



Outside

The Reflection :: 01-01-31 ::

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Prologue

“There is something wrong here..... A presence. We sense its hunger.....Not infant race, not Unbound.....something other, something older.... Something from Outside!”

The Bentusi paused in their thoughts for a moment, as the Beast Heavy Cruiser slowed to a stop. Yellow ion cannons still blazed out at the Beast ships, vaporizing fighters after an instant of contact with each, while Kushan ships fired on Ion Array Frigates no longer piloted by anything recognizably Turanic. However, their main thoughts were not of the battle, but those of fear.

Like a whisper in their ears, the Bentusi heard a plea from the *Kuun-Lan*, as one of the Bound, one who could see into the currents of time better than most, cried out to them.

“Outside? No! Don't let it get close! It'll destroy you! Flee into hyperspace, we'll deal with it...”

But it was too late.

The Beast Heavy Cruiser fired its infection beam at the Bentusi Exchange, and a horde of nanotechnological entities tore into the hull. The Bentusi found themselves being absorbed, devoured by the Beast. The Bentusi recoiled in pain as they lost their memories, their thoughts, their very existence to the service of the Beast. The Bentusi were being changed by the hunger for something, to serve in a quest for.....something familiar, yet unfamiliar; something powerful, yet distant.

As they fell to the Beast, they cried out a warning to all of the Bentusi, who would in turn pass on the information to the other Unbound races in the Galaxy.

Something from Outside.....

The Bentusi, being bound to their fears, defied the Beast, refusing to join.

“.....WE.....WILL.....NOT.....BE.....BOUND!”

The Bentusi ship's engines overloaded and a fireball of plasma tore through the Tradeship. The Bentusi felt a triumph in their sacrifice as the Beast consuming their ship was vaporized alongside them and they were freed. The com channels of the Kushan fleets were filled with frantic messages and static as the explosion destroyed the battling fleets surrounding the ship.

However, the other Bentusi were less interested in the Hiigaran fleet than with the new threat.

Something from Outside.....

The Bentusi were frightened by the prospect.

But, there was another matter.....the Hiigaran who had tried to warn the Bentusi, the one the Somtaaw called the Oracle. Perhaps she knew something about the matter, something the Unbound races did not know. The Bentusi would have to look into the matter and work with the Hiigarans if need be, and certainly pay attention to the Devourer. They would watch for any opportunities that

arose.

As the Somtaaw fleet moved to avenge the destruction of the Bentusi ship they had just witnessed, the Bentusi had already begun work on devising courses of action.

The doorway beckoned.

The stars fell out of the sky.

The voices spoke, an infinity of lives crying out.

“Help us.....”

It was vast, ancient.

There was a flicker of light somewhere, something usually insignificant.

However, there was something about the flicker that was intriguing. Nothing specific that could be named, but it was simply.....intriguing. It sent out a tiny piece of its mind to observe, to wait for the flicker again, and then returned to its deep, permeating thoughts.

Chapter 1: Tasiin

Tasiin Limandatt surveyed the vast fleet that had gathered over thousands of kloms, swarming the area. Already, he had counted twelve carriers, five of them Republican Taiidan. A wall of heavy cruisers slid past the corvette-turned-transport he stood on. As the transport approached its destination, Tasiin could easily see the center of it all. Flanked by two Somtaaw Explorer warships was Galactic Shipyard 0. Galactic Shipyard 0 grew in the viewscreen, eclipsing the local red dwarf. Finally, the transport arced past the forward-thrust arms of the base. Six Bentusi tradeships surrounded the masterpiece.

Inside the base, a monster peered at Tasiin.

"Welcome to Galactic Shipyard 0 of the Rim Void. You will remain here until the alliance launches the ship. Security is tight," Dolann Kaalel stated. "We cannot let anyone know we are trying to rebuild the *Naggarok*."

Dolann Kaalel sat with representatives of the races that worked on the project, some of whom Tasiin had only read about: Taiidan, Hiigaran, Frrem, X'n, K'naldeq, Zaala, and I'ao. In addition, a Somtaaw also appeared in the semicircle.

"Tasiin Limandatt, please sit down," Dolann Kaalel said, offering a chair.

Tasiin made no motion.

"As you wish," Kaalel sighed. "I am project coordinator for the Hiigaran team. I chose you to join our project because of your work on Kharak. You predicted a sort of trans-hyperspace mathematically. Investigation has revealed the *Naggarok* might have used it on its journey to our galaxy before it was subverted."

"My predictions were merely musings," Tasiin said. Truly Tasiin did not think that, but it was what he was accustomed to saying as a Limandatt, if a distant one.

"I am not sure there are many 'musings' with rigorous tensor proofs in them."

"Some of my kiith dream in images or words. I appear to do so in equations."

"And I thought Manaas were impractical," a Hiigaran dressed in the deep red of Kiith Soban mumbled.

The Somtaaw glared at the Soban quite fiercely, but probably more of their dislike of the giant kiithid's arrogance than because Tasiin's kiith was innocent of being impractical. The Soban, however, smiled knowingly at the Somtaaw.

"You Hiigarans can waste time efficiently with your internal struggles," a X'n hissed. "We have used much resources for this project."

"We donated our Shipyard Psi for this undertaking," the Taiidan replied. "We do not complain."

Pukna Somtaaw, will you explain the project further to our Hiigaran friend?"

"When we slayed the Beast," Pukna began with an air of triumph and pride characteristic of Somtaaw of late, "We had to des troy the 'parent' ship - the *Naggarok*. As we engaged it on two occasions, we managed to send Recons past. This allowed us, primarily, to study its inertialess drive so we could stop and destroy it. However, we also managed to capture glimpses of its hyperdrive. We also managed to buy second-hand information of Imperialist Taiidan scans of the Naggarok. For the past few months, the races here have been working on rebuilding its hyperdrive and mounting it on a new ship."

"I presume I am here because I designed something similar," Tasiin said.

"You seem to have an understanding of the physics involved," Kaalel stated. "You accepted our request to use your knowledge. There aren't many Limandatt around, and there are not many opportunities for Sleeper clans, not until kiith Somtaaw and kiith Paktu push reforms in the Daiamid. That will take months, if not years. By the time we finish work, however, your kiith should have enough say for other opportunities to appear."

Tasiin pitied Kaalel for thinking that all kiithid were as lucky as Dolann's, those who had survived the Burning of Kharak with hundreds or thousands of members. Kiith Limandatt had survived with a mere 28 members, and only about half of them actively called themselves the name, the rest having resigned to becoming part of Kiith Manaana, who favored the Limandatt's flair for musing. At most, they might have been granted a light frigate out of sympathy for the once great poets and philosophers, if they all joined together. However, he had turned his back on the Limandatt, on Kharak, on the whole Universe before the Mothership had even left the Scaffold.

And now the Universe was calling him.

"What choice do I have?"

The reply was far stronger than he expected.

"Your Bound mind is full of contradictions. Your abilities touch those of ours, yet your song is troubled."

"Who, if I may ask, was that?" Tasiin asked, shaken.

"The Bentusi," Dolann Kaalel said. "They monitor everything that goes on everywhere in the station, the prototype and the fleet. They allow no risks in allowing the Beast to come back."

Tasiin Limandatt took it all in.

"It is always interesting to wonder what exactly the Bentusi are watching if they see everything here," the Soban quietly remarked.

"So the warrior is a joker, a K'naldeq said. A majority of the Hiigarans, however, including Kaalel and Somtaaw smirked, one even whispering a mock answer to the Soban. A few of the Taiidan

seemed amused as well.

"Kiith Somtaaw forced us to see that Bound persons can exceed us in courage and sanity. You seem to prove that the Unbound are lacking in your strange sense of humor. It is regrettable we do not understand it better," the echoing Bentusi response came.

"I am not sure you would regret not understanding it," the K'haldeq said.

The Bentusi were silent this time.

Tasiin, however, did not pay any attention.

Chapter 2: Datlai

There is something disturbing about him. He yearns to be Unbound, but also to be solitary. He does not see the paradox. Only once have we sensed such yearning but desire to be alone.

We sensed it in the Devourer.

The Bentusi paid more attention.

Tasiin woke up in a cold sweat. The dream of the night before resonated in him. It was not simply a dream, but Tasiin's dream.

In the first cryogenic flight around the Kharakian system, the great Rei Magann remained in hibernation for six months. Upon returning, Magann wrote a beautiful book of poems describing an intense, wonderful dream he had. Many Limandatt saw it as inspiration, and had sought to experience a similar dream; thirty-four had made it aboard the Mothership, as well as Magann himself. Six died in the Taiidan assault on their world, but as the others awakened on Hiigara, they recalled their own Dreams. Virtually all of the Sleepers reported similar experiences, and some sought to express it. The other 27 Limandatt had followed Magann's path, even as he wrote a second book.

He dared tell no one about his Dream.

He had seen Kharak burn in his Dream. He somehow knew in his slumber about the genocide, how the missile defense, the Scaffold, the planet were all destroyed in turn. What scared him, though, was that he had not cared.

All around him, the Galaxy cried for help. Empires crumbled, people despaired, cancers grew.

