



Lucrative Business : Chapter 1 - RBA\_Armageddon :: 01-03-2001 ::

He surveyed the course of the battle. The Taiidan were losing terribly. He watched as a Hiigaran Destroyer pulsed out four flaming energy rounds from its converted mass drivers into a Sajuuk-Cor class Ion Cannon Frigate. The ship's spinal-mounted Ion Cannon snapped in two, and a large shockwave of flame rippled across space. He pressed several buttons on his holoprojector, and the view of the battlefield zoom out to take in the whole of the battle. He sighed, and, with a clawed hand, he switched it off, and the room was once again in darkness.

He said over the comm., "How long?" Captain Lance'hek replied, "We estimate that, within five hours, the battle will be lost. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to move into the heart of combat, and escort the Destroyers Powerful Flame and Quicksilver out of the system. Chances are you won't be able to change the tide of the battle, but at least you'll be able to save some people."

Klu'Koth was confused. "Captain, you're a Republic officer. Why are you helping out the Imperialists?" The reply sounded weary with age. "Well, the Imperialists are a bloodthirsty people, and they are a bit vengeful in their decisions, but they are still Taiidan, and I feel a bit responsible for them. Do what you can. Lance'hek out."

The Turanic officer sighed again. He called up the bridge, and said, "Ensign Ken'lom, plot a course for the Hiigaran system, maximum speed."

"Yes, Magistrate," the reply came out crackled.

He got up from his desk, and walked out of his quarters. Before he walked out, he looked around, and felt a powerful surge of nostalgia sweep over him. Fifteen years ago, this room housed Magistrate Lorn, and this Carrier was his. Fifteen years ago, he was ordered to head out to the Great Nebula, on a mission that very nearly killed every one of his men.....

And, for some reason, Klu'koth felt that this mission was going to be very similar. He brushed the feeling aside, and began walking towards the bridge. The past fifteen years had been anything but uneventful. After the mission to the Nebula, and Klu'koth took control of the greatly reduced fleet of the Swift Death, he had plotted a course to the Galactic Core, near the Hiigaran system and far away from his home. Turan was several thousand light-years away, and he hadn't seen it for over fifteen years.

However, here in the Core, there was much excitement. He was employed on many occasions to make raids on Hiigaran convoys, but he also helped out the Republic and the Exiles in his career. Since he heralded from the Turanic sect Gul'daan, he was unopposed to working on both sides of

the war. While it had been slowing to a stop lately, this latest attack on Hiigara may be the spark needed to start up a full-scale conflict.

He ran his fingers along the dulled bulkheads as he walked. The Swift Death was a fine ship, and though it seemed dark and dilapidated like most Turanic vessels, he had done what he could to preserve it. Along the course of the last few years, he had amassed a fleet of five Turanic Ion Cannon Frigates, two squadrons of Turanic Interceptors, and six Standard Corvettes and another six Missile Corvettes. He figured that that would be enough to last for this coming mission, and hopefully if they wouldn't directly attack the Hiigaran forces, they probably wouldn't be confronted.

Or so he hoped.....

In any case, it was too late now. With a quick lurching feeling in his stomach, he knew they were in hyperspace. In a half hour, they would be in the middle of a violent firefight.

When he reached the bridge, it was only a few more minutes until they got out of hyperspace. All junior officers stood up straight, and one of them, the comm. officer Kellis, said, "Captain on deck!" He nodded to all of them, and said, "At ease." He remembered being that young, snapping to attention as his Magistrate entered the bridge. Now, he was reaching middle age, he was almost eighty Turanic years old, and in another twenty he could retire. Not that he would take that opportunity. If he could help it, he would continue fighting until he was a hundred and fifty.

He sat down in his captain's chair, and said, "Everyone, when we reach Hiigara, I want us to deploy fighters in the Kelm Sarl maneuver, with four flights of six." The Kelm Sarl maneuver was when the fighters were deployed in small flights to protect the limited Fighter-defenses of the Turanic Ion Array Frigates. Since it was often Bombers who had the punch to destroy a Frigate, the superior engines of the Interceptors made this maneuver, even with few fighters, a very effective one. "For the fifth Ion Frigate, have three of our Thief-class corvettes, and three Missile Corvettes go in Sphere formation around it. After that, have all five of our Frigates go in Sphere formation around the Swift Death. Once we are there, I will launch in my Corvette to rendezvous with the two Destroyers, and I want the other six Corvettes to defend me in Sphere formation."

The tactical officer acknowledged, and began relaying the information to the flight crews. Klu'koth asked, "How long until we reach the system?" The nav. Officer responded, "In about two minutes, sir."

He said, "I will be in the hangar bay. Now, everyone, this may be a tough battle, and if we try to antagonize the Hiigarans directly, we may surely lose. Our main objective is to escort the Taiidan vessels out with little difficulty. Since there are no secondary objectives, we must keep the whole fleet with each other to maximize survivability. Good luck."

He stood up, and walked out of the bridge towards the hangar. Good luck, indeed.

He entered the large hangar, and walked across the long catwalk to reach the turbolift. He looked down at the three levels of the hangar, the top two able to hold a squadron of fighters each, and the larger bottom section that housed his twelve Corvettes. He looked at the two armed guards flanking the turbolift as he approached, and they both gave a short military bow.

The one on the left approached him, and said, "Welcome, Magistrate. Follow me." He gestured to the other guard, who obligingly activated the turbolift doors. Klu'koth knew his way from here, but it was always nice to be escorted.

When they were in, the guard closed the doors, and the other one entered with him. He stood straight during the whole ride, and Klu'koth was impressed by the image he gave off. Standing only five feet tall, which was considered short by most races in the galaxy, he still gave off an impression of lethal force. His black-chrome battle armor, with Klu'koth's personal insignia blazoned on the breastplate, complemented the alien's earth-colored, thick carapace. Slung across his back was a long, and state-of-the-art pulse rifle; booty from one of their last raids.

Klu'koth smiled. To the rest of the galaxy, they were a bunch of hardened, ragtag mercenaries, with no sense of diplomacy or order. However, they did have a standing council of the fifteen sects of their race, and rank and official orders only added to their military discipline. Unlike that idiot Lorn, Klu'koth wanted every one of his men working at top efficiency and obedience. He never disappointed them in his promises of victory and celebrations, and they had yet to disappoint him in their diligence.

The turbolift shuddered to a halt, and the doors opened onto the Corvette bay. As he exited, the guard saluted, and said, "Good luck, sir." He turned back just as the doors were closing and saluted back. He continued walking through the floor, and watching all of the large Corvettes begin to hover and take off, and he reached his Corvette, which lay in the center of the bay.

As the technicians backed away from it, having finished touching it up, it was rather awe-inspiring. While certainly not the strongest ship in the fleet, the Taiidan Heavy Corvette was a sight to see, anyway. Definitely not the most spacious ship, (He had heard that the Hiigarans called their version "Coffins,") it only housed seats for two people in the cockpit, and no back rest area like most other Corvettes. The ship gleamed light from its polished surface, and it hummed with its destructive power. As it was Klu'koth's personal Strike Craft, the Penetrator, he had made some powerful modifications to it, like increasing its paltry maneuverability and speed by a good 30%, and enhancing the combat sensors to improve targeting of the most threatening ships in range.

He saw his pilot already climbing into the lower seat in the double-decked cockpit, and when he had strapped himself in, he looked at the Magistrate and said, "Welcome, Magistrate. Feeling lucky about this mission?" Klu'koth replied, "That depends on how well you've been practicing, Esh'lar. All have to do is point and shoot."

Esh'lar grinned, and declared, "Today, I feel that I could take over a planet with only this one ship." Klu'koth chuckled, "Perhaps an uninhabited one, but that's only a maybe." He glared back, and he was the only person who Klu'koth allowed to get that angered with him. Were it not for his superior piloting skills, Klu'koth may have been killed long ago.

He grabbed hold of the handholds on the hull, and climbed up to the upper section, the gunner's chair. Esh'lar flipped the cockpit switch, and the canopy closed down on them, locking in place with a click and a hissing of pressurized air. He surveyed the hangar from his high vantage point, and saw the remaining six Corvettes being manned and starting up. Klu'koth put on his flight helmet to drown out the loud sounds of the engine exhausts kicking in, and he heard a beeping sound in his helmet comm., which he responded to by clicking his comm. twice.

A crackled voice came through, "Magistrate Klu'koth, this is Bandit 4. Bandits 4-6 are up and go." Indeed, he watched the three standard Corvettes hit their engine boosters and exit the violet-lit hangar. He then heard, "This is Wolf 1. Wolf flight is go for launch. The three Missile Corvettes lifted in the air, waiting for the Penetrator to join them. Esh'lar pulled at the pilot's yoke, and

Klu'koth felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. His pilot pushed the joystick forward, and brought the throttle up to seventy-five percent thrust, and they swiftly flew out of the Swift Death.

When they were out, Klu'koth looked around, seeing the battle ensue in the distance. They pulled off a hard U-turn, and they leveled off to fly above the Carrier's top hull. They began to speed up to reach the two Taiidan Destroyers in the distance. He saw three Corvettes move up to flank them on each side, and they began to arrange themselves in a sphere around the Penetrator. However, that meant that one of them blocked the view from the front.

He spoke in his comm., "Bandit Six, can you move out of our line of fire?"

"Sorry, Magistrate," he said, and promptly drifted up and to port.

When he saw that they were twenty kilometers away from the destroyers, he spoke into his comm. on the standard Imperialist frequency, "Attention, Destroyers Powerful Flame and Quicksilver. I am Magistrate Klu'koth of the Turanic Carrier Force Swift Death. I have been assigned to escort you out of the system. Come with us."

The reply sounded irritated, "This is Captain Grekor of the Destroyer Powerful Flame. There is no chance in hell that we're leaving. Don't you see that we're winning? As we speak, I have sent out my Bombers to subdue a whole flight of Firelance-class Ion Frigates. Our other Frigates and Destroyers are currently battling the Hiigarans, and we have been able to down a few of their elite capital ships. Go home, Magistrate. You're not needed."

Klu'koth was annoyed at his arrogance. Curious, he searched the battlefield for Grekor's Bombers. Indeed, there was a whole flight of them harassing some Ion Frigates, but they had fallen under attack by fighters of an unknown origin. Frowning, he searched the Taiidan technical database for that kind of vessel, but it came up blank. Obviously, it was a new type of ship. Targeting one of them, he noticed a seal painted on its hull; a curvy U shape, with a star stamped in the middle. Looking like a kiith seal, he ran that through the database, and it came up with one entry:

HIIGARAN; KIITH SOMMTAWW.

Flipping briefly through it, he learned that the kiith, mainly composed of Mothership Sleepers, were a kiith of miners, only about 25,000 strong. The entry had only been updated several years ago, so he began running the update software through the GalNet. Several more things came up, like their debates on joining Kiith Naabal, and, at the end, there were three names that piqued his curiosity; FAAL-CORUM, CLEE-SAN, and KUUN-LAAN. There was no information on those ships, obviously they were classified or something. He made a mental note to research them back on the Swift Death, but for now, he checked the sensors, to find that the Sommtaww fighters had wiped out all the Bombers, and to finish off they went off chasing an Imperial Heavy Cruiser.

He was impressed. They were supposedly miners, but they weren't too bad as warriors. And this little incident would give him some leverage in his bargaining with the Taiidan.

"Captain Grekor, it seems like your Bombers have been prematurely stricken from service, and your Heavy Cruiser will join them shortly. I think it will be in your best interests if you come with us."

An unfamiliar voice came over communications, "Maybe he's right, Grekor. After all, we have lost a good deal of ships; maybe we should leave while we have the chance."

"Listen, Kellis, I'm not going to go through this argument. We have no idea who they are working for; perhaps they will bring us into the hands of Republic Security Forces. Besides, only a coward

runs from the climax of a battle."

"No. A hero is one who knows when he is beaten; a fool is one who stays for too long."

"Traitor! I should have you killed for this!"

"Look, if they were working for our enemies, they could easily have destroyed us by now! Either we die here, or take our chances. I'm going to take the latter option."

"You idiot! Stop right now, or -"

The line abruptly cut. Through the new silence, Klu'koth heard Kellis say, "Quicksilver to Swift Death, you have my agreement to come with you. However, I don't think that Grekor will be so willing."

Klu'koth sighed. "Fair enough; if he wants to die, let him. We're sending you the nav coordinates to make a safe hyperjump. The Ion Frigates are generating a lot of interference with their beams."

"Acknowledged."

The Quicksilver powered its drives, and began hulking forward, and Klu'koth watched as the crazed captain of the other Destroyer turned to have all weapons bear on it. "Esh'lar, move us in close. I want to chew up this bastard's toy." He nodded, and the Penetrator and her escort began to swoop in like wasps to sting this large bear.

He powered on the mass drivers, and switched on his targeting screen. Using the turrets' limited articulation, he managed to get a good shot at the turrets. His bullets pinged off of the hull as the turrets turned to their new threat, the Ion Cannons still gnawing at the Quicksilver. The Powerful Flame fired out an energy torpedo that zipped through the sky, and hit Bandit 5, on the port side of the Heavy Corvette. Esh'lar strained to negotiate the turbulence, and then increased to full throttle to make a strafing run.

