. If a carrier cannot stay in the front lines, it has to launch its strike craft further behind. More fuel is consumed, there is less endurance over the battlespace, fighters have to take a longer time to return to the carrier. This can be a life and death matter if the strike craft is damaged or has run out of fuel. The effectivity of a carrier is determined by how close we can bring it to the battlespace, and the closer it gets the more danger it will get. We need to counter that threat by equipping a carrier with some firepower on its own.

Q: So when did you think about this?

A: I was a pilot aboard the Mothership when we first encountered the Rancor, which is a Turanic Lord class carrier. Somehow the idea behind the Rancor stayed in my mind when I thought about the feeble protection they have equipped the Emperor and Shaman carriers. They have repeated the same mistake the Taiidans did with their carriers. As usual, I had a lot of opposition with my colleagues who are purists pledged to defend the sanctity and elegance of their concepts, without putting an ounce of common sense that every carrier put into battlespace will inevitably be subjected to capital ship attack. My model of an assault carrier was the Rancor. Whatever problems the Lord class carrier has, it does not seem insurmountable and can be designed around such.

So I approached the Liirhra about whether they can build such a ship and they indeed can. The Paktu Kiithsa agreed and the matter was brought to Fleet Command and the Daiamid. Approval was given for the construction of the Baal-Haasim. The light of the threat from the Kadeshi Crusade was an important factor.

Page 25, "Interview with a Turanic Royalty, Princess Zha of the House of Khor"

Q: How do you like Hiigara?

A: It's really a beautiful world. I like so far what I see. I have been in a planet before.

Q: It's not normal for a teenage girl like you to have your own carrier much less a task force.

A: It's burden and a responsibility as well. That comes with being royalty, losing your father, inheriting all he had. There were kingdoms and empires when children suddenly had to be kings and emperors. That's a pretty heavy burden so if you think about it, I got off pretty light. I guess I had to grow up pretty quick. I also had some good advisors It's a long story and I'm not in the mood to discuss it in length.

Q: I heard that you are a major ship enthusiast?

A: Yes, I like fighters. I custom them as my hobby in my spare time. Having your own carrier is definitely an advantage. I collect some fighters.

Q: Any favorites?

A: I used to have custom Fiirkan. Pretty fast ship, nice to handle. We picked up some surplus Arrows and I had recently test flown an Acolyte and a Blade Mk 6. But my favorite is always the Triikor. It's got nice looks, and its easy to work at it. I got some Kadeshi Swarms and they're awfully fast.

Q: Any plans you have, any relationships you are in?

A: Since this thing is going to be read by a lot of people, I like the opportunity to advertise our services. We can do escort work in the Outer sectors, do mercenary work.... Whatever deed you need, we will do. Having your own carrier and a task force means a lot of bills to pay, so we need to keep working...

(end)

Firefight's note: I cannot believe this story is 178 pages long! I also can't believe that I went and built this monster into a PDF and even spell checked and added a Table of Contents! Sheesh, this is easily the epic of HW:C storytelling! Crobato, you own me! Big Time! :-)