He did not acknowledge it, too frustrated and too tired to think.

Yet, he held the key to something. Something powerful, but dangerous. He could save or destroy the Universe at a whim. He did not want it, though. He did not want the responsibility, the stress of a trillion lives depending on him.

"Lock the door!"

"No, we must see what is on the other side!"

"It kills us!"

"We must see..."

"It is important to..."

"I don't want it!" Tasiin exclaimed. He turned away from the unbearable argument.

"You must..."

"I don't want it," Tasiin repeated. He said it again and again, but the voices kept tormenting him. He began sobbing. *"I don't want it!"*

"Help..."

"I...don't...want...it!" he whispered as he collapsed.

He turned his back on the falling stars.

"I wondered when we would drift into each other's currents again."

Tasiin turned around in his mess hall seat from his sketchbook filled with equations at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Datlai," he breathed. As he said the name, his voice was full of fear and a sort of grief. Yet, there was a glimmer of hope, to more his surprise than Datlai's.

After a long moment of watching his reaction, Datlai said "I imagine you have seen enough of our poor, depleted kiith since the Landfall. That would explain our not engaging in a Limandatt greeting."

Tasiin looked at her, not quite sure what to do. Datlai, sensing his inner turmoil, began the greeting first. Laying her hand over his heart and closing her eyes, she softly said an ancient verse form over a millennium before, a verse that sounded oddly musical. Tasiin slowly returned the greeting, but distantly.

Tasiin sat down, Datlai following.

"I am surprised you are here," he said.

"I have some skill in math also. However, we both know the Sjet and the I'ao can handle most of the rigorous parts of the project.

"So, I come because...fear is the greatest monster; it can not be slayed; yet the Devourer fears, for if no one listens to it, no one can fall prey to its calls."

Tasiin was familiar enough with her musing to understand what she was saying. "What is the fear that you distract from?"

"We fear most what we create. The Beastslayer, our version of the Naggarok. Everyone is afraid of what might happen if it is launched," Datlai responded.

"Except the Bentusi."

"*Especially* the Bentusi. The thought of being infected is infinitely feared among them."

"Then why are they helping us?"

Datlai shook her head. "They aren't here to help us. They are here to destroy the project if something goes wrong."

Tasiin wondered why the Bentusi did not interfere with their conversation, if they were listening. In the large window of the seats hovered one of their trade ships. It showed no indication of his watching.

"I am surprised you came here alone," Datlai continued. Tasiin's mind was forced back from its drifting in the distance. He did not like the way she pulled him back into reality from solitude, however obliviously and innocently.

"Why do you say such a thing?"

"Most of us came in large groups a few months ago. You were brought here alone. I believe you must be special to be privileged to join after the project began."

Tasiin looked at Datlai. There was genuine admiration in her eyes. It made him regret, for an instant, realizing he wanted to be alone, back on Kharak, when she still a friend...

He recomposed himself.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Datlai let him drift off again, while he gazed at the Bentusi trade station, as if wanting desperately to be there.

Chapter 3: Trans-Hyperdrive

Situation Report 17.67 AHL

The Beastslayer's construction is on progress. Estimated date of launch is 17.96 AHL. The ship's chassis has been completed. Conventional drives are operational. Standard hyperdrive is online. What remains now is to finish research on the trans-hyperdrive the Naggarok used and to reconstruct it aboard the Beastslayer. The Bentusi's requested specialist on trans-hyperspace, Tasiin Limandatt, has provided numerous insights into such a drive, however there are some concerns about his behavior - I fear that he has become so focused on his work that he will burn out soon.

What is more of concern is how the Bentusi seem to be becoming more apprehensive as the launch date nears. They promised not to overreact if something happens, but as Pukna Somtaaw is quick to point out, they are quite adamant about not being Bound. If the unthinkable occurs, they might destroy our fleets as well as the Beastslayer, or they might leave us to defend ourselves on our own.

The Taiidan Republic has warned us that certain members of the Galactic Council have suspicions that we are developing some kind of superweapon. A few have called on us to reveal ourselves. How they know about the Beastslayer is something that is cause for worry. The Bentusi say they have only told the few senior Unbound races in the Council, and the other members of the project assure us they have told no one.

I hope they are telling the truth. Martyrs of Kharak, we cannot let it fall into the wrong hands.

May the gods forgive us if something happens.

*Dolann Kaalel
Coordinator of Project
Hiigaran team*

Dolann Kaalel finished the log entry, quietly reflecting on it, when the door chimed.

"Enter."

Tasiin Limandatt briskly entered at Dolann's authorization.

"I am here to report that preliminary research into the *Naggarok's* drive has been complete. We are ready to begin doing experiments to guide us further," Tasiin reported.

"You have completed research already? It has been only four days since you arrived."

"Trans-hyperdrive is merely an extension of hyperdrive," Tasiin said. "Understand hyperspace and the *Naggarok* is the next logical step."

The way he said it made it sound so simple. However, understanding hyperspace was no easy task. Dolann wondered just how clear hyperspace seemed to Tasiin, who was certainly gifted in the math

behind it.

"The problem is that we *don't* understand hyperspace," Dolann replied. "We know it has to do with quantum tunneling an object, but not much else. Neither do the Taiidan. It was one of the first things the Republic told us - they bought hyperspace technology from someone else and made a few simple adjustments. The Bentusi even do not fully comprehend it, although they have done some extensive modifications to their own. We do have speculations, ideas, but....."

Tasiin sighed, as if it was all obvious. "Back on Kharak, I noticed similarities between the *Khar-Toba's* hyperdrive and the tunneling of simple particles, like an electron. It works by creating a single quantum wave for an object. Then it forces the object to tunnel to a different energy level. The energy level is actually a higher universe, where objects can move much faster. In standard hyperspacing, it is pushed into the next higher universe. The *Naggarok* pushed itself into a much higher universe."

"That is quite impressive," Kaalel said.

"However, the *Naggarok* had an immense power source," Tasiin warned. "We do not have one."

"The Bentusi can probably provide one for the Beastslayer with some negotiation," Dolann suggested. "You may have helped solve one of the Galaxy's greatest mysteries."

Tasiin Limandatt turned around to leave.

"Please stay. I have something I want to discuss."

Tasiin froze but did not turn back.

"Your colleagues say you work completely alone. For the day, you isolate yourself from them. At the end of the day, you return with brilliant designs that half of the Sjet cannot follow. Afterwards, you simply return to your quarters, venturing out only to eat," Dolann began.

Tasiin still made no motion. Dolann waited for none.

"We are very grateful for your work, obviously. However, we Kushan have society in our genetic heritage. You cannot always be solitary or psychological effects start showing, and having you burn out is the last thing we need. If being alone is well during work, we cannot complain, but do take care of yourself. By allowing yourself to rest, for example. I have also taken care to notice that three other of your kiith are here, thanks to kiith Manaan's request."

Dolann noted the surprise come on his face at hearing that news.

"I find it strange that our kind of musers are here."

"Tasiin, this place is not just a large version of a research ship. It needs to be a community so we can withstand the months of isolation from the outside or we would go insane. There is talk of opening this place as a waypoint to friendly races if we build a fleet of trans-hyperdrive ships.

Surely, *then*, there will be need to be more than the labs and the PDA."

Tasiin still waited.

"Just make sure you do not cause yourself undue stress. You have done so much for us already. Do not stop now."

Before he drifted away from the conversation, Dolann dismissed Tasiin. When all was quiet again, he asked, "Are you listening?"

"We listen to all that moves in the Void. We listen here as well," the Bentusi said.

"I tried to convince him to not be alone, as you asked," Kaalel responded.

"His mind is still the same. We must continue."

"What about the hyperdrive explanation he developed?"

"It is impossibly clever for a Bound mind."

"And for an Unbound mind?"

"The explanation solves what we have contemplated for countless orbits." The Bentusi, for the first time, seemed awed. "The Hiigaran people have shown glimmers of being Unbound. The Sjet persona of your Mothership was Unbound. Your kiith Somtaaw killed the Devourer. However, he shows signs of being not only Unbound, but beyond Unbound."

"Beyond Unbound?" Kaalel asked. "Have you ever encountered something like that before?"

"Only once. The Devourer."

"It is therefore necessary to touch his mind soon."

"What if we fail?" Dolann finally asked.

"Then we would regret the consequences."

Chapter 4: Muser's Dream

Tasiin watched the Scaffold burst into a thousand pieces. The Imperial Taiidan fighters glided by, unscathed by Kharak missile defense. Already the fate of Kharak was sealed. The Imperial Carrier began launching its corvette-sized weapon, which aimed itself at the planet.

Watching the Burning of Kharak was particularly morose activity. Tasiin was not sure why he was doing it, although he suspected the Dream on the Mothership was responsible. Whatever the reason, he felt completely numb.

"Self-inflicted pain can seem noble, but it is often an unheard cry for help," he could remember Datlai saying. He imagined her there, reminding him of the musing.

The atmosphere-deprivation missile arced towards Kharak.

"What do you hope to prove by this?" Datlai asked. "Is this an unconscious penance for turning your back on the Universe?"