When they were mere meters from the hull, Klu'koth punched powerful holes into it with its weapons, and he watched as the powerful missiles from Wolf flight detonate on its surface, vaporizing the nearby metal. When they cleared the Destroyer, Klu'koth lifted a safety device from one of the weapon controls, and the ship turned to face the engines. He fired a charged shot, which rammed into the thrusters, and set most of them on fire or offline.

He saw his fleet of Ion Array Frigates rake their red beams across the hull, dissecting it with flames. When they punched through to the hull, the ship separated into countless trillion pieces. He grinned, but he quickly dropped it when he saw a group of six Firelance frigates near his fleet. While the Hiigaran vessels were not as fast as his Frigates, they were far more powerful, and could easily take out his capital ships without problem.

"Swift Death, how long until you reach the hyperspace buoy?"

"Give us about a minute longer, Magistrate."

"Well, hurry up. I spot at least six Ion Frigates coming your way."

"Acknowledged. Should we fire off our Ion Probes?"

Klu'koth was amazed. "We still have some?"

"Affirmative, sir. We used our PDA to build some during hyperspace. Launching now."

Four small spheres launched from one of the Carrier's auxiliary weapons platforms, and the moved

towards the incoming ships. The Ion Frigates were too slow to avoid the Turanic treat of Ion Probes, and the four of them detonated in a display of blue plasma that tore apart the ships, leaving only one of the ships surviving, but not by much, and the other two continuing on their lethal course.

Klu'koth said, "All fighters, dock now, repeat, all fighters dock with the Carrier now!" They hit their afterburners, and he saw that, in the distance, his fighters, several of whom had suffered some damage, were filing in nicely into the hangar. He watched the range scope decrease until they were practically inside the ship, and a blue beam shot out into their path. "Whoa!" exclaimed Esh'lar, as he narrowly avoided it, but from the scream over the comm., he guessed that one of his other ships weren't so lucky.

When they were very nearly inside the hangar, the blast doors began closing for the jump. They were in with plenty of spare time, but just before they closed completely, he felt the ship rock with agony when an Ion Beam penetrated to the hangar, and it was all Esh'lar could do to prevent their crash landing from being a lethal one.

And, with a final shudder, they were gone. Klu'koth, Magistrate of the starship Swift Death, slumped into his chair. He really needed some time off. As if he would ever get that.

## Chapter 2

What had begun as a simple curiosity blossomed into a great interest.

These Sommtaww, a kiith which consisted of barely a twenty-fifth of their race, were a very resourceful one. Klu'koth looked through the entry again, and was interested at the part about its control over the Mothership's PDA. The two ships, the Faal-Corum and the Kuun-Laan, were very impressive ships. While not combat ships, it managed to have access to a large array of weaponry that made the ship not only more difficult to capture, but even more desirable. The original Kushan Mothership was a very large and powerful ship, but very vulnerable to a full-scale assault. Neither was the Taiidan Emperor's flagship any better. While they could build great ships, they were in themselves not a good investment.

But this ship, the Kuun-Laan, was both a great construction vessel, a mining ship, and a ship that could hold its own in combat. It was the pirates' holy grail. He grinned. He can, and would, have that ship. He scrolled down to the part about the Clee-San. A frigate-sized ship, it was able to process information faster than any vessel in its class. Its scanners recorded everything in a particular part of space, infrared, ultraviolet, and several other kinds of scanning were built into one large scanning beam. A rather interesting ship, it was not as interesting as the Explorer-class vessels.

He shut off the data processor, and he received a call from the bridge. He patched it in, and he heard, "Sir, there is someone on the comm., on an encrypted channel. I can't patch into it, but it told me that you could access the line. It said it was Code Black."

Klu'koth lit up. There was only one conceivable person that could send a Code Black message. "Yes, I'll take it." He heard a robotic voice speak now, saying, "Please enter the encryption code." He thought back, and replied, "Turan 11089-Omicron." After a second, the voice replied, "Code accepted. Line coming through."

His holoprojector turned on, and the head of an aged Turanic materialized. Klu'koth breathed in sharply. "Leader Jomlau, it is an honor." The face nodded. "And I share that honor, Klu'koth Gul'daan. You have proved to be an able warrior. I heard of your recent victory for Captain Lance'hek. That was a rather brave thing you did." Had the Turanic been able to blush, he would have in response to praise from the highest member of his sect.

"I doubt that this was merely an excuse to chat, good Leader."

He nodded. "You are perceptive. Actually, it has to do with a special business offer I had in mind. Are you interested?"

Klu'koth parroted his teachings, "A Turanic lives for money and Turan. Why would I refuse?" Jomlau replied, "Perhaps this will count for both of those. Recently, a mining fleet from the Res'coom sect ran into a Hiigaran research vessel in the Coruc-Tel system. It is a top of the line ship, barely a year old, called the Clee-San. Have you heard of it?"

Klu'koth became fully attentive. "As a matter of fact, I was just researching into that ship's history." Jomlau continued, "We tried to share the discovery with the Res'coom, as we were escorting their fleet at the time, but they were reluctant to divide the prize. As they are in their infancy in terms of combat, this was.....unwise."

Klu'koth winced. What had to be done in this profession had to be done.

"We have a crack slicer team from the Harkk'hah sect decoding their computer core, and we have the crew under interrogation, but it will take time to get all of their knowledge. If we receive such information as where their forces are weak, and what their weapons systems are like, we could be sitting on a wealth of knowledge. As a loyal member of the Gul'daan, you are entitled to a share of the credit, if you would be so kind as to offer the assistance of your ships and crew to defend us."

He quickly replied, "We will be there before the day is over." His leader nodded. "We appreciate any help you can give. Leader Jomlau out." The image dematerialized, and Klu'koth called the bridge. "Ensign, lay in a course for the Coruc-Tel system. Scan the system for any Turanic vessels, and bring us in close."

"Yes sir. Course laid in."

Klu'koth grinned. The Clee-San would be a very valuable prize indeed.

When they jumped out, the Nav. Officer reported that they were 200 kilometers from the Clee-San. Klu'koth hailed the nearest vessel, which happened to be an Imperial Heavy Cruiser. "Swift Death to Knock-Out. We have arrived in system, and are ready to move in to assist with the Clee-San."

The voice of Jomlau replied, "Ah, Klu'koth. Glad you could make it."

He said, "That is a nice ship you have there, Leader. Where did you get it?" The voice responded smugly, "Well, if it takes more than helping out in a skirmish against the Bentusi once in a while to be offered one of these, then I got a very good deal."

Klu'koth smiled. "Do you want us to move directly to the Clee-San?"

Jomlau replied, "No, that is ill advised. We have been placing mines all over the area to ensure safety from attacking forces. The problem is, they're very antiquated Minelayers, and the mines will be attracted to any Frigate-class or higher vessel that gets within range that isn't emitting an explicit engine harmonic. We ourselves are having trouble adapting our ships, and only a few are actually within the perimeter. We can have a technician team shuttle over to make modifications, but that will take time, and it would be better if you could fly over there now in a small craft, preferably with an escort of your best programmers. We still haven't cracked that core yet. I will be waiting for you there."

Klu'koth nodded. "We will comply, Knock-Out. Swift Death out." He gestured to the comm. officer to switch the comm. off, and he got out of his chair to go to the hangar. He picked up his personal communicator, and declared, "Suit up, Esh'lar. We're going for a ride."

It was only when they got to the Clee-San, which was now "protected" by a sphere of mines, that the two of them realized that there was no docking pad to speak of on the research frigate, so they were forced to enter vac-suits and float through space to the airlock. Esh'lar commented, "Damn, these suits are cold!"

Klu'koth said, "Well, they haven't been used in four years. You should be glad they work at all." Esh'lar grumbled something unintelligible; very likely derogatory.

When they reached the airlock on the rod-shaped vessel, Klu'koth saw that another Corvette, a modified Multi-Gun Corvette bearing the colors of a Turanic Leader vessel, and sporting the Gul'daan crest, was hovering outside of the ship beside the Penetrator. That meant that Jomlau was already here. It took them a little effort to crank open the airlock, and pulled themselves inside the ship.

When they cleared the inner airlock doors, they unlatched their helmets, and saluted Jomlau and his escorts. The old Turanic said, "Welcome to the Clee-San. Very nice, don't you think? I admire how neat those Hiigarans are. Follow me."

They walked down the bright corridors, and he noticed that more than one of them in the group were squinting their eyes because of the increased light level. Most of them had been working on the usual dark Turanic vessels, and obviously the Taiidan flagship had been modified to accompany their preferences.

They reached one room, which was labeled, flanked by two Sommtaww crests, CENTRAL COMPUTER CORE. Jomlau explained, "We moved the hostages here, so that we could focus on both tasks in one place. Will your programmers arrive soon?"

Klu'koth shook his head. "There were some problems with our "Brigand"-class Corvettes, so they have to be delayed by about an hour. Until then, we could help out with the hostage interrogation. Jomlau conceded, and opened the doors.

Klu'koth saw the massive, torus-shaped core, which was covered in bright lights and computer screens. Turanic hackers were sweating over the security systems as if they were conducting major brain surgery with a shard of glass. In the corner of the room, a beaten up Hiigaran officer, judging from his garments, Klu'koth assumed that he was the captain of the ship, was being tormented by large soldiers.

One of them, a large, six-foot Raider, slapped him on the face, and with serrated claws for hands, that was rather bad. "What is the password?" The Hiigaran officer merely smiled weakly, blood glistening off of his cheek. "The code is E-A-T S-H-....." Another slap.

He walked over to him, and asked, "What is your name?" The Hiigaran officer, obviously unaccustomed to anything other than questions about confidential information and vicious beatings, looked at him with a wary eye. Then, he said, "My name is Captain Chezzo." He nodded, and while the soldier did not enjoy this form of interrogation, he let him continue.

"Why were you sent to Coruc-Tel?"

"We found pockets of heavily ionized gases in the system. We were hoping that we could find something that would improve our plasma containment fields. We were hiding in these iron-rich asteroid belts when our hyperdrive malfunctioned, and while we were making repairs you bastards jumped us."

Slap! Klu'koth did not object to that one.

"How many ships does your race own?"

He grinned a bloody, toothy grin. "Nice try, but I knew what you were trying to do all along." Klu'koth hung his head. "Besides," he continued, and he raised his head. "Do you really think I know the numbers of every ship owned by my people? Your entire race has about 20 to 30 carrier groups amongst you."

Klu'koth glared. "So far as you know."

He shrugged. "Some of our individual kiith have that many, and they are being spread across the galaxy as we speak, each carrier spawning more and more ships. You pitiful pirates will never exterminate us like your friends did back on Kharak. Not anymore."

Klu'koth realized that this was a rather intelligent and confident man, and it would take much to break him. Then he had an idea. "You know," he said. "It's funny how quickly you people want to leave home." The officer blinked. "After all," he went on, "you've spent all this time just trying to get to Hiigara, and now, you have your race leaving in hordes. Why not just stay with that desert planet of yours', and used the Mothership hull to build more than enough ships to help you guys out? I think your whole Exodus was a futile effort, if you want to know the truth."

The officer was silent, and he knew he'd struck a nerve. All he had to do was push it.....

But before he was able to go any further, he was interrupted by a warning klaxon. He turned to the other officers, and one of them clutched their helmet, listening to something. He snapped to attention. "Sir! Explorer-class vessel reported in the region, sir! Engine harmonics signify the Kuun-Laan, sir!"

Jomlau moved into action. "All hands, prepare to attack! All fighters prep crews, and go in! They are probably trying to rescue the Clee-San!" Klu'koth rubbed his clawed mandibles together in glee.

When it rains, it pours.

## Chapter 3

He and Esh'lar had boarded the Penetrator when Klu'koth asked over the comm., "Leader Jomlau, do you want us to defend the Clee-San?"

The reply came, "Negative, Magistrate. If that ship moves, it will fall prey to our mines, and be easily destroyed. We have evacuated the vessel, with one prisoner. Concentrate your attack on the Kuun-Laan, destroying the weapons and hyperdrive engines."

He acknowledged, but then something struck him. He called up the Swift Death, and asked the sensors officer, "Lieutenant, how did the Kuun-Laan learn of the Clee-San's location without taking any ships to the location?" The reply was, "We aren't sure, Magistrate. The Kuun-Laan appears to have used one ship as a comm. relay, but we aren't sure how that is possible."

Klu'koth looked around the battlefield, which was being filled with bulkier ships than those Acolytes, apparently called ACVs. They proved very capable in the skirmish, but their valiant Missile Corvettes fought them back. The Kuun-Laan was being swarmed by Turanic fighters, and its highly articulated turrets were able to track some of them. However, a module on the top section of the ship, it looked sort of like a research deck, exploded, giving the Turanic army some hope for victory.

He cycled through all the fighters in the battlefield, and when he had been doing so for a few seconds, Esh'lar said, "Magistrate.....could you cycle through those ships again?" Perplexed, he obeyed his pilot, and when he got to a particular ship, he ordered, "OK, stop!"

The highlighted ship looked like a Turanic interceptor. Klu'koth squinted at it. "So?" Esh'lar replied, excitedly, "So, sir, its designation is Scythe Seven. I was just talking to the Scythe members, and they reported only having six fighters in their squadron." Klu'koth froze. "Are you absolutely sure you aren't mistaken?" Esh'lar shook his head. "No sir. Setting a course now."