Tasiin continued to watch.

"Is this really what you want?"

"Let me be," he replied.

"Such a tragedy. You do not know what you want."

"Let me be."

"Do you remember the realization?"

"This...you never did this to me," Tasiin said.

"But did *you* do this to *me*?" Datlai asked.

The missile neared impact. The Taiidan ships positioned themselves, as if spectators of a brutal sport.

"Help us."

"I don't want this!"

"You have the key."

"I don't want it!"

"You have a decision."

"I don't want it!"

The weapon detonated, spreading fire across the planet. In the flash, the entire world fell apart.

Tasiin found himself lying in a bed, his entire body sore. Bandages covered his arms, bruises covered his legs. A doctor with the typical colors of the Sleeper kiith Feisu stood nearby.

"What happened?" he asked in his disorientation.

"You were attacking yourself in your sleep. It was quite a violent reaction even to the Burning. The grief you felt must have been overwhelming."

Tasiin kept to himself that grief had little to do with it. He doubted a Sleeper would react favorably to being told the Burning of Kharak did not matter. Instead it was...

Datlai. She stood in the vicinity, watching him.

"Why are you here?" he asked. The doctor backed away discretely to give some privacy. Datlai came forward.

"They told me you cried out for me in your sleep."

Again, Tasiin kept to himself what he was actually doing. Still the end of the dream was garbled in his memory. What the doctors said might have been possible.

What is happening to me? he thought. *I have had no problems for 17 years, but now...*

I thought I had moved on.

"Is it evening or morning?"

"It is mid-day."

"The trans-hyperdrive has to be worked on." Tasiin began to sit up, but immediately regretted it when a throbbing headache revealed itself.

"Look at yourself. You are not in a condition to work. Even if you think you are, the doctor and Project Coordinator Kaalel order you to rest today and tomorrow."

Tasiin sighed. He wished they did not have the authority to keep him from his work, from his musings. It seemed...binding. For a moment, he tried to get up again, but his body refused to cooperate.

"Self-inflicted pain can seem noble, but is often an unheard cry for help," she reminded him softly. He could not tell if she actually said or if he was imagining her again. Tasiin closed his eyes again, trying to ignore the world. He wanted its confusion to melt away. But as he tried, Datlai returned to his mind. She acted as if they were still on Kharak, at each other's side. He, even more strangely, was beginning to go along with the act, *wanting* to go along, despite how painful it all was.

"Let us find the others of our kiith here tomorrow," he found himself saying. Tasiin drifted off to sleep again, dreaming about the Bentusi he was sure were listening.

"Kiith Soban does offer courses in the martial arts," the Soban at Tasiin Limandatt's first welcoming suggested.

"It is a long story," Datlai explained, following the limping, bandaged, Tasiin at a fair distance.

"A question," Tasiin began. "What honors have you had as a Soban?"

The Soban looked at him indignantly. "During the Hiigaran war, I served aboard the frigate Hero of Kharak, and battled Kadeshi and Taiidan. During the war with the Beast, I commanded the heavy cruiser *Tal-Hul* and took out a large carrier group with only a minor fighter escort," the Soban said matter-of-factly.

"Just a question," Tasiin said and slowly moved on.

"Here are the others," Datlai said. The other Limandatt were clad in the traditional black, silver, and blue of the kiith. Tasiin, with great effort, sat down opposite of Datlai. The other Kushan greeted them, the ritual verse whispered among them.

"We have heard that you have influenced the project already," one of the others, Kanell Limandatt, said.

"That may be true," Tasiin replied. "I helped work on the trans-hyperdrive of the *Beastlayer*."

"The most influential ones are the humblest," the fourth Hiigaran, Naela Limandatt remarked. "Do you realize even the Bentusi are surprised with you?"

The Bentusi are surprised with me. The thought ran itself several times through his mind, creating a favorable impression.

"...And they are they only Unbound race we know anything about," Naela added.

"Except the T-Mat," Datlai said. "They have been talked about here."

"Who are the T-Mat?"

"I do not know much. They accompanied the Council's fleet that helped us regain Hiigara," she replied.

After a pause, Tasiin added, "We know some more. A ship of theirs was often detected in hyperspace following the Mothership. They simply...observed.

"We have encountered them since. On every occasion, always with small fleets, they have attacked and destroyed our fleet. We do not know why."

The other Limandatt were silent.

"I overhear things from the other researchers, while I present my work," Tasiin said. During the long, somber quiet that followed, he began thinking again about the *Beastslayer's* trans-hyperdrive, and how it could be implemented.

"Tasiin, you are quite distant," Kanell said.

"He can be distant," Datlai replied, seeming to understand his way of contemplation. "Just so long as he does not leave us."

In his musing, he heard Datlai and silently thanked her for letting him be.

The entity sensed the focal point of the presences, the center of the light. Some were particularly bright, but the entity could snuff them out at a whim. Instead, it neared the seemingly normal one, the yearning on - the one growing exponentially in brightness now. It had a powerful potential.

One that must be guided.

Come to us.

Come.

Chapter 5: Bentusi

We sense a presence here, the Bentusi thought.

Not Bound nor Unbound. Something older.

Not from space nor hyperspace. Something from somewhere else. Something from Outside.

An echo of the Devourer.

It searches for someone - The other one can be beyond Unbound.

"Do not leave us," they said to Tasiin.

"Do not leave us," Datlai pleaded to Tasiin.

The door beckoned - a way out of the confusion. The Galaxy burned around him, the stars tumbled out of the sky into nonexistence.

Outside, everything would be simpler. No galaxies or stars to fall; no one except himself.

The door beckoned.

But Datlai was tugging on his hand, pulling him back from the brink. He tried to take a step forward. Datlai's grip tightened as he did, preventing him from going anywhere.

The door beckoned.

"Please," Datlai said.

The Bentusi were merely observers now. Tasiin had accommodated their command into his Bound state of unrest in rest. Instead of coming across as an intimidating order that it was, the persona in his dream plead - using the request to represent what was going on in Tasiin's mind.

We have no control here, they thought, taking care to hide the soliloquy from Tasiin. *We can touch but not change.*

Tasiin was unable to decide. He closed his eyes, tried to ignore the door and Datlai both. *Since when do I make such decisions?* Tasiin thought. *Sacrifice myself for Datlai's sake, or sacrifice Datlai for my own sake?*

Why, gods, do you make me choose what to save? Why do you torment me?

"We never lose our connection with the past, even when we try," Datlai mused. "Think back to before the Burning, before the realization. You remember - and you hope for it to come again, although you won't admit it. Would you sacrifice that?"

Tasiin began shaking, then sobbing, finally falling to his knees and collapsing in despair. *Why do you continue this? I don't want to be like this!*

"No," he said, his voice unclear from the emotion.

"No, I can not leave."

Use your knowledge to keep Outside away, the Bentusi thought.

"Lock the door," Datlai said.

Tasiin despaired further. How much did the Universe expect of him?

"I can't. Don't you understand? I can't handle this!... You are asking for too much... I am not even sure I want to be here. I want..." Tasiin trailed off and did not continue.

Datlai looked at him, analyzing him.

"Then I will not ask it of you. But don't leave."

We asked him repeatedly to keep Outside away, but only once did the persona ask.

He is beyond our control.

We have never experienced this before.

We do not know what to do.

Tasiin floated up to consciousness again. Although he was still sore and bandaged, he forced himself out of bed.

The Beastlayer's trans-hyperdrive must be completed. It must, soon. He thought about the dream, about leaving the Universe without any defense, without the *Beastlayer*.

He shuddered.

Tasiin called the lab over the station's message system.

"Tasiin Limandatt," a Taiidan said. "Will you be here today?"

"Yes. Have you made any progress with the entry waveform equation for trans-hyperspace?"

The Taiidan bowed, ashamed. "We are still trying to understand your solution for hyperspace. We have no idea where to even start with trans-hyperspace."

Tasiin forced himself not to say anything, not to sigh, but he could feel his face fall in disappointment. In truth, he was struggling with some parts of trans-hyperspace, but an inspiration should help.

"Have all data concerning the *Naggarok's* hyperdrive prepared when I arrive."

The Taiidan bowed again and set out.

"Advanced mimic mode fully operational. Approaching target."

The Turanic Raider corvette approached, disguised holographically as a Hiigaran heavy corvette. It was specifically designed to evade Galactic Shipyard 0's sensor array, to slip in close, and then to transmit to the fleet nearing in hyperspace.

"Visual confirmation confirmed. Relaying enemy fleet telemetry."

"Telemetry received," the warfleet leader stated.

"Detecting Hiigaran ships on intercept vectors."

"The Bentusi may have detected you. Retreat at maximum speed," the war leader ordered.

"Retreat confirmed. Evasive mode set. Returning to hyperspace jump point."

Chapter 6: Grief for the Past

Personal Log 17.71 AHL

The Beastslayer's progress is well. The trans-hyperdrive will allow entry into normal hyperspace, as predicted. Entry into higher spaces, though, is far more complex. We do not know what exactly the ship's waveform should be, nor is there much empirical data. In time, I should be able to solve the wave equation - and in fact I have many ideas already on how to do this. Over the next several days, the answer should appear.

At present, I have reconstructed the Naggarok's trans-hyperspace entry mathematically and I believe that the Beastslayer's own hyperdrive can reproduce it. The team is working on this approach, as I work on other ways to use trans-hyperdrive. I have doubts, though. What I have found about trans-hyperspace is that the spacing in energy between each level of space decreases with each higher level - so there is a reachable infinitely high hyperspace - like the infinitely high energy level in an atom. However, the Naggarok's energy requirement seems too high.....it is as if it is going beyond all levels of hyperspace. None of the others know it, but we are dealing with something far more powerful than we thought.

Then there is life outside of work.....

My dreams have been haunting, strange. Someone always wants me to do something. The Universe is always falling apart, and it will be completely destroyed unless I do something - lock a door. But it is tempting to step onto the otherside.....Datlai-she's always there, trying to keep me here, trying to reverse my decision to live alone. And, in wakefulness I am her friend once again.

Why is this happening?

This cannot go on. I need to understand everything, before it destroys me.

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[Notes: Check with notes from Kharak about trans-hyperspace. Also, try extrapolations of the Naggarok's hyperdrive. Search for records on derelict ships - may come across something Rest tonight.

Talk to Datlai. Soon.]

Tasiin Limandatt

Trans-hyperdrive Specialist

“Tasiin,” Datlai said, sitting near where he would have. In truth, this made it easier for him, forcing him to speak with her. She reached out to him, her hand over his heart. Immediately, though, she felt him touch similarly apprehensively, weakly. They greeted each other.

“Why do I feel that you come here in sadness?” she asked, looking at him.

“Perhaps because I come in sadness.”

“You still are a part of our kiith’s spirit. Tasiin, what troubles you?”

He hesitated. *I cannot do this. What am I doing? Why.....*

Tasiin knew it was too late to back out now.

“The.....the dream I had a few days ago, when I.....injured myself.....it was just one nightmare.....although the worst.....except.....” Tasiin began.

Datlai simply waited.

“Do you remember your Dream as a Sleeper on the Mothership?”

“Yes,” she sighed, looking into the distance with a slight smile. “I was on a long journey to a mythical paradise. The things that I saw were amazing.....When I reached it, it was different than I thought it would be, but it had its own reasons that made it paradise.....”

“I saw Kharak burn.”

Datlai turned around to face him, completely shocked.

“I watched the Scaffold, the satellites, the interplanetary outposts, the planet itself all fall prey to the Taiidan, the Imperialists. Yet, I did not feel anything.”

“Tasiin,” she said, but then found no other words to say.

“Then, then I saw empires fall apart the Galaxy. And there was a.....cancer eating away at everything.”

“The Beast.”

“Yes. And there was something that I could control - a doorway. Some wanted me to see what was on the other side - and others wanted me to lock it forever. Ever since, I came here, I always have had to make the same decision in my sleep. It is tormenting - I must decide the fate of everything, but I don’t want to. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she replied, unnaturally calm.

“This is going to be harder to say.....but you have been in my dreams recently. Always the one keeping me here. Always.....trying to pull me back from.....my decision on Kharak.”

Datlai said nothing. There was a saddened expression on her face, but still she did nothing. How she was holding herself back was a mystery to Tasiin. Still, he did not expect her to forgive him for what he was to say next.

“The Universe seemed daunting then. The way my work on hyperspace was ignored because of the

size and nature of the kiith, the large kiithid's hypocrisy by claiming we were all one large kiith of Kushan. I did not want to be part of it anymore - I wanted to be alone. And then there was.....I thought you wouldn't need me if..... Dillat....."

"Please," Datlai said. "For the soul of Sajuuk, do not tell me you fell to something as childish as jealousy."

Tasiin did not answer.

"Dillat....." she began. Again, she maintained a placated reply, but underneath there was not calmness. Instead, there was a melancholy undercurrent, a sadness, a grief, a desire to be alone. Tasiin recognized it as a reflection of himself. "Dillat, just before we underwent the Sleeping, joined Kiith Manaan. He made it to Hiigara, and we remained friends.....until the war with the Beast. He was assigned at the time to a carrier named the *Caal-Shto*."

"The *Caal-Shto*?" asked Tasiin.

"It encountered the *Kuun-Lan* and was on its way back to Hiigara when it was distracted by a small Beast fleet. In the battle, the Beast mothership arrived and attacked the *Caal-Shto*. In that time, the Naar directive had not been invented. The *Caal-Shto* was lost to the Beast."

Tasiin did not know what to say. He could not apologize, not the way the conversation was unfolding. However, he could not back out now.

"I do not know what to say," he began. Tasiin could feel himself begin to shake. He looked to Datlai. Her face betrayed her sadness; her eyes glistened with tears.

"If you are asking me to forget, I cannot," Datlai said. "If you are asking me to forgive, though, I already have, Tasiin."

"Why? I do not think I deserve your forgiveness."

"Why? Because I am sure that you have feelings. I am sure that you have gone through as much as I have." Datlai's voice suddenly turned from sadness to anger, something that Tasiin found disturbing. "*I am sure that you are an actual person under that Kharak-forsaken aloof mask you wear!*" Datlai began to cry.

"I.....I thought you forga-"

"*You seem to want this!* You want to punish yourself. I want to move on with my - our lives. Do you want penance or forgiveness?"

Tasiin joined her in her crying. He ignored the others who were watching; he ignored the listening Bentusi visible in the window.

It would be a few minutes before they looked at each other again. When they did it was hesitantly. There was still an awkward silence between them.

“Perhaps the true test of friendship is being in sadness together,” Datlai finally said.

“Let us build upon whatever is left,” Tasiin agreed.

“*Dolann Kaalel, report to station command!*” Thenar Soban’s voice came across the station’s message system.

“What is it?” Kaalel asked, running into Galactic Shipyard 0’s command deck.

“Hyperspace signatures all around us,” Soban said. “They are Imperialists and Raiders. Our secret is out.”

“How many ships?”

A Taiidan answered.

“Nineteen carriers, twenty cruisers, forty destroyers, and over a hundred frigates. They are all closing in on us.”

Chapter 7: Raiders

“What are they doing?” Kaalel asked. “That must be half of their fleet. Are they insane?”

“Strike craft launching from carriers,” the Taiidan said. “They are coming in, fast, 50 kloms from the station. Ion Array Frigates unfolding magnetic arrays; all ships have weapon signatures.”

Another Taiidan came aboard the station’s command deck. “Thank you for informing Kaalel of the situation. I can find out on my own.”

“Shanal Alo, this is no time for jokes,” Thenar Soban said. He heard Kaalel give orders over the background sounds from inside the tactical display: “GravWell defense, activate. Groups Zeta and Protectors, fire at the group of Turanic carriers at -40° by 70°. All fighters, stay clear of the GravWells and target the carriers. Group Retribution.....”

“Command your fleet!” Soban said and then stepped into the tactical room. “Assuming control of group Immortality. *Sel-Tan* fire.....”

Shanal Alo and the instantly appearing Pukna Somtaaw ran into the tactical room.

“Rebel-leader online!”

“*Coor-Lan* and *Naab-Corum* fleets responding!”

The first Imperialist interceptors and scouts neared the shipyard in claw formation, their orange trails blazing behind them.

Missile destroyers and Somtaaw multi-beam frigates rushed out to meet the threat. As the fighters approached, firing their mass-driver weapons into the defending ships, a sudden volley of missiles was launched from the destroyers. The missiles fired their engines, propelling themselves into the fighters in kamikaze attacks. Instantly, the first waves were destroyed.

Defenders, Plasma Bombers, Turanic Interceptors, and corvettes moved in on the offensive next. As the Somtaaw frigates fired their ion cannons and Frrern Attacker corvettes closed in on the new threat, the main Hiigaran and Taiidan groups of frigates, destroyers, and cruisers pushed forward to the main attacking wave. Carriers followed, providing support for the capital ships. Meanwhile the strike craft and the remaining wings of frigates moved out to intercept the smaller groups of adversaries that surrounded the station in multiple directions.

Hiigaran Ion Cannon Frigates focused their fire on a single Raider carrier. The Turanic ship responded with its two beams, exploding through the Kushan frigate *Retaker of Hiigara*, destroying its engines. A pair of Imperialist Heavy Cruisers slowly turned to join their fire. As they did, Republican destroyers fired their cannons at full power at the newly exposed sides of the cruisers, scorching the hulls. By now it was too late for the cruisers to aid the dying carrier, even as its guarding Ion Array Frigates pounded away on the Hiigarans with their powerful red beams. The

carrier exploded while the Missile Corvettes fleeing its destruction now swarmed several of the slower frigates.

Over the station's com channel, a warning sounded. "Somtaaw Explorer warships firing their siege cannons at secondary Raiderwave at 160° by -60°. All ships break off and clear the area!" As soon as it was broadcast, the two battleships launched their globes of plasma towards the group of four Turanic carriers. Watching the incoming fire, the carriers began to turn in evasion. Their massiveness, however, betrayed them, and the blasts hit two carriers on the side. The direct hits completely destroyed the two attackers, as well as their strike craft and frigate escorts, while damaging the other two.