Klu'koth saw on his canopy that "Scythe 7" was only a few clicks from their position, and they were apparently racing towards something.....The Leader's Corvette! He said, "Full power to the engines, mass drivers online!" He gritted his teeth. "Come on, you sneaky bastard!" He realized that these Hiigarans must have learnt their secret for mimicking vessels. Very clever.

They reached the target, and he let loose with a barrage of fire, but they overshot it, and it kept on its suicidal course. "Leader, if you read, there is a mimicked vessel coming your way! Evasive maneuvers!" They made a sharp bank to the left to get back on course, and realized that it was already too close. The ship smashed into the Corvette, detonating its fusion drives to cover the ship in destructive flame. A secondary explosion tossed debris through the cloud, and Klu'koth smashed his hand on the controls.

"No!"

He ordered, "Esh'lar, move in to attack the Kuun-Laan. We're going to give them something back." He nodded, "Yes, sir!" They moved to starboard to confront the massive starship, and Klu'koth began firing out particle rounds from the Corvette's cannons. They were unable to penetrate the massive

ship's hull, however, and merely only created small dents. To add injury to insult, the Kuun-Laan's turrets began to turn to face his Corvette, so he said, "Move, move! Don't stay in its path!"

They dodged the bullets, and fought back in a futile manner. He tried instead to target the Sommtaww fighters, but he noticed that they were gliding into the massive hangar. He fired at them in rage, but they did not respond. The hull of the mining vessel's armor plating began to crackle with blue energy, and after a few moments, a blue wall began to engulf it. They had jumped out of the system before he knew what had happened.

He swore repeatedly under his breath. There was nothing he could do, and the Clee-San was gone. They had failed to extract their information, and now they had lost everything. And to top it all off, Leader Jomlau was dead.

Twelve officers sat around the table. At the end, one seat was empty, and he was pretty sure who would sit there. And, he was right, he realized as the doors into the dark room opened. The figure became illuminated under the lights of the table. Klu'koth sat up with the others and bowed. "Welcome, High Magistrate Marselk."

He nodded, and waved him down. He walked over to his chair, and sat down. His commanding voice reverberated through the silent room. "This emergency of the local Turanic leaders is now in session. We are fortunate that this situation has brought many of our powerful forces to the core. At this very table, we have Magistrate Mej'hol....." An ageing Turanic warrior stood up for the approval of the rest. Marselk continued, ".....who has been able to pacify a whole force of Tiamat Frigate warships in the Bentara system. And we also have Magistrate Klu'koth, who recently helped out our Imperialist allies in a skirmish in the very Hii garan system."

Klu'koth grinned in self-satisfaction. "Your praise is unnecessary, High Magistrate." He glared back at him. "So is your praise." He immediately stopped smiling. The head officer continued. "Now, we will discuss the pursuit of the Sommtaww fleet, but first, a more pertinent issue must be resolved."

He cleared his throat and raised his voice. "I speak of the replacement of Leader Jomlau. We need to elect a new leader for our sect, lest we should collapse into anarchy. Were we close to Turan, we could inquire the Council as to their input, but since our Homeworld is dozens of thousands of light-years from here, that isn't a feasible option. Thus, a temporary one must be assigned until we can relay the message back to the Council."

He concluded, "I pick myself."

The meeting went into disarray, with every member voicing their own opinion on the subject. Knowing that it would change nothing to add to the chaos, Klu'koth remained silent. As the volume died down, an older Raider spoke up. "Listen, good Marselk. I am far more experienced than you. I have fought cataclysmic battles before you were even born. Why are you more worthy of this position than I?"

Marselk replied, "Listen, Haar'kohm. I am of a higher rank than you, so I automatically am more qualified." Haar'kohm glowered at him. "Merely because you have served as the Leader's lapdog for the past five years. Who are you to lead us?" He smiled back. "I assure you, that combat experience has nothing to do with leadership abilities."

Mej'hol stood up. "No, it is you who are mistaken! Combat and honor are what built up this culture in the first place. To shrug it away for your own political cravings is treason." He turned to Klu'koth. "Magistrate Klu'koth, have you any say in this? Your fleet is famous for your survival of the Kadeshi Gardens." He looked around the attentive room. He coughed a bit, and offered, "Well, I see no real problem with Marselk being Leader. As he said, it is only a temporary position. It wouldn't hurt for him to drink power for a few months."

Haar'kohm said, "You know that this station isn't temporary. Do you think the Council will concern themselves with our sect? The Gul'daan are not the most powerful sect, you know. They will merely shrug off this decision as already resolved."

Marselk said, "This isn't getting us anywhere. We must try to stay orderly. By allowing ourselves to be divided, we are advocating-"

A sharp whine filled the chamber, and it was lit up for a fast instant with green light. A smoking hole lay embedded in Marselk's skull. His figure slumped over, bleeding on the table. Everyone turned to the owner of the blaster. Mej'hol put his weapon back into his battle armor, and walked over to Marselk's body. He shoved it out of the way, and sat down in his chair. He looked at the other members and said, "So, this worm wanted to base our race on diplomacy and rules. While they have improved our race to a degree, that is not what our forefathers have based our people on. They based it on death and fear."

These two words were emphasized by his claws pounding the table. He looked around in anger. "I will enforce these old ideals on our sect. Anyone think that is unwise?"

There were no contradictions.

He smiled. "Good. I will do my best to risk my life to protect you all, and I expect the same from you." He laid back in his throne. "Now, about the Kuun-Laan. Despite EM fluctuations caused by the mines in the system, our astrogationists have plotted a likely target system based on their speed and direction. I have already sent the orders to plot the course.

"Now, we know that we failed because of our inability to approach the mines with our Frigates, even though the Hiigarans were able to easily plow through them. But now, we will be able to jump them immediately after they exit hyperspace to set up their game plan. While their flagship is impressive, their fleet is less so. It consists of only a few squadrons of fighters, and larger mining vessels that should prove no threat. Therefore, we will be able to use our Frigates to lay siege to the Kuun-Laan and, at the very least, capture the Clee-San.

"However, I also plan to take over the Kuun-Laan itself. A ship that massive, with such advanced technology, could allow us to crank out our own Capital Ships and Super Capital vessels far faster than before. If we capture that Mothership, we could forge our own massive empire right here in the Core. The rest of our race will envy us totally, and our enemies will fear us equally so. That is our goal."

He finished, "Now, you all realize the importance of this mission. It could drastically change our very way of life, and with any luck, we will get it very easily.

"Barring any unforeseen circumstances....."

## Chapter 4

"Hyperspace target will be reached in three minutes," said the Swift Death's conn officer. Klu'koth spoke in the comm, "Leader Mej'hol, what is the battle plan once we reach the edge of the sector?"

"Our four Carriers will stay behind to form a defensive barrier. That includes your ship. The Knock-Out will head over to the Kuun-Laan, along with sixteen of our Ion Frigates."

Klu'koth frowned. "But we have twenty-five Ion Frigates. What of the other nine?" Mej'hol confirmed, "Yes. We need to have more people staying behind to prevent the Hiigarans from slipping through our ships. That means your entire fleet has to stay in reserve."

He frantically tried to argue, "But, Leader, we have more power in numbers. We would be more intimidating. You can't leave a fourth of the fleet in behind!" The reply was condescending, "Look, Magistrate, in the case of a surprise attack, we can't afford to use all of our ships in one wave. And if there isn't, then we will be able to overpower them with little effort at all. Remember, they have no combat Frigate force."

He growled. "I assume that you'll be carrying the flag?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm onboard the Razor right now. I figured that it would be better for morale if I accompanied you rear guard people. Besides, much as I love combat, I am getting old in age. That last mission took it out of me. I need to take a breather. Don't worry, everything will go as planned."

He grunted, wondering if that were true. The viewscreen went from swirling blue to dark starfield in a few seconds, and he could see some of his Strike Craft fly forward to make a defensive perimeter around the Knock-Out, which was being trailed by several gray Ion Array Frigates.

He called over the sensors officer, and ordered, "Lieutenant Vark, patch in the main viewscreen remotely to the Knock-Out's front cameras." The view then shifted to a view through the Heavy Cruiser, which began moving forward.

"Uh, sir?" said Vark.

Klu'koth looked over to the Lieutenant's station. "Yes?"

He looked down at his console, and back at his CO. "I am detecting two engine signatures out in the distance, one is the Kuun-Laan, the other is.....well, I don't know. I think it's Sommtaww, but it is a bit twisted. I don't know how to explain it."

"Could it be the Clee-San?"

"No. Both of them are Mothership-class, and yet, both of them are registering as the Kuun-Laan. Oh, now this is interesting....."

"What?"

"Well, sir, if it were a trap, we would obviously notice several hundred lifeforms onboard, unless

they evacuated, and, say, rigged it to explode. But I'm reading only one massive bio-signature, and it seems to be emanating from the entire ship simultaneously. Not only are these readings off the scale, but they don't register as any life form I know of, least of all Hiigaran."

Klu'koth thought hard. Something very, very wrong had happened. He called Vark, "Enlarge the image a hundred-fold." The viewscreen changed to show an image of a large ship. He said, "Magnify it again."

The image was clearer, and it was rather disturbing. It looked like a large section of the Kuun-Laan, but rather different. A reddish patch of.....blisters or something.....had encroached all over the length of the hull, and it seemed to be crackling with electricity. That certainly did not seem right.

"Leader Mej'hol, are you reading this?"

He replied in a rather relaxed tone, "Oh, yes. Interesting plan, those Hiigarans have set up, but it won't stop us from going forth."

He persisted, "I'm uncertain about this, sir."

"I'm not," he concluded.

Klu'koth was frustrated; he did not believe they should move forward, but their insolence prevented him from doing anything. All he could do was watch.....

The dialogue between the Knock-Out and the Kuun-Laan was garbled, but he decided that it was far from as compelling as the sight of what would happen a few seconds later. The viewscreen showed a close-up view of the Kuun-Laan's lower section, and something that looked rather like a turret, but seemed more like a biological appendage, was turning to face the Heavy Cruiser. It then flashed out a blinding light of red, and the view turned to static.

His heart started pumping. "Vark, shift view to encompass the whole battle fleet." Something was wrong, and he knew it all along. The view showed the Heavy Cruiser become invaded by the red bio-matter that had been on the Kuun-Laan. And the sounds from the ship were even more horrifying.

"Sensors down! Weapons down! Hull integrity failing! It's draining our power!"

"Oh my GOD!"

".....it's coming through the walls! It's spilling onto the floor! Ahh.....AAAAAAH!"

"SHIIIT! IT'S EATING ME!"

"(gunshots) It's sucking up my rifle's blasts!"

"-it-over-everyone dead-help--!"

Klu'koth watched in grim fascination as the Heavy Cruiser deflected the beam to hit another ship in the formation, which began the steady assimilation that the Cruiser went through. That ship consequently knocked it to the next ship, and the next and the next, until every ship in the fleet was

now a distorted nightmare; a fiendish amalgamation of biomass and metal, a mere shell of what it once was, yet filled with an evident evil.

The worst part was about to happen. Half of the fleet continued on its path to partner with the Kuun-Laan, the other half, including the Knock-Out, turned around to return to the Turanic fleet.

His eyes widened. He grabbed the comm, "Now do you believe me, Mej'hol?"

"You are obviously perceptive, Magistrate. Begin revving up your hyperdrive for an emergency jump. Don't even bother launching a defensive screen, just get out of here!"

Klu'koth replied, "Don't worry about that. Half of my fighters were assimilated in that attack. I don't know what the hell happened, but I'm not going to think about it now. How long until you guys can jump out?"

"About three minutes."

"Hmm. It should be about the same for us." Three minutes seemed like no time on different circumstances, but it was 180 seconds where only one second was needed to bring on utter failure.

He walked over to the conn, and punched the buttons on the console, to calculate the optimum hyperspace route. He then went over to the tactical console, and inquired, "Commander, are you recording all of this?" He nodded. Anything that transpired here would be subject to scrutiny once they entered hyperspace. "Well, quit scanning the whole sector, and intensify your scans on a tight-beam reception aimed towards the enemy fleet. I want all the available power to record as much as you can about this thing."

Feverish with activity, he then called up his five Ion Frigates. "Hellcat Group, increase velocity to get in front of us. I don't want you endangering your lives for our sake." He paused. "And stay at least ten kilometers away from any of our vessels. If one of us gets hit by that.....infection weapon, I don't want it to spread to the rest of us."

He couldn't afford to be inefficient at this point in time. He moved over to his throne. "Vark, give me a visual and range of the incoming fleet." The viewscreen shifted to show the eight Ion Frigates and Heavy Cruiser. "Range is twenty clicks and closing. ETA to jump is one minute."

Not good. That meant they would be here twenty seconds before jump. He said, "Tactical, launch some of our Ion Probes to scatter the fleet." The officer complied, and the floor shuddered as the rail gun launched their special breed of destruction. Klu'koth remained hopeful.

As the Ion Probes continued along their course, eventually entering the viewscreen's field of vision. The Probes got close to the Knock-Out, and they seemed to have succeeded, but to no avail. A structure seemingly identical to the one mounted on the Kuun-Laan module had been erected on the Cruiser, and it fired out a red beam to smash into one of the projectiles. The bio-material encrusted the hull, and the infection spread to the rest of the Probes. They abruptly froze in their flight, and turned around to fly back to their owners.

Things just got worse and worse.

The probes got close to the Ion Frigates, racing past the Carrier. Most of them detonated against the hull of one ship, and it began to infest the ship, except the combined force of all of them exploding ripped the ship apart before it could be subverted.