"Three Raider Carriers taken out!" Kaalel said.

"ACV wing giving the stragglers an EM pulse - unlinking - firing missiles," Pukna Somtaaw added. "They took the other two out!"

"Nice, but it will be four minutes before your siege cannons recharge," Shanal Alo replied.

".....Cruiser lost. Destroyer lost. Frigate lost. Frigate lost.....Frigate lost," the tactical display automatically intoned.

"The Imperial cruisers are tearing us apart!" Soban exclaimed. "Diverting Ion Cannon Frigates to attack from the flank. Missile destroyers firing volley at escorts. Somtaaw, get your Leeches out here onto these Kharak-burning things!"

"Wait. The Bentusi are coming into the battle," Kaalel said.

The six Bentusi ships seemed out of place in the fierce battle - gliding serenely towards the main Turanic and Imperialist group. The attackers were careful not to attack them yet, to avoid their wrath. The Tradeships moved in front of the most dangerous ships, blocking their paths to the shipyard and the *Beastslayer*. As the Raiders maneuvered to find new targets and move around the immense ships, the Bentusi broadcast a message.

"Turanic Raiders and Taiidan Imperialists: halt your attack immediately."

The pirate vessels ignored the Bentusi, continuing to try to come closer to the shipyard. Several Taiidan Ion Cannon Frigates attacked a Kushan Carrier. The Carrier was destroyed in moments.

"It is unfortunate you insist on conflict," the Bentusi said. *"We regret the consequences."* The Tradeships expelled their fighters, all arranging themselves into walls of twenty each. The fighter groups closed in on the largest ships, as the Tradeships fired their destructive ion cannons at the escorts. Then flashes of yellow appeared throughout the battle scene, when Bentusi-designed Super Acolytes fired at full power on the carriers and cruisers, destroying them with one pass each. The

Hiigaran and Republican forces focused their fire on the Imperialist missile destroyers, before they could destroy the fighters.

Carrier after carrier fell to the Bentusi; the pirate forces thinned out considerably. Finally several of the Turanic and Imperialist strike craft retreated to the few remaining carriers as well as the Imperial support frigates. The Super Acolytes continued their powerful slicing of the capital ships until hyperspace windows appeared in front of every Turanic and Imperialist capital ship not damaged too much in the battle. The ships were engulfed in a glowing blue color.

In a few moments, they were gone.

The Republicans and Kushan launched their salvage corvettes to salvage whatever was left of their ships that had not made it. Then, they turned upon the stragglers, abandoned by the more fortunate of their forces.

Chapter 8: Entity

Come back. Come to us. Do not fear. Come.

“No,” Tasiin whispered, looking out of the window in his room.

“Tasiin,” Datlai asked. She asked the question gently, even after what they had said to each other the night before. “What is it?”

“No, I will not go,” Tasiin said.

“Tasiin?”

“There is something, someone here. It wants something - me. It does not belong here. *No.*”

“What - who is it?”

“Something powerful. It should not be here - in the Universe. It is from somewhere else. It is infinitely powerful.....or powerful enough to seem infinite.”

Datlai felt nothing except for a vague unease. She was unsure if it was her own mind or the presence Tasiin was describing. “The Bentusi?”

“No. It means us harm, and is far more powerful. We are much closer to the Bentusi than it is to them.”

“The T-Mat, perhaps? You overheard they are malevolent.”

“Again, it does not seem powerful enough.”

“The Beast.”

“The Beast.....the Beast still was not powerful enough, I think. I feel a great.....hunger. It might be related to the Beast,” Tasiin replied.

“We also sense the presence,” the voice of the Bentusi stated. *“It tries to hide from us, but we can overhear it in your mind. It is far beyond us.....far older. It comes from Outside. It is an echo of the Devourer.”*

“No, it is stronger,” Tasiin said, his face turning pale, his breath becoming shallow. “The Beast was like.....its child. If that. The Beast was its seed, a spore. A few cells of the true monster.

“I won’t go.....” he responded to the other.

“We feared the Devourer. You sense something far worse.”

“Your mind is growing strong now - exponentially.”

“*I will not go,*” Tasiin said to the presence.

“*Something happens. Your resolve is equal to ours,*” the Bentusi said. “*It is beyond ours.*” Datlai, for the first time, heard surprise in their echoing voices.

“Tasiin?”

“*I will not go!*”

“Ta-“

“**No!**”

The entity flinched unconsciously, away from the light that had revealed its brightness. Compared to its own vast being, the one had merely given it an insignificant injury. Yet, that was enough to cause much pain - for it was the first time in its memory of feeling any noticeable hurt. Certainly, it was more than the faint ones who called themselves Bentusi could do.

Wary, the entity withdrew.

Datlai watched Tasiin find himself in bed, looking at her eyes.

“Datlai,” he said. “How long was I.....out?”

“Two hours. It is still night,” she replied softly.

“That is good,” Tasiin said. “I felt it. The presence was hungry. It wanted me to follow it. It wanted me.....to go to the other side of the door. It wanted so much. It was about to force me.”

“Tasiin, you made it past it. You are still here. You are *here*,” she reassured.

“It still is out there, waiting for me. I touched it, not killed it. I don’t want to go.”

“Tasiin, be calm. You are here.”

“*You hurt the presence. It has retreated for now,*” the Bentusi said.

“Rest,” Datlai said.

“What if-“

“We are looking over you.”

Tasiin started to speak again, but Datlai quieted him. “Rest.”

After she was sure he could not hear, she asked, “May I talk with you?”

“The Unbound think many things at once. We can converse,” the Bentusi responded.

‘There was a presence.’

“Yes.”

“Was it as powerful as he said.”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Does it want him so much?”

“Yes. He is....becoming brighter - more powerful, exponentially. He will be beyond Unbound.”

“Can it be beaten?”

“It does not seem so. However, Tasiin Limandatt hurt the presence. This is reason for hope.”

“You say that so calmly.”

“We fear. We fear more than ever. Your kind, however, shows us courage. It is....inspiring.”

“So, you will not leave us?”

“We have learned. We will face our fate with you.”

Datlai breathed a sigh of relief. “Sometimes, this is too much.”

“He thinks the same way. You keep him here, though. You must continue.”

Apparently sensing her despair, the Bentusi added, *“In turn we watch over you.”*

“Can we talk at anytime?”

“Yes. We watch over you. To lose you, and thus, lose him is something we fear. Talk to us whenever you want, if need be. We must not let Outside in here.”

“Thank you.”

“We thought you would find this interesting,” a Hiigaran in Kiith Naabal’s colors said to Dolann Kaalel. Soban and Taiidan Republicans also stood in the area. Kaalel approached the interrogation chair in which a pained Taiidan was stretched out. Kaalel looked over the Imperial captain.

“We found him on an Imperial frigate,” the Naabal stated. “Tell him what you told us.”

The Taiidan Imperialist said nothing.

“Why? Why did you attack us?” Kaalel demanded.

“You kept a secret from us. We tried to take it,” the captain replied, with hostility and resentment filling his voice.

“I do not believe that. You knew the Bentusi were here. You knew you could not win. And how did you know about this place and its location? How does the Council know about us?”

“Say it,” the Naabal commanded.

“We were mercenaries. We attacked to soften you up and gather intelligence,” the Taiidan said.

“Who hired you? One of our ‘allies’?”

“No, your allies are loyal - ‘puppets’ is probably a better term.” The captain tried to struggle in the chain, but the restraints did not budge.

“Turanic Raiders or an Imperialist faction, then.”

“You think too small. If we softened you up, then you will be slaughtered.”

“The Bentusi?” Kaalel asked.

“The Bentusi?” the Imperialist repeated with a smile, and then laughed. “You pathetic, paranoid Hiigarans! One does not kill your own servants.”

“*Something from Outside*,” the Bentusi’s voice stated.

The Taiidan was surprised at the response. “The Bentusi are *here*? They are listening?”

“Yes,” Kaalel said. “Answer their question.”

“Something from Outside.....what is Outside?” The Taiidan seemed genuinely confused. Kaalel also took in account that the Imperials, in the end of the war two years ago, were reasonable and turned against the Beast.

“Have I betrayed my people enough, or must I disgrace them further?” The question seemed force, as if the Imperial was trying to put more contempt into his words than he had.

Kaalel considered, then said, “That will be enough for now.”

Chapter 9: Naggarok

Situation Report 17.73 AHL:

Since the Turanic and Imperialist attack on the shipyard, we have increased defense substantially. A prisoner's claim that the attack was merely a prelude to something worse has left us all on edge. Five carrier groups have hyperspaced in as reinforcements, as well as two more Bentusi Tradeships. Bentusi fighters constantly patrol the area. We have devised mass evacuation plans for the station. Among our more controversial suggestions is to use the Beastslayer as a large lifeboat if need be. We are currently looking into this.