The last one did not have enough destructive force to rupture the hull, but it was able to propel the techno/bio virus along the whole of the ship. It crackled with enigmatic energy, and before long it had been taken over by the enemy force.

Four dozen Turanic lives lost. And a ship added to the enemy force.

The captured ship was close to the Swift Death, and it moved in sharply on an attack vector. The ship rocked from the impact of accelerated ions. A red light flashed on and off, producing an annoying strobe effect.

"Turn that damn thing off!" he ordered.

"Sorry, sir, I can't find the alarm controls!"

Dammit. Even through the epileptic-inducing light, he could see that they were twentyseconds away from autohyperspace, but the enemy wave was already on top of them. The Heavy Cruiser came within weapons range, and it fired its horrible red beam.

Klu'koth brought up a holographic model of the Swift Death. He saw that the beam had winged the vessel, hitting them on the top side, on their main comm. radar. The red organism began to creep down onto the main hull.....

"Computer, eject the main comm array, authorization code 448-Alpha-Omicron! NOW!!!"

The radar shot off from the main hull mere seconds before the stuff brushed the hull. The Carrier's main Ion Cannon shot out at it, melting the metal and matter into nothingness. Heat kills everything.

Before the cruiser could charge up another shot, they escaped into a tunnel of blue light. He slumped into his chair. They had made it, but only barely. He turned to his men. "Begin researching into that organism. I want everything you have on it. This has massive priority. We won't get anything out of this, but we can lose all if we just turn the other cheek."

## Chapter 5

"The 'Beast'?"

Klu'koth wrinkled his nostrils at the rather unoriginal name. His head biologist, Myar'ko, shrugged. "Don't thank me; thank Somtaaw creativity. Along with our own records, we used the surviving Hurr'kan slicers to tap into the Kuun-Laan's crewmember logs. That's what they've decided to call it."

Klu'koth replied, "Well, I guess it's a justified name. What have you found out?"

They were the only three in sick bay, along with Mej'hol. While the floors and walls were all painted the same dulled, dark colors that adorned the rest of the Carrier, but the room was clearly very hygienic, and the air was filled with some odd, antiseptic scent. That said, it was not a very modern sick bay, not that any Turanic one was. So long as bones weren't protruding from your skin or blood coming out in pints, you were considered not only healthy, but fit for duty.

Klu'koth, Mej'hol, and Myar'ko stood in front of a holoprojector, which the scientist switched on. The dark room was lit up by an image of a Turanic Ion Array Frigate. The name of it eluded Klu'koth at that moment, but he recognized it as one of the ships in the attacking force on the infested Hiigaran module.

Myar'ko played the recording forward, and a red beam struck the vessel. The image froze, and zoomed straight into the red beam. The three observed that the beam "carried" several small robotic creatures. They looked rather like small, silver beetles, but covered in the odd, reddish biomatter that they had all come to fear in the past 48 hours. A green line pointed at several of them, and at the other end of the line came Turanic hieroglyphs that explained several different aspects of the nanoprobes, such as size and composition, but Klu'koth ignored these trivialities.

"This," he began, "is the Beast. Several million little nanoprobes that are carried on a beam of plasma that we have dubbed the 'infection beam.'" He moved the holograph to follow the trail of the beam, up to where it impacted on the hull. He zoomed in more closely, and played the tape. The probes latched onto the surface of the ship, and spread out as more joined their companions. The probes sunk their metal claws into the hull, and used very tiny cutting lasers to break off pieces of the hull, which they then assimilated and, using what really looked like miniature PDA systems, replicated more of the nanoprobes, which snuck into the ship and across the stretch of the frigate.

Watching the horror show again, the Turanic Magistrate couldn't help but wince. The doctor said, "These nanoprobes can apparently metabolize both metal and organic tissue. However, they are really nasty when they assimilate a living being. This next footage came from the security holocams within the Knock-Out."

The picture showed a huge swarm of nanoprobes crawl over a Turanic soldier, and began to.....dissolve the body from the outside inwards. With almost nothing left of the body, including bones, the nanoprobes and their trillions of new siblings continued to encroach the bright hallways of the Taiidan cruiser. "Nothing you can see is new, but what you don't see is that they use the body's life energy to create a direct neural link with the ship's central computer. We still don't know the

exact process, but it has something to do with what we believe is a telepathic nature of the organism, and some kind of transmitter system on the probes. In any case, the Beast reproduces by assimilating any ship it touches, with enough probes, that is, and assumes control of it."

The image was now showing some sort of cell, dyed in red hues, with several massively alien organelles in its membrane. "This is a Beast cell. As I said, it can break down both metal and living cells. It has a special kind of molecular acid in its cytoplasm that allows it to do so, and prevents self-annihilation by having its cell membrane and other organelles coated with some kind of silicon compound that the acid cannot break through. Even at the core, they are part machine," he observed.

"They must obviously be telepathic creatures, because the countless different drones work alongside each other, working to the same ends in practically the same way. I have conferred with the head biologists on the other Carriers, and we agree that there must also be a hive mind that holds power over their actions, possibly made up of an amalgamation of several billion nanoprobe, but it may also be a non-corporeal intelligence; we're not quite sure," he admitted.

Klu'koth asked, "And where would this Hive Mind be?"

Myar'ko speculated, "I think it could be on the Kuun-Laan module. It is the first thing it has come into contact with for God knows how long, and it is a rather large ship. That would be the logical guess."

Mej'hol was grim. "What is the rate of infection?"

"Well, sir, depending on size and abundance of biomass to infest, we think it could subvert a whole planet within the span of, say, 82 hours.

Klu'koth shivered. "Who in God's name could possibly create this?"

Myar'ko was not helpful. "We don't know who originally produced them. But....."

"Yes?" both senior officers inquired.

"I have a strong suspicion that the Somtaaw have revived it."

"WHAT!?"

He nodded. "Well, apparently no one knows of this organism's existence. Not even the Unbound races. And when I had the slicers download the Kuun-Laan's logs, I noticed that they picked up an interstellar probe in a distant system; one of our very small recon forces tried to attack it during that time. I think that that probe was the cause of the infection of the ship's lower decks, which in turn infected much of our task force."

"So," said Mej'hol. "You're saying that the Hiigarans have unleashed a biological entity of mass destruction upon the galaxy?"

"Well.....unwittingly, yes."

Mej'hol sighed. "We got far more than we bargained for on this mission. May the gods smile upon

us."

The Hiigaran officer was rather calm, under the circumstances. He hardly acknowledged the enemy; flicking at the medallion that he held from a string in his hand.

"How many ships?" Admiral Raymar Liir Hra asked, quite detached.

"About fourteen, sir. We think that they have four Destroyers, but the rest are Frigate class."

He thumbed the Kushan crest on the shiny, gold pendant, and felt an elating wave of nostalgia encompass him. Boy, did he wish he could meet someone from their former empire. "No strike Craft, then?"

The officer shook his head. "Actually, sir, those are Skaal-Tel Mark IIs." That meant that these Imperialists had their paws in very modern toys. The Mark IIs were the Taiidan response to their over-dependency on Carrier vessels for transporting Strike Craft. Using Support Frigates, Strike Craft were unsafely exposed to naked hyperspace fields. While the Hiigarans responded with the Troop Transport-a vessel that held over twenty fighters and six Corvettes-that could safely shield them from the effects of the hyper-flotsam, the Taiidan decided to increase the size of their current ships to add hangar bays to accommodate a squadron and a half of fighters (18 ships,) or an equivalent amount of Corvettes, internally. This proved rather effective in skirmishes against the Hiigarans and the Republic, but this officer was still not swayed by fear.

Such was the general attitude of someone who commanded an Avatar-class Cruiser.

Admiral Liir Hra, in addition to his glorious Protector, a vintage Heavy Cruiser from the Exodus, had a pair of Carriers and a dozen Frigates and Destroyer-class vessels under his belt. He was not afraid of his chances against this large, yet un-threatening Taiidan force.

He allowed himself a little guilt, however. As a decorated Admiral from the Hiigaran War, he was granted the Protector and his two Carriers as a gift from the Navy, and he set off to build up his fleet. Finding a large resource field to exploit, he created his taskforce rather easily (albeit a bit undermanned, with many of his Frigates relying on the new 1R and 1U classes of robotic battle droids to operate weapon systems and ship maintenance.) These miserable Taiidani, however, had obviously taken great pains to bring this fleet together, and forced to spare it, in their losing war with the Republic and the Exiles. To them, this battle would be one of monumental importance, and a great defeat.

To him, it would be Friday.

Nevertheless, a good Admiral never let his ego get out of hand, and he paid attention to the Imperialist formation even through his detachment. He ordered, "Keep Assault Frigates Moonshine and Quartz back with our Collectors, along with a substantial portion of Scythe Wing. Have all the other ships form up behind us in Wall Formation, except for the Valiant. Have that come up on our flank to attack their Strike Craft. After half of the fighters are vaped, send in our own Interceptors."

All officers nodded obediently, and began issuing commands to the rest of the fleet. He pulled up his chair's holoplate, and his whole fleet came up above his lap. The Heavy Cruiser had a wall of

nine vessels behind it, with a Missile Destroyer coming up on its port side. The two Carriers sat at the two flanks of the large formation, and the Resource Collectors and their escorts stood a healthy fifty clicks behind them. They were ready.

The Taiidan Destroyers opened their hangar bays and released the frenzied clouds of Fighters and Corvettes out at the Hiigaran fleet. They got in close to the Cruiser, and hit it with their plasma cannons and bombs. They did minimal damage, but the Cruiser fired out a quad-beam of Ion energy at them. It did nothing, but it did rile them up, and Liir Hra wanted them to be nervous. Crazy bees could sting, but they couldn't sting a tank.

Besides, the Valiant was firing its blue projectiles of destruction anyway. The missiles smashed into the fragile Strike Craft, blowing them to pieces. A Taiidan Multi-Gun Corvette flew past the main viewport, with flames gushing out of its starboard engine. Two of his Interceptors flew towards it and released pink energy spheres into the damaged vessel, and it was no more. As they flew above the Cruiser, their swooping wings glinted light off of the nearby stars.

He grinned smugly. Those were Lance-class Interceptors. They were supposed to be exclusively leased to Commander Sjet's Angel Squadron, but through his connections, Liir Hra was able to acquire the blueprints for the Carrier construction bays, and he'd noticed a real change in pilot losses ever since.

He moved his Cruiser towards the main fleet, and his Ion Beams fired into the main Destroyer, melting and chewing through metal to create a flaming hole in the face of the ship. His Ion Frigates approached the fleet from below, and threw their energy beams into the ships' bellies. His Bombers flew in small Delta formations at the head Destroyer, and spewed plasma into the hull, charring the already battered war paint on the ship.

The cockpit rocked as the massive plasma cannons (he'd only just recently upgraded from mass drivers) shot off large balls of fire into the other ships in the enemy formation. He reached into the inside pocket and pulled out his copy of *To Set Sail Across the Stars: A Novel* by the Former Head of Fleet Intelligence (Foreword by General Karan Sjet'sa,) and flipped through the book.

This battle bored him. He checked his fleet's status after forty-five minutes, and saw that his most damaged vessel was the Spearhead, an Ion Frigate that had gotten below 55% hull strength. No matter. He ordered his Troop Transport, the Shield, to repair it in the field. No harm done.

The battle raged on for an hour, and his fleet was going on strong. Then, however, something went awry. One of his officers spoke up, "Captain, something interesting just happened."

He looked up from his book, bemused. "What are they doing now? Launching their Repair Corvettes?" The ensign was not amused. "No, sir. I'm picking up a hell of a lot of hyperspace signatures. Hold on....."

He waited while the ships emerged from hyperspace, and continued, "Sir, you won't believe this, but there are a bunch of Taiidani Cruise Missiles out there. Lots of them!"

Liir Hra frowned. "Those are very old weapons. Only the Imperialists use them anymore."

The officer nodded vigorously. "Yes sir, but the thing is they're targeting both of our fleets. And.....you're not going to believe this.....but they are giving off bio-signatures!" This made no sense indeed. The admiral thought, Why are unmanned missiles giving off energy signatures? Our sensors must be malfunctioning.

The ensign brought the missiles up on the main holoprojector. Liir Hra noticed that all ships had stopped fighting. The hologram showed several Cruise Missiles, yes, but they appeared to be.....infested with some sort of organism.

Their sensors hadn't been malfunctioning. And those missiles were advancing.

"Sir, I'm picking up over seven hundred missiles inbound!"

He sat down, dropping his book.

"Red alert."

## Chapter 6

Klu'koth stormed into the bridge. He scanned the room furiously, "Who authorized a hyperspace entry?"

No one answered him immediately, and he repeated, "Who authorized it?"

Reluctantly, Esh'lar stood up. "I did, sir." The magistrate looked at him. "May I ask why?" The pilot answered, "Well, sir, I was on the bridge when a distress call arrived. It was from a Hii garan Ion Frigate. It only reported that it was fighting an Imperialist taskforce when another fleet hyped in to intercept them, overwhelming their forces."

Klu'koth fumed. "We aren't taught to jump at every distress call made. You should know that, Esh'lar. We have to stay out of battles that aren't ours." Esh'lar nodded, and explained, "I know, sir, but the Frigate also reported that the attacking fleet was giving off anomalous bio-signatures."