The situation in the Council has deteriorated much. The Imperialists claim to have seen a secret base being developed by us. They have proof also - recordings of the battle yesterday. They are demanding that we reveal ourselves immediately, and virtually every non-allied race agrees with them. It is only a matter of time before every race overreacts and the Galaxy is consumed by complete war.

The only good news is that the Beastslayer is ready for launch. The trans-hyperdrive can recreate the Naggarok's hyperspace entry. The Bentusi have expressed deep concerns about something from "Outside" attacking the ship and wreaking destruction across the Universe. They do not go into specifics, but their fear is cause for much worry. What if they overreact? What if they inform the entire Council about the Beastslayer? What if they are justified in their fear?

This project is turning into our worst nightmares. It can be daunting many times, far too often. At present we will have to continue. We must hope that the ship will be launched before something happens.

*Dolann Kaalel
Coordinator of Project
Hiigaran team*

"Datlai, I must talk to the research team," Tasiin explained. "Ever since.....the presence there has been something bothering me about the *Beastslayer's* hyperdrive. You must wait while I talk to them."

"Is it necessary that I cannot go further? Do you think I can understand what you are talking about?"

Tasiin sighed. "If you insist on following, be discrete. Do not tell anyone of what you heard or what you saw." He approached the table of conversing Sjet, Taiidan, and I'ao, speculating about the trans-hyperdrive of the *Beastslayer*.

"Tasiin Limandatt, please join us and enlighten us about your theory," a Taiidan said.

"There is something urgent I must share," he warned. "Our temporary solution for the trans-hyperdrive was to copy the *Naggarok*."

“A good idea,” said a Sjet. “What would be better than to imitate from the masters of trans-hyperdrive?”

“The problem is with what the ‘masters’ were trying to do. How much do you know about the energy requirements for hyperspace?”

“We are still dis-“ an I’ao said.

Tasiin summoned a small holographic display that appeared over the table. At the bottom was a plane filled with galaxies, representing normal space. Above it were blue layers of hyperspace. The distance between each higher plane was halved at each next level. The result was an infinite amount of blue planes layered in a finite distance.

“This is a diagram of the relations of the energy required to enter each layer of hyperspace,” Tasiin explained. “The scale is not accurate, but you can still see the implications - the infinitely high hyperspace level is reachable with finite energy. It is like an atom - only a finite amount of energy is needed to enter any of its infinite energy levels.”

“Are you saying the *Naggarok* reached the infinitely high energy level? That it had instantaneous travel?” another Sjet asked.

“No. Here is where the *Naggarok*’s energy requirements would be on the diagram.”

A red icon depicting the *Naggarok* appeared far higher than any of the planes representing the levels of hyperspace.

“Whoever built the *Naggarok* had no concern about traveling fast. They were trying to go beyond all the levels. There were trying to deliberately *leave* the Universe,” Tasiin said. None of the others said anything, too stunned to think further. Subtly glancing around, he was aware that Datlai, not too far away and pretending to be gazing at the stars, had frozen completely.

“Sajuuk help us,” the first Sjet whispered.

“Why?” a Taiidan wondered out loud.

“That question bothers me most,” Tasiin replied. *If only they knew about the presence. About the thing that lurks Outside. They would see the threat immediately.*

The emergency alert sounded throughout the station.

“What is it?” Thenar Soban asked a waiting Shanal Alo, Dolann Kaalel, and Pukna Somtaaw.

“Hyperspace signatures at 100 kloms from the station,” Kaalel said. “They are massive ships with enormous energy readings - comparable to the Bentusi.”

“Who are they, then?”

“We have identified them,” a Soban at the defense display said. “They are T-Mat.”

“How many ships?” Kaalel asked. All hesitated while the strength of the belligerent Unbound race was measured.

“Kiith’s blood,” said Pukna, observing the display. Thenar also heard Shanai curse in Taiidan.

The Soban took in a deep breath. “Fifteen Megaships; over fifty capital ships. Approaching in wall formations. Intercept in two minutes.”

Chapter 10: T-Mat

“Red alert! All defenses activate!” Kaalel shouted. The four rushed into the main tactical room. “Emergency evacuation of non-essential personnel to carriers. All non-evacuation ships, move to intercept. Prepare to attack!”

“Somtaaw ships responding,” Pukna Somtaaw added.

“Taiidan Republican ships online,” Shanal Alo added.

“Soban fleet ready,” Thenar Soban joined in.

“Prepare to stop the T-Mat at all costs,” Kaalel ordered.

The evacuation alarm blared in the background. At once, the mass of people in the station’s informal room used for conversation began running to the exit.

“We must leave to the evacuation carriers,” said an I’ao researcher.

“Are we to leave the *Beastslayer* drifting in space?” asked a Taiidan. “And we have data on trans-hyperdrive there. The attackers could take it.”

“We could try to command it until the station’s officers decide what to do,” a Sjet offered.

“Were you listening to Tasiin here? We cannot use the trans-hyperdrive unless we know what it is doing-“

“There is a standard hyperdrive on the *Beastslayer*,” Tasiin interjected. “We can go aboard and charge the hyperspace module.”

The others started to nod slowly.

“We have little time. We must get to the ship,” he added. The group of researchers began to run into the station’s main corridor. “Datlai?”

He looked around and did not see her. “Use your security clearances and charge the hyperspace module. Wait for the shipyard’s officer to come aboard. If the station has taken massive damage, launch the *Beastslayer*. Do not wait for me.” The others stopped for a moment, then rushed to the ship.

Tasiin was surprised at himself. Only a few days ago, he would have gone alone onto a carrier. Now he had led a group to the *Beastslayer* and was risking himself for another.

He searched the rapidly exiting crowd. “Datlai?”

Tasiin felt a hand lightly brush his neck. He spun around to find Datlai standing in front of him.

With her were the others of kiith Limandatt aboard, as well as the Manaen she had introduced as the one who had arranged for them to come to the station.

“The researchers have gone to the *Beastlayer* for an emergency launch. I must go there,” Tasiin explained. He began to walk, leading them along. “You do realize you should not be on the *Beastlayer*,” he said.

“It is a curious mind that chooses a regulation over life,” Kanell Limandatt quoted a musing.

“Then we must hurry. I am sure the researchers will let us aboard. We can use a few people in bringing the hyperdrive online.”

The Kushan and Taiidan fleets moved in huge walls towards the approaching T-Mat vessels. Giant orange crystalline structures glistened on the Megaships; the partly angular, partly organic Frigates and Destroyers slowly glided alongside. However, the Bentusi Tradeships moved between the fleets, blocking the T-Mat.

By now, it was too late to stop the battle, though. The T-Mat vessels fired their ion cannons at the defending fleets. In response, the Hiigaran and Republican ships broke into several groups, moving to attack from the sides of the T-Mat fleet. Attack bombers and Interceptors began circling the Frigates, Defenders distracting the T-Mat from them. Ion and energy cannons lashed out from the shipyard’s defense fleet.

“*T-Mat, halt your attack. They are under our protection,*” the Bentusi broadcast.

In response, two T-Mat Frigates and a Destroyer fired their ion cannons on the lead Bentusi ship. The Bentusi ships attacked with their own weapons; patrolling Super Acolytes swarmed several frigates. The Megaships, with their relatively weak but high coverage ion cannons, began destroying the fighters one at a time.

“*Have you gone mad?*” the Bentusi asked. “*Unbound races do not attack like this. Unbound races do not attack one another.*”

The T-Mat replied. Their voice was deep, spiteful. It sounded eerily like some of the first transmissions from the Beast, almost a whisper but one full of power.

“*You threaten us. You cooperate on the Bound ones’ ship.*”

“*We watch over the Bound ones.*”

“*You have become soft and complacent. We serve all Unbound ones,*” the T-Mat replied.

“*You say this as you attack another Unbound race.*”

“*You threaten to release the Devourer again.*”

“We have as much to fear as you. We risk all. Yet, we still cooperate.”

“We lost some of ourselves to the Devourer. Their memories are no more.”

Two Kushan destroyers exploded. Much of the Hiigaran fleet had taken serious damage. The Taiidan groups focused their fire on a T-Mat Frigate, which only with painfully slow speed withered away. The Bentusi Super Acolytes had been halved in number by now, although they had managed to hold back the T-Mat fleet while destroying a trio of Frigates and a Destroyer.

“Do you not see what you are doing? Are you blind?” the Bentusi asked. *“Already you have erased so many memories, ended so many songs. You are killing us.”*

“You will kill us,” the T-Mat said.

A Taiidan Republican Heavy Cruiser, scarred with breaches across the entire hull, rammed a T-Mat Frigate in desperation. The Frigate stopped for a few seconds, as if shuddering in great pain. Then it continued pushing forward. Across the battle, the defending ships began to retreat to the Shipyard, where the T-Mat were maneuvering to.

“You kill the Bound ones with no thought.”

“We have helped the Bound,” the T-Mat replied. *“On some occasions.”*

“Stop this now,” the Bentusi demanded. The T-Mat fleet continued its approach to Galactic Shipyard 0.

“We regret what we must do.”

“Even the Bound see through that lie. You regret nothing!”