Something clicked into place. "The Beast?" he asked, warily.

Esh'lar nodded. "That was my best guess, sir. I deemed it a good opportunity to spread word of the Beast, and test our new countermeasures." His superior slackened his pose. "Or be subverted in the process." He sighed. "Nevertheless, I admire your initiative, Lieutenant. How far are we from the fleet?"

"We got the message five minutes ago. They were only forty light-years away, so we have about twelve minutes left before reversion. There is a chance we can make a difference."

Klu'koth filed this information, and sat in his captain's chair. It had been five days since he, Mej'hol, and Myar'ko held their private conference about the Beast biology. Not surprisingly, the information spread through their large Carrier fleet like wildfire. He noticed many of the junior officers seemed more jumpy than before, and more than one case of powerful paranoia had taken place (their most vivid fantasies were of finding a large amount of Beast biomatter in their quarters.) He tried to console them, telling them that they were warriors, and could defeat this menace. However, he seriously doubted that. Given the options, he wouldn't have fought the Beast for all the riches in the universe.

Upon inquiring how Esh'lar intended to move the Swift Death out of the Gul'daan fleet, and into a massive furball, he replied sheepishly that he'd slaved the navicomps of all the Frigates and Carriers to the Swift Death. Leader Mej'hol would not be pleased.

However, despite the massive sense of fear that everyone felt, it wouldn't have been unusual to have a strong feeling of adventure right now. After all, this was one enemy they knew nothing about. His fleet could become famous for defeating the almighty, terrifying Beast. He liked that.

Several weapons had been built that they thought could do damage to the Beast. Some were biological viruses that could kill off the biological portion of the Beast, but there were other, rather unorthodox weapons like sonic-based energy beams that they theorized could disable the nano-probes. Many they were quite certain would not work, but they couldn't be sure until they'd tested

them.

Well, in any case, they would soon find out how much they really knew.

Things were worse.

Admiral Liir Hra looked at his Number One, a Liir Hra of the name Mel, and inquired, "Commander, I thought that those missiles were attacking both of us." His First Officer shrugged. "Don't look at me, sir. I just work here."

The missiles had ceased to attack the Taiidan about ten minutes after they hyped out, and were instead forming up to escort them to a safe hyperspace marker. However, this wasn't until after the missiles had impacted on two of the badly-damaged Taiidan vessels, and he and his fleet witnessed the horrible transformation that the Beast had performed. His fighters fought back valiantly, as did the rest of his fleet, but the missiles had subverted his Missile Destroyer before it could truly retaliate. The admiral knew that remote-activating its self-destruct mechanism was better than leaving it for the enemy to take over, but he still regretted having to give that order.

He felt the rocking as the Heavy guns on his ship fired away at the rather slow projectiles. They were quite slow, and easy to track as they moved in straight paths, but their sheer numbers more than made up for it, and the Taiidan fighters began to defend them with their own starfighters. Two Scouts flew in to attack one missile, but its escort of Heavy Corvettes smashed them into scrap easily.

He looked at that sight in fury, and opened a hailing channel with the head Taiidan Destroyer, the one that hadn't been subverted. "Imperial Destroyer, what is the meaning of this? Didn't you see your ships get taken over by that.....that.....whatever it is? How can you let yourselves ally with that thing?"

A hologram of a smug Imperial officer obstructed his view of the battle. "Well, Exile, we know when we're beaten, unlike you. And apparently, those missiles have just received an order from their command center that our forces have struck a deal. Now, I could either be insubordinate, and watch as my fleet is taken away by force, or capitulate, and join forces by this obviously more powerful fleet. It was far from a difficult decision, I assure you."

Admiral Liir Hra thought for a moment. "Who are they, and why are your Cruise Missiles under their control?" The officer shook his head. "Oh no, I won't give away priceless info like that. But just hang on. Stick around long enough, and you will be, shall we say, 'drafted' into their army."

The transmission was cut off, and the admiral mulled over his options, which were very few. He sure wasn't going to lick boot like those Imperialist cowards. Hell no. But at this rate, they weren't doing so good.

"Just out of curiosity, Lieutenant, how many more missiles are there?"

A green, young officer replied, "Just over three hundred, sir."

Damn. They had barely taken out half of them, and with the Taiidan on their side, it would complicate things much more than he'd hoped. However, as a commander of a fleet, he had to show

an example of courage. That was his duty, after all.

"Listen up, people. This is an Avatar-class Heavy cruiser. We have six guns and four Ion Beams; this thing can give out a lot of damage and beg for even more. It will take a lot more than a handful of Fighters and Corvettes, and a few hundred archaic Cruise missiles to take us down. Now, I want you to recall the part of Scythe Wing that was defending our Resource group, and tell them to report over here. Our Assault Frigates can take care of whatever missiles head over to them."

His Number One chewed on his lower lip before replying, "Well, actually, Scythe Wing arrived to the main battle a few minutes ago. Our Resources and Frigates were ambushed by a cloaked missile group."

"Oh. I see. ...." replied the admiral, not being his best in leadership. One officer suggested that they retreat, and while he refused, he did not see it as quite a bad idea anymore. Right before he considered ordering his fighters to doc for hyperspace, his sensors officer piped up, "Sir? You won't believe this, but five Turanic Carriers and nine Ion Array Frigates have hyped in twenty clicks off to port!"

He looked soberly at the Ensign, and said, "Please tell me it's good news."

The younger man shrugged. "See for yourself. Patching in the comm. signal now."

A holo of a short, buglike creature appeared in front of him. The admiral never really liked the Turanic. They were ugly, filthy creatures, and their loyalties were hard to ascertain. Still, he would have accepted help from the Tiamat right about now.

"Admiral Liir Hra, this is Leader Mej'hol of the Gul'daan Turanic Core fleet. One of your ion Frigates, the Smooth Flight, sent out a distress call that we picked up. We have vital information about the enemy you are facing, and would be glad to offer our assistance in fighting them off."

The Hiigaran conceded, "Sure thing, Leader Mej'hol. Deploy fighters and Corvettes, and attack all Taiidan Cruise missiles in the area. Disregard those Imperialist warships unless they attack you; our main problem right now is the. ...."

"The Beast," the Turanic offered.

Admiral Liir Hra nodded. Fitting name, he thought.

Klu'koth strapped himself into the gunner's seat of the Penetrator once more. He left Lieutenant Vark in charge of his Carrier; a good officer, but he wouldn't have trusted him entirely in a combat situation. Nevertheless, the Magistrate knew he could make the most difference out in a Corvette, so he accepted the fact that his ship could stand a few hours without him at the helm.

As the Corvette launched swiftly out of the Carrier's hangar, he scanned the area for the Cruise Missiles. One particularly large concentration of them threatened one of the Hiigaran Carriers, and he commanded Esh'lar to take them over there. He brought down his visor helmet, and as the missiles came into view, he saw virtual crosshairs appear close to one of them.

The missile was outlined in a red rectangle, and the crosshairs moved towards it, holding position

when the turrets achieved a target lock. He fired, and red pulses of energy pumped out towards the target. One of the shots wasn't enough to bring it down, but two more knocked out its engines, throwing it off course. It exploded in a flameless shockwave (he figured the carcinogenic fluids were replaced by Beast bio-matter. Coupled with the horrid "infection beam," these Beast sure knew how to reproduce.

The debris riding the shockwave did little to detract the other missiles, so Esh'lar pushed the Corvette forward to get into firing position. Two more missiles went down, and more were vaped by a duo of Defenders that moved in to flank the Heavy Corvette.

Klu'koth looked to his right, and one of the spherical ships retracted its guns while its pilot waved at him. He managed to return a slack salute, but the man had little time to register the reply, as his ship was hit by a horrid red beam, forcing it behind the Penetrator.

Klu'koth looked at the infected vessel, then at the origin of the beam.

"Dammit!" he declared, as he saw the Hiigaran Carrier was infected, and had grown its own infection beams. The other missiles had scattered. He was not about to attack the massive Beast Carrier, for fear of following the Defender's fate, but it didn't matter, as the ship went into hyperspace moments later.

"How many more missiles, Esh'lar?"

"About a hundred, sir!"

Good. But not good enough.

Something on his sensors attracted him, and Klu'koth magnified the image to check it out. Sure enough, one of Mej'hol's Carriers, the Rotaran, had captured five of the Cruise Missiles in a green beam emanating from its Ion Cannon. Fuming, he ordered, "Penetrator to Rotaran. This is Magistrate Klu'koth. Deactivate the Starship Tug immediately! I repeat, deactivate the Tug now!"

The captain of the vessel reported, "Nothing to worry about, Magistrate. We're not so stupid as to bring the Missiles aboard. We're just holding the Missiles in place so that we can examine them."

Klu'koth slackened, but then almost immediately replied, "Wait, the Starship Tug is a plasma beam, Rotaran!"

"So?"

"So, the Beast Infection Beam works on the principles of charged plasma ions, and....."

The warning was too late. Already, the Beast nanoprobes on the Cruise Missiles' hulls began to drift along the green beam coat the Carrier's hull. Frantically, the Carrier attempted to kill them off by firing an Ion Beam through the Tug, but already the infection had begun to spread. Within minutes, the Carrier had become the enemy.

"This is Magistrate Klu'koth to any and all Ion Array Frigates still on our side! The Rotaran has been subverted! Destroy it immediately; we don't want our Carrier technology in Beast hands!"

All nine Ion Frigates moved in to intercept the Rotaran, raking it with blue beams of destruction. However, like the Hiigaran Carrier, the Rotaran also revved up its hyperdrive and warped out of the battle. The Beast didn't want to fight; they just wanted to build up their fleet. And they had succeeded.

All missiles were gone. The Taiidan fleet and all new Beast warships were also gone. The Beast had gained countless new technologies without needing to expend its own Frigates; leaving the job to archaic Cruise Missiles, which Klu'koth had decided were not their own. And this mysterious alliance with the Imperialists.....

Not much was going their way.

Klu'koth, Mej'hol, and the Magistrates of the other two Turanic Carriers met with the Hiigaran admiral aboard his own Heavy Cruiser. The Missile Corvette that had ferried them over to the Cruiser's hangar wheezed down onto its landing gear, the sign of a very aged, and very victorious vessel. However, it had gained little extra victory from its most recent assignment.

The grand Hiigaran admiral, complete in ancient Kushan military garb, bowed to them. "Gloried Turanic warriors, welcome to the Protector. I am Admiral Raynar Liir Hra. And I am in great debt to you.

Mej'hol bowed back. "I am Mej'hol, leader of the Gul'daan sect. These are my head commanders, Magistrates Klu'koth, of the Swift Death, Agam'nar, of the Rusty Hull, and Dath'mir, of the Barnacle. We seek an alliance with your fleet. We have begun a private war against the creature we know as the Beast, and we have much information about it. You, in return, have a large, impressive frontier fleet which has the firepower we need to help us reach this goal."

The Hiigaran nodded. "You are of Gul'daan. I know my Turanic history, and if you weren't impartial to your employers, I would not have let you onboard my vessel. We have only met these creatures once, but we can tell they are a superior foe. We will agree on such a truce, since it could threaten all of Hiigara. Come, follow me to the war room. We must discuss this in private."

In the admiral's war room, the holoprojector in the center of the table was online. It displayed a hologram of an Imperialist Cruise Missile, and what the warriors had discovered because of it was promising.

Mej'hol stood up, being the most senior of the officers in the room, and began to explain the revelation. "This," he began, "as we all know, is a Taiidani Cruise Missile. Back in the days when the Taiidan Empire reigned, Emperor Riesstu III used thousands of these in his skirmishes against the Frern. Instead of wasting his best officers in bloody firefights, he would hype in these weapons within fifty kilometers of the enemy fleet, and they would usually decimate the opponent before they could properly react. Often a control ship would hype in at the perimeter of the battlefield to relay orders to these remotes, although the missiles' tracking systems were unparalleled.

"These were employed several times, with deadly success ratios, in a time when ships were built to be slow and well armored. Few of their targets would be able to outrun them, let alone withstand their explosive yield.

"However, with the advent of the Firrkan-class Scout, and fast-tracking mass driver cannons, these weapons became obsolete, and were easily defeated. Emperor Riesstu IV began his reign already recognizing this fact, putting his military wealth into retiring the old Missiles to build up his Assault Frigates. Since a hundred years ago, the Missiles were never used once."

He tapped up a hologram of a starbase that Klu'koth was unfamiliar with. It had no weapons, and thin armor, but appeared to have a very massive hangar facility for shipbuilding, revealed by its multiple docking bays. "However," he continued, "that does not mean that they were all destroyed. This is only one of the missile silos where thousands of the weapons were stored, for safekeeping. In the event of a civil war, these stations were in classified locations, known only by the Emperor himself. He could draw upon these arsenals in times of dire need to impose his wrath upon the galaxy once again. However, since he was the only person who knew about it, the knowledge of them died with him fifteen years ago."

"The stations' crews lived on, and a few Turanic carrier groups had encountered them, plundering their arms to make them more powerful warlords. Not all were looted, though, and some were reinforced by Imperial warlords that happened to discover them. They held the secret, knowing that it could be advantageous to them."

"We assume that the Beast has infected one of the last stations, and took over the complete complement of Missiles. Scans taken from your Hiigaran vessels, Admiral, revealed their hyperspace course, and confirmed our suspicion. They definitely came from a station known in the Turanic databases. My guess is that the Taiidan reinforcements were quick to cut a deal, knowing they'd been defeated."

He cleared his throat. "We have already told you what we know about the Beast, and I believe our next action is to move to this supposed installation, and learn more about this Beast plague."

Admiral Liir Hra nodded. "One thing, however," he said. "I have dealt with you Turanic before. You have a saying: 'We work for any price except zero.' What do you plan to earn from this mission, Leader?"

Klu'koth spoke up, and everyone looked at him. "My good Admiral, we are working for the highest price imaginable. Survival."

## Chapter 7

"Hyperspace exit?"

"Twenty minutes, sir!"

"Are the new hull modifications complete, Lieutenant Vark?"

The junior officer nodded, "Fully operational. The electrical charge should reduce the rate of infection by at least a third; not slow enough, but it gives us some breathing room."

Klu'koth said, "Our ships?"

Another voice said, "All present and accounted for, sir; including the Hiigaran vessels."

This was it. Their first fight against the Beast that was planned by them, and not thrust upon them. With the new modifications, and the loss of the Beast's element of surprise, this skirmish would be far more rewarding than the previous ones. Yet, Klu'koth felt that there was something more going on; something that they hadn't uncovered yet. They had sent Mimic-enabled Missile Corvettes to spy on the Somtaaw, and the last thing they'd heard from them was that they were hooking up with an Imperialist spy who they thought knew something about the Beast, and their relationship with the Taiidan. However, the information on their results was not going to reach them before they got into this next battle, so the Magistrate had decided to do what he had to do to find out for himself.

The Hiigarans were formulating some theories on the Beast infection beam, and what countermeasures could be used to deflect it. Unfortunately, their efforts had been fruitless so far. And despite their truce, the Raiders and the Hiigarans were never very comfortable in each other's presence.

Admiral Liir Hra was no exception. He flipped through the security camera views from his quarters to survey a Turanic engineer team that was making repairs aboard one of his Assault Frigates. And if anyone asked, he would have to admit his ordering the security robots to pull double-shifts.

The engineers did not seem to be sabotaging their ships, and at least that Klu'koth fellow seemed honorable enough (as a warrior, he deeply admired his successes against the Kadeshi), but he still wasn't too sure about them.

Tired, he checked their nav. status. They were mere minutes away from the Taiidan missile silo. He wasn't tired because of the fact he'd been working twenty-hour days since he first encountered this Beast, or at least not entirely. He felt impotent. It was a feeling uncommon in the elite cadre of Heavy Cruiser captains spanning all sentient races. In their positions at the head of such a powerful warship, they did not even consider death. It took a lot to destroy their ship, and they weren't exactly armless. Even in their death throes, they could, and most crews did, take another enemy ship out with them.

But this Beast.....

They would capture his ship, subvert his crew and himself into mindless slaves, and feel no emotion in the process. At least with a race like the Turanic, who fought for money, or the Kadeshi, who

fought out of powerful fanatic beliefs, one could see why they attacked. And in some rare occasions, one could even convince them to stop fighting (actually, he doubted the Kadeshi were that good.) The Beast, however, would fight to the bitter end, and if their fleet died, did they give a shit?

Hell no. That was the problem fighting races based around hive minds. They considered their whole existence as one big family, but a family that would rather kill itself than run from battle. If a race cannot be reasoned with, and it considers any others as impeding on their space, there is only one sane course of action.

Eradication.

It was cruel, but true. And he would have definitely not have any problems sleeping if he wiped this particular enemy out. Not at all.

He got up, and left his room. Two minutes left.

Mej'hol looked from his bridge chair. As the new Gul'daan Leader, he had immediately ordered the PDA to crank out a fabulous new throne to sit upon. Jewel encrusted and shining platinum, he found no problem with regaling in the opulence he was entitled to.

He heard the pilot count down the seconds to reversion. "Four.....two.....one..... we're hot!"

He sat up, and said into his comm., "This is your Leader," he declared to the rest of the Turanic warships. "Be watchful out there. We know how powerful this enemy, and allied with the Imperialists they can only get-"

He froze. "What the hell is going on?"

Klu'koth saw it, too. There was no space station; no warships; no sign of Beast life.

Instead, sitting there in the middle of space, was a planet.

He turned to Lieutenant Vark. "Are you sure we are where we should be?" He nodded, but checked the navicomp again. "Yes, sir. And I doubt that our records of the station's position was right where that planet was.

Klu'koth frowned, but then a wave of realization fell over him. "Unless that isn't a real planet." Vark looked at him, confused. "Sir?" Klu'koth looked at him. "Lieutenant, do you remember how the former Leader died in the Tel sector? Those Hiigarans took hold of our Mimicking technology and used it to send a suicide unit to destroy his Corvette. What if the Beast captured that technology from our ships, or even those of the Somtaaw? They may be hiding that station under that ruse of a cover.

He grinned at himself. Sometimes he knew everything. "In any case, there is no way the station is as big as a planet, so theoretically, our weapons would pass through the hologram's edges. Fire our Ion Cannon at the Northern Polar Region, and keep sensors primed at maximum."

The blue beam fired out at the planet, and.....boiled a hundred tons of ice into the atmosphere.

He sighed, relieved. At least there wasn't a surprise fleet waiting for them. Though just to be sure,

he sent out a few Probes to analyze the dark side of the planet.

He turned to the sensors officer, and said, "Report on the planet's condition."

"Well, surface temperature is stable at absolute zero all throughout the planet. Not surprising, since there isn't a star out here for at least four light-years. Atmosphere consists of methane and fluorine, which means we can breathe down there, but because of the temperature we will have to go down in bio-suits. Detecting rich deposits of titanium ore and.....what looks like a huge mountain of platinum."

Klu'koth walked over to his station, and saw that, indeed, there was a huge deposit of platinum right there, smack in the middle of this planet in the middle of nowhere. Klu'koth said, "Is there any chance this is some sort of ruse? A trap?" He still couldn't believe any of this was happening. Instead of ambushing a Beast-subverted Taiidan station that no one had heard about, they found a planet without a sun, with a conveniently-laid mountain of precious metal that didn't belong to any one. It seemed like a set-up.

But he had to do something. He picked up his comm., and said to his Collector pilots (he had found it rather easy to acquire beaten-up, but easily repairable Providence-class Collectors in Hiigaran orbit just after the Battle of Hiigara) "Ok, pilots. Listen up. I have been informed that there is a whole lot of platinum and titanium down on that planet. I want you to get the titanium for our PDA, and keep the platinum stored separately. We could get a whole lot of good out of that wealth. There may be Beast presence down there, so never touch down on the surface, and keep an open sensor sweep."

He paused, and added, "No doubt the Hiigarans are going to act upon this new discovery as well, not to mention our Turanic brethren. If they try to siphon the resources away to their ships, don't fend them off, but try to get the most out of the situation."

There was no sign of acknowledgment from them, but he did see the hexagonal ships, repainted in grays and blacks, fly past the bridge and down to the planet. A few fighters followed them, but he called them off. "Commander, do not escort the collection team." He protested, "But sir-" The magistrate was adamant. "No. If there are Beast down there, I want to lose as few ships as possible. And there is nothing you could do if they did attack."

It pained him to give that order, but when it came time to make a sacrifice, he had to pick out the Collectors. And that was assuming that there were Beast down there.

"I'm reading five Providence-class Collectors coming out of the Swift Death, sir. The other Turanic Carriers are also reacting accordingly. Should we launch our own Collectors to the platinum deposit?"

Admiral Liir Hra shook his head. "Do we even have Collectors?"

"Well, sir, the Kull-ani has been building a pair as we speak. They should be flight-ready in four hours."

He thought it over. "No, I still don't think so. Let the dogs have their bone. I say we send down a

survey team to the surface to check the place out. It still seems fishy." The junior officer acknowledged. "Dropship, sir?"

"No, I don't want them touching the surface. Just in case. Besides, the weather down there is damn harsh; I think they would be safer inside a ship. Send down five of our modified Repair Corvettes, repulsor-lifts on. I want them to shunt all power from their plasma guns to sensors, and create a broad-scan of the whole surface first. Then they can make tight-beam scans of the planet's core. If those bastards are waiting for us thirty meters below the surface, I'd like to know."

The Collector hovered ten meters above the surface of the mountain. The metal was severely dulled by the environment, but once they were broken down through the collection beam they would be rebuilt as pure, shiny metal. Boy, something like this rarely happened to anyone, least of all a merc race.

The Collector officer was pleased. The beam shot out from the Hiigaran ship, and began to eat away at the mountain slowly. The control panel screen showed the storage tanks filling up gradually; nothing surprising.

The Collector reported back after fifteen minutes of Collection. "Swift Death, this Collector 589. I am at 57% storage capacity, and have not detected anything anomalous. However, I cannot scan to a sufficient depth with any reliability because of the large pockets of metal. Will report back in fifteen minutes, Collector 589 out."

The Repair Corvette screamed down the landscape. It was pumping out almost 1500 meters per second, and Captain Lance Soban couldn't be happier. He had personally modified this bird for high speed, and had hoped to race it in the coveted Tegrís Junkyard Tournament, but unfortunately he had been forced to return to service and keep this baby flying sedate, repair runs.

Fortunately, since the old Admiral had ordered the RCs to go down and survey the terrain, it gave him a good excuse to try out its turbo-engines. His co-pilots were not as enthusiastic, though.

One of them, (both were Liir Hra, of course) Halen, said, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Lance shook his head, yelling over the howl of the wind outside. "Nah, but if I were, we wouldn't be having any fun, would we, Tek?" Tek, the other officer on the corvette, was the kind of guy who would get nauseous sitting in a chair, so he was currently retching in the ship's bathroom.

But Lance cared little for their objections. He loved speed. Like a fighter pilot, he risked his life every time he flew, but unlike them, he was only in it for sheer velocity. Surprisingly, he couldn't stand hyperspace jumps, which could move someone as fast as 3,000 light-years in only a week's journey. There was no feel of break-neck rapidity that he'd become infatuated with. Let the rest of his kiith get shot at in combat, or those fighter jocks get shot down in a blaze of plasma; the only way he would go down would be at 40,000 kilometers per hour, a death so quick, yet so glorious.

All he had to do was fly around the surface relaying his sensor logs to the remaining Carrier and the Protector, and even he couldn't go too fast for his scanners to search the area. As the dark, methane clouds began to flare up with dangerous lightning, only a small jolt from one of them needed to break his concentration and force them to smash into the ground in a billion shreds of metal and flesh, he tried not to think about the Beast.

It wasn't easy, though. Ever since he watched the first Taiidan ship back there taken over by the techno-nightmare, he couldn't get it out of his mind, like all other Hiigarans in the fleet. The thought of an enemy without fear or remorse, or even anger, scared him. They only hungered, and when they were hungry they fed. And the Beast was always famished.

He saw a bunch of natural obstacles that he thought would help to destroy that train of thought, so he banked hard to starboard while Halen checked his restraining belts. They approached a large boulder, and he cranked down the repulsor-lift cushion down to two meters; not enough to hit the ground, but enough to improve the thrill immensely. They reached the rock, and he hopped over it with a mere flick of his wrist on the joystick.

Along came a series of interesting arches, which kind of looked like the ribs of a very large animal. He zoomed through them, finishing the last one by making a quick loop around it before blasting forward. He performed a barrel roll in mid-air, which caused the port wing to barely scrape the ground as it raced by, and also to cause a yell of protest emit from the restroom. Lance laughed. "Sorry, Tek!"

He continued down the horizon, when he saw the ground seem to break up in front of him. They shot off the cliffside like a bullet out of a mass driver, and they began falling diagonally down to the hard ground. Lance leveled the ship out, and let the controls go. Halen eyed him nervously. "Lance, what are you doing?"

He grinned. "Nothing, Halen. Just trying to have a little fun, that's all." His co-pilot went white as he watched their altitude quickly drop from seven hundred meters to fifty in mere seconds. They were careening down to the bottom at terminal velocity, and he closed his eyes to prevent watching the crash.

And then they stopped. They rather abruptly went from impossible speeds to zero velocity. Halen opened his eyes, and glared at his colleague. "No matter how many times you do that, I get frightened every time. You know, that repulsor-lift mechanism won't last very long if you keep making these foolhardy stunts."

Lance only shrugged, and began plotting in a new course. "With an insurance coverage like mine, I can afford to act like a bastard." They began to go forward, but slowly enough to allow the queasy Tek to get out of the restroom and strap himself into the third chair. He looked at Halen accusingly, but he only gestured off-handedly at Lance. Lance knew he could be a bastard behind the wheel, but as long as he had his precious speed, he really couldn't care less.

They flew around for a bit when Halen pointed something out. "Lance, go closer to that."

He looked up from his speed-trance. "What?"

Halen pointed, "That."

He saw. He got in closer to it, and parked the Corvette. They entered the howling atmosphere in their bio-suits, and walked closer. It was a miracle that Halen spotted it; it seemed to be embedded in the ground. But it was there.

It looked kind of like a starship airlock, but seemed sealed shut. Lance tapped it with his knuckles, and it seemed pretty solid. All he knew for certain was that there was a Taiidan Imperial crest burned into the lock. He turned to Tek, whom Lance knew always carried a laser torch. He bent down, and began to shear off the circular door with the red beam, with the two others watching in fascination. He finished tracing the circumference with the laser, and the door fell down into a pit, and even through the howling wind they heard the clang of metal striking metal as it hit the bottom.