“The T-Mat are entering weapons range of the shipyard!” Kaalel exclaimed.

“I know! Their ships are far more powerful and far more durable,” Shanal Alo replied. “Our ships are doing little to them. Even the Bentusi have taken much damage.”

“The *Beastslayer* is exposed to them,” Pukna Somtaaw said.

Both Kaalel and Shanal cursed out loud. “We must launch it!” Kaalel said.

A voice came over the com channel. “I anticipated this. The research team is preparing for emergency launch.”

“Tasiin!” exclaimed Dolann Kaalel. “Thank the gods for you! But the *Beastslayer* needs to charge its hyperdrive module.”

“What do you think we have been doing?” Tasiin asked. “The *Beastslayer* can jump in 90 seconds.”

“*Thank you!*” Kaalel responded. “All personnel evacuate to the *Beastslayer*! Thenar, get the prisoners and escort them there. They might have some information we can use. Pukna, go with him. If you find any civilians, help them get to the *Beastslayer*.”

The command deck cleared immediately. Thenar Soban and Pukna Somtaaw hesitated for a moment. The shipyard began to shake under the T-Mat’s onslaught. “Go!” Kaalel yelled. Both hurried out.

“Tasiin, begin downloading essential things from the shipyards’ data banks. Shanal, command the fleet for a few moments, while I download a few other important things onto my personal computer for the *Beastslayer*. Then we’ll go.”

“Agreed,” said Shanal Alo.

The Kushan and Taiidan fleets, battered, still attacked the T-Mat vessels in the rear as they fired on the Shipyard. The eight Bentusi Tradeships still pounded away on the Frigates and Destroyers, while their own vessels were scorched by the T-Mat.

But then, orange hyperspace windows opened in the battle. Emerging from them was a small fleet of capital ships of the other Unbound races in the Council. They glided into the fleets, aiming themselves at the T-Mat.....

.....They spun in space for a few moments, twisting violently, then attacked the Bentusi, leaving the T-Mat free to fire on the station.

“*We sense anger, fear from the vessels,*” the Bentusi said. “*Their minds are trapped in the ships. Have you become completely mad? You have binded them!*”

“*It is a temporary measure,*” the T-Mat said. “*They will not be harmed.*” Their fleet fired a salvo of ion cannons at Galactic Shipyard 0.

Dolann Kaalel and Shanal Alo stepped onto the bridge of the *Beastslayer*. “Are we all?”

“The station is evacuated. It is also about to explode,” Thenar Soban stated.

“Emergency launch!” Dolann Kaalel commanded.

On the main viewscreen, the cratered arms of the station, aligned parallel to the *Beastslayer*, vented flames as the engines started. Then, the shipyard began to fall behind the viewer as the ship lurched forwards. Galactic Shipyard 0 was behind the *Beastslayer*.

“All ships, prepare for emergency hyperspace!” Kaalel ordered.

The Bentusi Tradeships each launched a frigate-class vessel. The Cargo Barge, rarely seen in combat, was a last resort - to let some of their kind escape their burning ships. The Cargo Barges moved quickly in different directions, some of the remaining Super Acolytes trailing.

“Follow the vessel we indicate through hyperspace. The others are diversions from your fleet,” the Bentusi stated over the Shipyard’s com channel. *“Summon the Council, bring them to your ship. We will distract the T-Mat.”*

Fighters and corvettes rushed to dock with carriers and Support Frigates. Before the fleets, the forward-thrust arms of Galactic Shipyard 0 detached, exploding.

“Go, now,” the Bentusi urged.

Hyperspace windows appeared in front of the fleet, the *Beastlayer*, and the Cargo Barges. The blue glows enveloped the Hiigaran and Taiidan ships, leading them to safety. The Bentusi Tradeships and remaining Super Acolytes continued firing on the T-Mat, as much of their scarred fleet began to flame.

Galactic Shipyard 0 exploded. The T-Mat vessels turned around to face the Bentusi.

“Do you see your errors?” the T-Mat asked.

“We do not err,” the Bentusi replied, still attacking.

“Your ships must regrettably be controlled to find the Bound ones. Prepare to join us for a few moments.”

The Bentusi response was like a sigh, as if they resigned to their fate.

The T-Mat ships approached.

Suddenly the Bentusi began to speak again. Their voices were full of anger and resentment at what the T-Mat had done and rebellion in them at what the T-Mat were going to do. As the T-Mat began to subvert their vessels, trying to find where the fleet went, the Bentusi replied.

“WE WILL NOT BE BOUND!”

The self-destruct of the Bentusi vessels that destroyed the crippled ships the Bentusi had been firing on. Three Megaships, seven Destroyers, and eleven Frigates exploded with the Bentusi.

Even as the T-Mat recoiled in pain, they acknowledged the Bentusi in their sacrifice. Their method, if not motive, of saving themselves and the fleet was admirable. Many sane Unbound ones would have done the same. Then, once they had paid respect in their minds, the T-Mat fleet jumped to hyperspace, in search of the *Beastlayer*.

Chapter 11: The Beastslayer's Songs

Datlai was awake. The other Limandatt were asleep in the room, barely more than a compartment, which Dolann Kaalel had given to them in gratitude for preparing the *Beastslayer*. She quietly stood up and walked over to Tasiin, whose rest seemed be haunted. She wondered if the Dream aboard the Mothership was replaying itself. Worse was the possibility that the presence Tasiin had felt had returned.

“What you are going through I cannot imagine,” she whispered. “But for everyone, for me, for yourself, do not let the presence tempt you. Do not leave.”

Datlai could not really tell if her words had any effect on him. He did slightly calmer, but not enough to know for sure. Still, she brushed his face lightly, as much for her comfort as for his.

“Are you still listening?” she asked into the darkness.

“*We still listen and watch,*” the Bentusi replied. Their voices seemed fewer, quieter. They also seemed closer, as if they were in the room with her.

“You seem weaker.”

“*We are few. We lost many distracting from you. The T-Mat tried to bind us so they could find you. We would not let them harm you. We would not be Bound. Those left behind destroyed themselves rather than let the T-Mat harm you. The frigate and nine fighters are all that are with you.*”

“Do you feel the presence from Outside?”

“*Yes. It claws at his mind. It is more careful, more subtle, and less aggressive this time.*”

Datlai’s hand still rested on Tasiin’s face. She let it stroke his cheek.

“*There is something else. His mind is Unbound, sometimes even beyond Unbound, but his body is only Bound. It confines him. Soon he will need to become completely Unbound, so he can then grow even further, or life will become too painful.*”

“I am not sure I could let him go like that.”

“*It need not be letting go. It would require much change. It may be difficult. His mind can still be with yours, though. He must become Unbound soon, for his sake, for everyone’s sake. Perhaps even for your own.*”

“For his sake, then, I will.”

“*We knew that you would feel that way. We watch over you both.*”

“So you have said.”

The *Beastslayer* and its immense escort fleet jumped out of hyperspace, about 10000 light years from the T-Mat attack on Galactic Shipyard 0. The Hiigaran and Taiidan ships moved into escort formations, the Bentusi Cargo Barge floating behind the *Beastslayer*. Newly constructed resource harvesters launched themselves, gathering from nearby dust clouds.

Amid this relatively placid scene, the *Beastslayer* was readying itself for battle. At its heart, the trans-hyperdrive charged up. In a short span of time, it would be ready to do what the *Naggarok* had done - go Outside.

“You are going to launch the ship Outside?” Tasiin asked. He sat before Dolann Kaalel, who seemed to think it was the obvious course of action. “There is something there. Something that does not want us there, something that we should not be around.”

“I have been told about that,” Kaalel replied. “Part of the reason the *Beastslayer* is going is to find out what it is.”

Tasiin felt as if the entire Universe had gone insane. “While we study it, it can study us, destroy us, subvert us, do what it wants with us.....the ship. It might try to infect the *Beastslayer*. ‘Planting a seed on it’ might be a better term.”

“The *Beastslayer* will be evacuated except for those going Outside. It will jump out, take a few scans, and jump back in, all within 20 seconds. While it is Outside, every known method of stopping or slowing infection will be running. Upon its return, if it has been found that the *Beastslayer* has been subverted, the fleet will immediately destroy it.”

Still sensing Tasiin’s skepticism, he added, “We have talked it over with the Daiamid, the Taiidan Republic, the other members of the project, and the Bentusi still with us. We agree that we must not let the T-Mat get this ship, especially if we do not know what it does. Much more important than that, though, is the fact that the entity that is Outside unleashed the Beast on the *Naggarok*, and then on us. There could be more ‘seeds’ out there, capable of annihilating everything we done. Are we going to let it do what it wants without any regret, forever? Do we not owe it to the Universe to at least try to stop it? We do not even have to destroy it, just find a defense against it, or seal it off, even reason with it.”

“I understand,” Tasiin said. “But if we fail, the situation would become much worse.” He stood up, about to leave. “If the *Beastslayer* goes, so do I.”

“Tasiin, that is unnecessary.....” Kaalel began.

“No. I am the one who knows the most about the *Beastslayer*’s hyperdrive. I am also the only one to have even begun to injure the.....presence, entity. I must go.”