He observed that a ladder was leading down into the darkness, and he turned to Halen. "Think we should check it out?" He only replied, in a grim fashion, "You first."

They went down into the abyss. Tek had contacted the other RC teams with the news, and were on their way, but for now, they were alone. They reached the bottom, which turned out to be a rather dark, yet brightly-painted hallway. Like a hospital, Lance observed.

They walked down the corridors, and managed to pass through a series of locked doors with some elbow grease and some stolen Imperial codes that he had received from friends in Fleet Intelligence. They saw several doors and rooms where complicated surgical tools and stasis tubes lay, which only reinforced Lance's original impression of the place. It was unlikely that this was a medical station, out in the middle of nowhere on a hostile world, but a good place to hide a research station.

They found a console on a wall that Tek managed to operate successfully, and declared that he could access environmental controls from it. "This place is currently a vacuum, with only traces of methane that probably crept in through the main airlock. Should I restore oxygen levels?" Lance mused. "Yeah, but don't remove your helmets. We still have six hours of air in these things, and I think we'll need them for protection anyway."

They walked down some more hallways, seemingly at random, and Halen observed, who was scanning the area with an omni-scan glove, "This place looks incredibly old. The metal is at least three thousand years old, which wouldn't predate Taiidan time, but-

"But the Imperialists have only existed for fifteen years," Tek finished for him.

Halen nodded. "Right, but there's more. In old starships or stations like this one, which remain in vacuum for long amounts of time, the metal begins to vacuum-freeze, and that, out of many things, causes doors and stuff to seal shut, and cannot be reopened. And this metal seems to be mere hours into the process. Someone has recently been here."

They exchanged glances, and Lance saw that one of the doors they were near had a plaque with the words "BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH" emblazoned across it. They approached the door carefully, and, with a finesse known only in the deepest ranks of the Hiigaran military, broke it down.

They entered a room which was basically a small catwalk that stretched across the room, splitting up two large banks of stasis cells, with a myriad of rather frightening-looking experiments locked inside. There was a lone console on their end of the catwalk, and they moved closer to it and turned it on. When they did, a huge row of lights illuminated the nightmarish tubes, giving them a much better look at the experiments.

Halen played around with the computer, and several windows popped up with information that was

written in archaic Taiidani script. Lance slumped, but Halen seemed to understand it, going through all the different displays expertly. He noted, "All of these are dead. When the Taiidan left, they must have left in a hurry, or they would have destroyed the evidence as well. He pressed some buttons, and one of the tubes separated from the display rack and came into view. Inside, a Taiidan male had several electrical apparatus protruding from his skin, and his head was nothing more than a technological mess.

"Apparently, this guy was an attempt to make the Taiidan Unbound."

"Not very successful, huh?" said Lance.

They cycled through others, and one, a Turanic/Taiidan hybrid, was particularly gruesome. Other more mild creatures included Taiidan that could breathe methane (for planetary scouting?) and Taiidan who could resist far greater temperatures.

But another in particular made them very uneasy. "Get the admiral. I think he'll like to look at this. After all, a Beast/Taiidan hybrid could be very dangerous indeed."

## Chapter 8

“Research Director Krennim, Log Entry 13/6/9856,” the recording began. “The missile station is gone. The organism we have come to know as the Beast has subverted it, and devastated our nanny fleet. Only hours ago had the First Admiral aboard the Keyol-Che convinced them to form a truce. I don’t know how long they will let us live, perhaps only up until after we repair the Naagarok, but we are safe for now. However, what those military people don’t know is that I have a piece of the Beast organism.”

The aged Taiidani scientist smiled, and presented the five people with a small, transparent cylinder, which clearly showed a fragment of red biomass hovering in the center of the vial. “I have it held within an anti-grav/electro-magnetic field, which we have deemed safe storage. We have made massively thorough scans of the organism, and have found it to be impossible to replicate. It utilizes an anomalous, seemingly intangible energy source which is possibly derived from its connection to the Hive Mind. The planet is too hostile to get invaded by the Beast, and we are so far down below the surface that we are safe from planetary bombardment, so I am confident that we will be safe for now. We will conduct further tests in the morning. This is a very exciting prospect.”

The hologram faded out, and Mej’hol said, “I do believe that your men have found something very important, Admiral. Where are they?”

Admiral Liir Hra said, “Captain Soban is in his quarters, and Lieutenants Tek and Halen Liir Hra are both getting tanked in our ship’s bar. I don’t exactly blame them; we will definitely need some shore leave after this.”

The Turanic leader nodded, apparently disappointed in their lack of a warrior’s strength, and activated the next recording.

“Research Director Krennim, Log Entry 27/6/9856. Using controlled methods, we were able to stimulate our existing Beast nanoprobes to replicate into about twenty-kilograms worth. And we have begun the major steps of Project Fusion.” The scientist looked grim. “Our first five subjects have been total disasters.” Several holographs of disgusting, distorted wads of flesh and bone popped up. At once, they seemed to have been Taiidan, but now they were nothing of the civilized world. It then moved the focus back to Krennim. “The nanoprobes only metabolized their skin, and replicated out of control. They were quickly vaporized to avert the spread of infection. But the sixth.....”

The scientist smiled, and said, “The sixth subject has been engineered almost perfectly. The biomass has incorporated itself with the patient’s skin, and already signs of rapid dermal regeneration and enhanced cellular efficiency have been detected. We have been able to suppress the communication with the Hive Mind, and we are attempting to remodulate the nanoprobes’ telepathic link to agree with our self-styled Hive Mind communications center, in the form of this computer.” He waved in the general direction of a small computer, and he explained, “Programmed to carry out our whims, this new breed of super-soldier, with enhanced inter-infantry communication and strategic planning, will bring our race back into the throne of galactic supremacy.”

It abruptly ended, and the warriors contemplated this meaning. Mej'hol said, "Well, it is an interesting concept. When you think about it, the perfect warrior race, one that never argued, one without greed, and one where all of the soldiers were constantly aware of the strong and weak points in their formation, it would be very easy to win a war."

Magistrate Agam'nar looked at him. "Are you saying that using Beast technology is a smart military tactic?"

He glared back at this insubordinate worm. "Of course not. But the whole reason that the Beast win their battles is because of their hive consciousness. Even without their obvious biological advantages, they are still a force to be reckoned with. As a fighter, I have to admire them at least in part."

Klu'koth remained solemn. "You won't when you see the last log entry."

He brought up the final log recording, and the scene was very different. Instead of in a sterile medical bay, the Project Fusion Director was in what seemed like a ship, and he was far more flustered than he appeared in his other log entries.

"This is Project Director Krennim! I am making this log to warn anyone who tries to repeat the mistakes we've made on this endeavor. We were able to create a half-dozen semi-Beast warrior creatures, but somehow the nano-probes did not respond to the new transponder signals. Not only did they link up with the Beast Hive Mind, but they also infected the battle computer we'd set up to control them, which seems to have coordinated them far more than any other Beast attack force we've seen!

"We were able to activate a complete security lockdown, and four of my team members along with myself have escaped in a shuttle. We began to vent toxic gases into the facility, but we don't know if that will affect them in anyway. We must reach our HQ base, at the Imperial Research Station at Gozan. We have to warn them about the--"

At that point in the recording, something in the holographic room smashed in, and grabbed Krennim. They had little time to examine the monstrosity that was the Taiidan/Beast birthchild before the recording degraded into static, the screams of the scientist barely drowned out by the white noise of distortion.

But they had seen all they needed to see.

"Did your men bring any trace of the Beast onboard?" Mej'hol inquired carefully.

Liir Hra assured him, "They were massively sterilized before being allowed out of the airlock, and their clothes were burned. We are making thorough checks of their transport ship, but I doubt we'll find anything."

"Why?" Agam'nar asked.

Liir Hra shrugged. "If the Beast had gained the upper hand in this situation--"

"As they always do....." Klu'koth interrupted.

“-then why wouldn’t they infect the base? They had plenty of bio-matter to draw upon, in the form of those research animals, so why didn’t they use them? They seemed to leave with almost all knowledge of their existence, and didn’t even bother to take over the facility.”

Magistrate Dath’mir said, “A mystery.....Have we any idea what they are conducting on Gozan?”

Klu’koth said, “The Somtaaw beat us to it. They arrived there and destroyed the facility. My experts believe that they were conducting experiments similar to those we saw here, but not at this calibre.”

“However,” said Agam’nar, “this does explain the disappearance of the missile station and the Taiidan fleet, and the Imperialists’ alliance with the Beast, but what is this Naagarok that the Research Director referred to?”

Admiral Liir Hra shook his head. “I know of no ship by that name, and none of our sensor sweeps of the nearby sectors have picked up anything. I even went out on a limb and hailed a Bentusi Tradeship that was passing by a few light-years from here. They don’t know anything about it, either. It must be incredibly ancient.”

Mej’hol said, “People, people, this is nothing of importance. We must focus on this Project Fusion. The Somtaaw appear to be tracking the Naagarok, so this is our chance to destroy a most dangerous part of the Beast. If we don’t act soon, the Beast/Taiidan warriors can overrun the galaxy, and be too widespread to eradicate.”

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The Taiidani soldier ran through the city’s streets and alleyways. He had watched as thousands of civilians and his fellow Taiidani Republican Guard get slaughtered by this new enemy. He dared not look back, since he knew there were several of the things chasing him already.

He reached a sand-weathered bunker on the outskirts of the city, and raced into the door. He bolted the door behind him, and rushed through the rooms. He was as far as the mess hall, with the smell of synthesized protein foods drifting through the air, when he heard the seemingly-secure front entrance blow inwards.

They were coming.

He looked down at his gun. The plasma rifle had 35% power left; hopefully enough to fight them back. He turned around and opened another door. And there it stood.

It towered above him. It was easily a foot taller than he, and far broader. It was covered in huge wads of red, palpitating flesh, which almost seemed to be crawling. Its face was covered in a dark visor, but the shivering combatant could see partially through it, where a distorted mess of flesh lay, with dark eyes boring into his soul. Where its arms should have been, there were twin projectile chain guns, which were obsolete, but no less deadly.

He raised his gun.

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*The Individual felt fear.*

*Fear was weakness.*

*The Young One cocked his head. He watched as the Individual raised his weapon. The Young One heard the shots, felt as the hot energy poured into him, but he did not fear, and he did not hurt. Pain was weak, and the weak will be purged.*

*The Young One began to bleed from the hot energy, but he healed. The Ancient Ones always healed, and this Young One was no different. They healed quickly. But the Individuals did not heal so quickly. He raised his weapons and brought pain upon the Individual.*

*It bled too, but it did not heal.*

*It fell, screaming.*

*The Young One bent down, and caressed the Individual, and felt itself pouring onto the Individual, purifying it.*

*Making it part of the Greater Mind.*

*It watched as the non-Individual, the Younger One, stir to life.*

*The Young One was pleased, and it felt the Greater Mind feel even more pleased.*

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The planet loomed over the holoprojectors.

“Amentoth?” Mej’hol asked. “Are you sure, Magistrate?”

Klu’koth said, “That seems to be the most logical place they could go. It is the closest and most heavily populated planet in the sector with thin enough defenses to allow them to land safely. We couldn’t find any hyperspace wake signatures in the area to determine the validity of this guess, but if those hybrids are still alive, and they’d left the research outpost only days ago, this is the one place they could have conceivably invaded. My pilots are plotting a course as we speak.”

The older Turanic nodded. “What do we know about it?”

Klu’koth brought up a list of information on the Taiidan colony, as he narrated. “Originally colonized seven hundred years ago, it was picked by the Empire for its high content of tri-magnesium, which is, or more correctly was, an integral part of old starship engines’ conductor systems. It had to be atmosphere-engineered to support Taiidan life, but the old Emperor found it an acceptable cost. By the time the population had swelled to a hundred thousand, tri-magnesium was replaced by tapered copper in conductor coils, and the Empire lost all interest in the planet.

“Since it became politically uninvolved, none of the colonists seemed to care that the Empire had been overthrown when a small portion of the Republican Guard went down a few months ago to claim it for the new Taiidani government. Only about 200 soldiers for a planet of millions, and a very small number of starships to go along with them; nothing larger than an Assault Frigate. The

Beast must have gone. They could have infected thousands of the colonists before the soldiers even were aware of their arrival.”

Mej’hol nodded, “Then to Amentoth we shall go.”

Klu’koth paused, and offered, “And.....what of the Hiigarans?”

Mej’hol grinned, “Ah, yes. Them. Well, do we really need them anymore? We wanted their ships because we were expecting to face a large space fleet. However, this appears to call for a ground assault, and our people are far more adept at such things. Let them stay here, with their research, and their robot-crewed vessels. If we ditch them, we will get all the glory for this victory.”

Klu’koth considered this. He was an honorable man (or bug), but in the end, he was a Turanic at heart. And they would profit more from leaving Admiral Liir Hra and his men.

He agreed, “Alright. Let’s do it. Let the glory be ours, and ours alone.”

## Chapter 9

One by one they disappeared. First went the Ion Frigates, to spearhead the formation, and then the Carriers jumped out. Up until then, their formation had received no attention from the Hiigaran crews, even when they had all turned to face the same direction, but with their hyperspace entry, much commotion was wrought aboard the Penetrator.

Even before the junior officer barged into his ready room, Raymar Liir Hra knew what he was going to report. Fortunately, his ship was oriented so that his room's viewport gave him a very nice view of the retreating Raiders.

"Sir, the Turanic-" he gasped.

"I know," he interrupted. "Try to extrapolate possible courses, now! I don't know what they found out about those Beast hybrids, but I'm damn sure they're acting on it."

He shook his head and cursed them, but he couldn't help but feel amusement. He knew that any deal with the Turanic meant that their interests came first. They would receive no cash compensation for this mission of theirs, but they would receive a lot of glory. And fame was as good as money when it came to galactic commerce. A warrior who has proved himself to this extent would receive a lot of publicity in the Underground, and that would lead to far more money in the future. But they would receive little glory if the dregs of the galaxy knew they had achieved success with the help of a Heavy Cruiser and a full Hiigaran battle fleet.

Clever bastards, they were.

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No ships were in orbit. This looked like it would be a simple mission.

The Carrier group had arrived only hours after they'd left the research outpost. Knowing those Hiigarans would try to track them, they made a quick jump to a system thirty light-years to the right of the system to throw them off course. This would be their victory alone.

Klu'koth ordered, "Scan the surface. Are there Beast down there?"

After a short delay, one officer said, "Yes, sir. A massive amount, too, along with a much subdued Taiidani population. They may be hiding, sir."

Klu'koth heard the announcement that they were a thousand clicks from the planet's atmosphere. "Should we go closer, Magistrate?" asked Lieutenant Vark. "If we can bombard the planet immediately, this could go as smooth as possible."

He shook his head. "No, we mustn't underestimate these Beast. If I were them, I would have planned for this eventuality." He thought it over, and decided they couldn't risk the spread of infection.

"Lieutenant, fire off two Ion Probes at a perpendicular angle, so that they fly past both sides of the

planet's orbit. Hardwire them to detonate after eight seconds of launch."

He saw the small probes shoot off at fantastic speeds towards the planet as he counted down to zero. After five seconds, a red beam shot out at the probe to port, coating it with the Beast plague, and three short seconds later both probes ignited into blue heat and light.

Klu'koth said, "That Infection Beam looks like it came from one of the main cities. Lieutenant, can you get a visual on the weapon they just fired?"

"Yes, sir. Visual patching in now."

On the viewscreen, there materialized a picture of an old, gray, dilapidated city, with broken-down skyscrapers and rusting hulks of landspeeders. A veritable planetary slum. Towering over all of the aged metal and buildings was a massive building; what sort of looked like an observatory dome, but with a large cannon sticking out of it. Of course, this monument was covered in the typical Beast scars.

"They couldn't have built something like that this quickly, could they?" he asked no one in particular.

Leader Mej'hol made himself heard over the comm., "No, Magistrate. After reviewing Amentoth's cultural history, I have learned that they sometimes, due to the lack of influx of new technologies, the colonists sometimes had to resort to using laser-propelled chemical rockets to get into orbit. I think the Beast used this old station to forge a new, powerful Infection Beam. My sources say that its range of fire is 500 kilometers. I wouldn't stray that close to the planet unless you're feeling suicidal."

"Agreed, Leader. How should we go about staging the ground invasion?"

"My tacticians are working on a battle plan now. We will relay the information to the rest of the fleet when they are done. Meanwhile, gather your soldiers in your war room. They don't seem to have any ships, but they probably know we're here, so we must act quickly."

"Agreed, sir. The equipment should be ready within the week."

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The forty platoon leaders for the Swift Death were assembled twenty minutes before the data had come in, but due to their incredibly attuned discipline the war auditorium was rather sedate. There were only slight murmurings when Klu'koth came in stage and began the briefing.

"Good morning, all. This is an important mission, so listen up." He brought up a hologram of Amentoth. "You all have been briefed on the nature of the new Beast/Taiidan hybrid warrior. With powerful regeneration abilities, instantaneous communication and strategic updates with every other soldier in their unit, and the capability of subverting enemy soldiers to increase their numbers, this is truly a force to be reckoned with. The Beast is no longer confined to the imprisonment of a ship or mere piles of biomass. They now have a body, and they plan to use it.

"Despite their connection to the supposed Hive Mind that control the Beast, there is no indication

that any other Beast in the galaxy can replicate such a warrior creature until one of them comes into direct contact with the main Beast base, which we believe is established on the Naagarok. Therefore, if we can keep this Beast strain contained on the planet, we can possibly eradicate this threat.”

A hologram of the Infection Cannon on Amentoth replaced that of the whole planet. “This,” he said, “is your target. As long as this Infection Cannon is up and running, which is powerful enough to infect our whole fleet and still have enough charge to power another ten such subversions, our frigates cannot get within firing range of the planet to obliterate all infected life down there. Thus, you and your men are to head down there, and disarm the weapon, at least for enough time for us to nuke it from orbit.”

The hologram of the planet came up again, with a red point indicating where the Infection Cannon was situated, and another green point off to the right of the Infection Cannon. “Your landing spot is that green spot, about seven hundred clicks east of the Cannon. This is the closest safe spot to touch down outside of the Cannon’s range. You will be brought down in modified Brigand-class Corvettes, and will be equipped with land speeders, as well as our newest brand of anti-Beast weaponry.”

A holo of a bulky, dark-colored bio-suits. “This is your Beast Hazard Suit. It has enough air for seventy five hours, a veritable feat of engineering in and of itself. I expect you to be down there no more than forty-eight hours for the whole coup. It has an electrical current running through the outer layer of armor, which should fry any Beast bio matter or nano-probes that you should come into contact with, while keeping you well insulated. And as for weaponry.....”

Another image came up, but this one was of a large, threatening gun. It had two pressurized tanks strapped below the trigger assembly, and the Magistrate explained, “This gun, what we have dubbed the Pacifier Field Rifle Mark One, is a doubly-loaded weapon. In its primary stage, it is a flamethrower, and shoots out napalm streams hot enough to vaporize your target. Noteven the Beast can survive fire.” He smiled at that small truth, and manipulated the controls so that a new image came up of a Hazard Suit-clad soldier firing a near-white stream of fire at a Beast hybrid, and the monstrosity literally melted in front of him. There were murmurs of approval from the crowd, and he moved on to the next function.

“Those two tanks at the bottom house the carcinogenic fuel to power the flamer, so be careful not to rupture it. However, should that fuel fail, there is a secondary mode of fire, which is rather more elaborate, and took us many hours to develop.” The image changed to show the gun firing like a chaingun, and the view zoomed in to focus on one of the bullets. The hologram changed to a cross-section of the bullet, showing a minuscule transmitter in the center of a bluish fluid. “The gun also houses a clip of one thousand bullets, although these bullets are decidedly far more advanced than most. In the center, that device produces a single burst of EMP radiation upon impact, frying any and all electrical equipment-like those nanoprobes-and that bluish substance is a very powerful, catalyzed cell regenerator gene. It embeds itself within the genetic code of the cells they come into contact with, and force them to multiply into an explosive, cancerous tumor within seconds. It also seeks out the Beast-viral gene and de-activates it. The only way to deactivate that particular gene is to get the virus directly into the cell nuclei, so a widespread, airborne virus is out of the question. Oh, and I wouldn’t try touching that stuff with bare hands. And organic tissue that it touches would

be affected, and that includes you.”

He sighed, and de-activated the holoprojector. “You all have your orders; now make us proud. Never forget that we Turanic are clearly the most knowledgeable of the Beast code. Not even those Somtaaw have gone up close with this powerful strain of the Beast. Victory, and ultimate profit shall be ours.” The all sat up, and filed off to the armory to suit up and prepare.

He felt a little guilty, though, since he wasn’t going with them.

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Admiral Liir Hra did not have that burden to cope with; he had a more immediate concern of actually finding the planet. So far, he was not successful.

He harrumphed, and looked out at the ringed world of P24998. “Well, that makes forty planets. We’re no closer to finding them than we were ten days ago.” He grunted as he shifted in his chair. “Have our advance Probes found anything?”

One junior officer responded, “One of them ran into a Turanic minefield; possibly placed there to mock us. But we didn’t get any information on its position beforehand.”

The admiral said, “Well, we better rethink this whole search thing. We must systematically eliminate enough planets to narrow our search. First of all, scan the area a hundred light-years radius around the Taiidan research outpost.”

There was a short pause, and the same officer reported, “One hundred and twenty eight, sir. Not counting satellites.”

He frowned. That wasn’t going to make it easy. “OK. Out of those, take out any gas giants. There is no way that even the Beast could survive down there, let alone subvert a colony.”

Another pause. “Seventy three.”

He nodded. “Now cross-reference those with our database of known Taiidan colonies, before and after the Republican Era.”

The officer complied, and came up with a new list. “Uh.....the only inhabited star systems are the Amentoth system, the binary Quexal’kol system, the Nuccckh’man system, and the Mari’teth system.”

“Which planet has the largest population?”

Another pause. “.....Quexal’kol 14 has 150 million inhabitants, as of 8.76 AHL.”

Liir Hra grinned. “The hybrids were probably attracted by the larger amount of biomass. Set course for the Quexal’kol system.”

“Yes, sir!”

The aging admiral grinned. Sometimes he couldn’t help but amaze himself.

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Klu'koth sat, sagging in his chair. He prayed to whatever gods there were that they would win this battle. Unfortunately, he did not feel much drive to go along with them. He was getting a bit old, and even the greatest warriors had to retire sometime. He had his occasional surge of youthful energy when he went out flying in the Penetrator, or even when he was on the bridge of the Swift Death, imposing Turanic wrath on another starship.

Yet, he did not feel up to this one. Perhaps he was afraid. Yes.....that made more sense. He was afraid. But could anyone blame him? Here he was, a Turanic Magistrate, yes, but a commander of a measly five starships against a potential Beast army of millions. Sure, he had his compatriot Turanic Carrier groups to draw on, but without the brute force of the Protector's star fleet-he did not doubt Mej'hol's decision, but he worried whether they could succeed without them-they were a very small force to attack one of the most powerful enemies in the history of the galaxy.

"We've launched fifteen Dropships, sir," said Lieutenant Vark.

True to his word, several modified Brigand-class Corvettes hovered in front of the bridge. Each held twenty men, which meant that three hundred troops from his ship alone were prepped for combat. They'd had to tap into their resource tanks from the platinum deposits to build the new starships and combat suits, so some of the ships gleamed light off of Amentoth's sun, creating a mesmerizing mirror-like effect which almost gave the impression that the ships were cloaked.

He checked their flight plan for what must have been the seventeenth time-if one burst from that groundside Infection Cannon hit one of the ships in their formation, the infection would spread to every other ship in the formation. In fact, that was why they were launching the ships in waves of five each. Klu'koth wasn't as afraid of losing his precious ships as he was of something far more sinister.

What if, with their current knowledge of successfully hybridizing host bodies, the Beast could spontaneously create their own Turanic-Beast hybrid? That was an image that he desperately did not want to linger in his head.

Fortunately (and perhaps unfortunately, for him), he did not have a chance to think about it much, because Leader Mej'hol barged into the bridge, in full battle gear. He was followed closely by those sniveling Dath'mir and Agam'nar. Those two brown-nosers truly disgusted Klu'koth, even though he could understand their fear of Mej'hol. Anyone who openly killed someone just to consolidate their power was someone to be reckoned with.

Lieutenant Vark snapped to attention, and announced, "Leader Mej'hol on deck!" Everyone else obediently rose and saluted. Klu'koth followed them, only more sedate in his motion. He said, "Leader, why do you honor me with your presence?"

Mej'hol scowled, "I'm surprised that you didn't honor me with your preparedness. Where is your Hazard Suit?"

Everything seemed to go in slow motion, as his stomach made sickening flip-flops. "Hazard Suit?"

Mej'hol nodded, his patchwork armor (he noticed that he had grafted various other battle-scarred armor plates over the Hazard Suit; perhaps out of nostalgia for his past victories,) clanging dully against itself. "My Corvette is docked and ready to fly. Aren't you coming?"

"Where?"

"The surface."

"The.....surface?"

"Yes! Now, quit stalling and suit up. We have to be down there as soon as possible."

"You mean....."

Mej'hol had never looked more bellicose. "Yes. We will all go down, and it will be a glorious victory. Finally, a mission worthy of the only survivor of the Kadeshi taskforce. Victory shall be ours, and at the end of the day, triumph is the greatest profit of all."

Klu'koth smiled uneasily. He knew that this was coming. And did he sure wish it hadn't.

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"Quexal'kol 14?"

"Yep, sir. Picking up massive energy spikes on the far end of the planet."

"The Beast?" Liir Hra inquired, looking at the dark blue planet.

"Either that, or a fleet of Unbound ships."

He nodded. "Good. Open a channel." When it was so, he announced, "Enemy vessels, this is Admiral Liir Hra of the Hiigaran Naval Strike Force Protector. Surrender now, and we may be lenient with you."

Yeah, right. Even if they could reason with the Beast, there was no way he would spare them. But he just felt more justified by saying it first. He felt quite relieved.

Right up until he saw the large ships move in front of the planet. He trembled as the deeply resonating voice came over the intercom. "You dare insult the Tiamat? You weak, Bound fools. You will pay for your insolence."

The Megaship drew closer, and powered weapons. Admiral Liir Hra's eyes widened, and he felt weak from his horrible decision.

"Oh, sonofa-!££\$!&\*%\$%^!" he swore.