Dolann did not even begin to argue again. Instead he said, “If at any time you change your mind, tell us.”

“I doubt it.” Tasiin left.

Tasiin found the others of kiith Limandatt waiting for him when he returned to the room.

“It appears that I am going Outside.”

Datlai stepped up to him. “I am sure you can hold the.....*it* away.”

“It will be much stronger out there. I told you about the Dream with the-“

“-the door. Yes. But Tasiin, nothing is as obvious as it seems. Stepping Outside in your dreams can mean turning your back on everything, as even you once said. I do not believe you would do such a thing.”

“No,” he sighed. “I would not.”

After giving him a few seconds of silence, Datlai began, “There is something else we should discuss. Tasiin, our kiith has been widely scattered since the Landfall. The journey to Hiigara, the survivors joining kiith Manaana, and.....you know of.....the loss of.....Kator Limandatt on the *Kuun-Lan* to.....the Beast.....have thinned our numbers. Only 14 of us are still Limandatt. For so long there has been no order in the kiith.”

“You want to reunite the kiith?”

“Perhaps.....However, if we are to become a kiith again, we need a leader - a kiith-sa.”

Tasiin did not answer as the others looked expectantly towards him.

“We had Dolann Kaalel give us a chance to talk with the others on Hiigara,” Datlai said.

“I.....I do not know if I deserve this.”

“You led us to here,” Kanell Limandatt said.

“This ship was made possible by you,” Naela Limandatt added.

“But have I been true to the kiith’s spirit?”

“You may not believe so. But I know you to be one of us. Your inspiration does not express itself in words, images, or music, but in mathematical truths of the Universe. Your inspiration is at the very center of the *Beastlayer*. Even if you dream differently, you still dream.”

“Datlai, can we discuss this outsi - in the hall?” Tasiin asked, catching the irony he was about to say before it left his mouth. Without questions or hesitation, they stepped out of the room together.

“I am not sure I can do this,” Tasiin said.

“This will not be completely official until the situation with the *Beastslayer* calms,” Datlai replied.

“It is not that. It has nothing to do with the kiith. Only that it seems like now that I have decided to stay here - not go through the door - everything is pushing me Outside. Datlai, I never wanted this, this fame, this *power*, at the expense of myself.....”

Datlai looked at Tasiin and then put her arms around him, pulling him close. He let her, even starting to return the embrace.

“I know it seems daunting,” Datlai said. “Pain never lasts forever. Just be patient and do what you can. No one can expect you to succeed in changing the entire Universe. And you will never surrender to Outside. It can take your body and your mind, but not your soul.”

Again, Tasiin did not answer directly. “Yes, if you want me to be a leader of the kiith, I accept.”

“Good,” Datlai replied. With a playful smile, she added, “Kiith-sa.” Upon hearing it, he let himself smile a little.

Chapter 12: Outside

Personal Log 17.75 AHL:

The Beastslayer is being prepared for launch to Outside.

It will gather information for the twenty seconds it is there. The others believe they can try to find a defense against the presence that lives there. They say the Beastslayer must be launched for the good of the entire Universe. They argue that the entity cannot be allowed to do as it pleases with us. Although I agree that the entity must be stopped eventually, I doubt we will be able to do it. It simply is too powerful, too malevolent. Whoever goes there will be completely at its mercy. I must go on it, though. If the Bentusi are correct in stating that I injured it slightly, then I may be the only chance for success on the mission.

I have done some calculations on Outside. It seems to be an actual space, perhaps not unlike our own as far as physics is concerned. It seems to be like a bridge connecting many universes. It might be a form of super-universe. A few calculations hint at Outside having several quantum states, each with its own physical constants. One of these layers would have laws nearly identical to our own, which would let the Beastslayer continue to exist without its atoms disintegrating. For which state the Beastslayer is going, we will have to trust the Naggarok launchers in choosing the correct one.

As for matters not related to the Beastslayer, the few remaining members of kiith Limandatt have chosen me as their kiith-sa. I accepted, but I am not sure if I will be able to lead them with the situation with Outside, the T-Mat, and the Beastslayer at hand. The journey Outside might make it irrelevant soon anyway. Datlai assures me to not worry about it for now. If only I could share her optimism..... If I could, I would believe the Beastslayer will return safely. I cannot imagine it happening, though. Datlai believes it will.

I hope she never understands what I do.

*Tasiin Limandatt('sa)
Trans-hyperdrive Specialist*

The Beastslayer hovered in front of the massed fleet, in formation for the launch Outside. Repair drones finished their work on the nascent trans-hyperdrive. The *Beastslayer's* missile bays loaded themselves, ion cannons charged up. An electrical field powered up around the *Beastslayer* in preparation for infection. Finally, the *Beastslayer* was ready.

“All systems are ready,” reported Thenar Soban, acting-captain of the *Beastslayer*. He paced in front of the bridge, one of the five people aboard.

“Good luck,” Dolann Kaalel said over a com channel.

“May the gods be with you,” Shanal Alo added.

Everyone looked to Tasiin, who sat at the trans-hyperdrive controls, slightly rear of the bridge’s center.

“Engaging trans-hyperdrive,” he finally stated.

On the viewscreen, what seemed to be a hyperspace window appeared. The glow was different in some ways - it was brighter, shafts of light reaching out of it. It moved along the *Beastslayer*, bluish light filling the viewscreen.

The ship jumped out of the Universe.

It sensed the entry into its being.

The group of flicker minds came like the previous ones. That unfortunate group had dared to attack, despite their faintness. In response, it had placed a small amount of its being on their vessel, dooming those inside.

It considered doing the same to this vessel. Those inside meant harm, and it would be a relatively easy matter to layer a fraction of its essence on the ship, or destroy it outright.

.....Except the bright one was on it. The yearning one, the one who had caused it pain, the one whose mind echoed its own. It did consider planting its essence, which would dispose of the bright one. Instead, it decided that the bright one would be of much greater use if kept. Even as the other plotted against it, there was a desire to within to join, to revert to a desirable state.

But first, it incapacitated the flicker minds.

The other four crew members screamed and clenched in pain. They all fell to the floor as their bodies shook. In moments they were unconscious.

Tasiin looked into the viewscreen, filled with a complete and utter darkness. Angrily, he asked, “What do you want?”

For the first time, a clear response came.

The entity sensed the resentment from the bright one. It replied calmly.

We want what you want.

We want to be left alone.

Tasiin could feel what the power of the entity was. It stretched his ability to comprehend. He realized its thoughts defined Outside. Its hunger was insatiable.

I do not want that, he thought. I do no-

You do want it, the presence replied. We know you do. Do not lie to yourself.

I do not attack-

Tasiin felt what seemed to be memories. *We were attacked by the previous group.* He understood who they were as the other said it, as well as their motivation.

The Naggarok. Kharak's name-

In a flash, Tasiin witnessed countless other journeys Outside, countless attacks on the entity. Each time, the others would futilely try to destroy the entity, when the other simply wanted to continue in its solitude. So many times, the other was forced to defend itself. A profound weariness, frustration, and sadness accompanied the memories. Tasiin began to feel sympathy for the other.

Not everyone is bad. Not everyone would harm you. Stop attacking us, so I can talk to them. I would not let them kill you. They can understand, he thought.

They understand nothing! It was like the entity was screaming at him. An infinite hate seemed to flood the room from the darkness on the viewscreen. Tasiin realized too many had hated it for it to believe in anything else.

Join us.

No. He thought of Datlai, who did understand his desire to be alone. He dared not to harm her.

You will come.

No!

The entity withdrew in pain. The bright one was stronger - it had now a minor injury where the other had struck out in resistance. It had underestimated the one's determination. It was, to an extent, confused even. It sensed the bright one's will to defend the others, but also a hidden desire to push them away.

Come, it said more forcefully.

No!

Again the entity recoiled in pain for a moment.

Come.

When the bright one lashed back in its own confusion, the entity did not flinch.

If you want to be left alone, then why do you want me? I am not you. Tasiin thought. The exchange was becoming more rapid and more intense.

We will become you. You will become us. Then we can be alone. Come.

The command was extremely powerful. Reality seemed to be fading around him, the entity's hunger devouring all. *You are forcing me to go. **I will not go.***

Come.

Tasiin felt himself being pulled out of his body. He resisted, holding on to the memory of his body, the ship, his kiith, the project, anything. He thought of Datlai.

Come!

Chapter 13: Ancient Sins

From the bridge of the carrier *Jal-Tor*, Dolann Kaalel watched the *Beastslayer* emerge from the luminous blue glow of its trans-hyperdrive. There were no visible signs of damage, no visible signs of infection. Even so, Kaalel had suspicions.

“This is *Jal-Tor* to *Beastslayer*. Please respond,” Kaalel was broadcast. “Someone respond.”

A silence filled the room.

“*Beastslayer*, someone respond.”

There was no reply.

“This is extremely suspect. Fleet, stand by for subversion contingency plan. Are we receiving medical data from the *Beastslayer*?” Kaalel asked.

“All five are unconscious. Four are near death,” a Hiigaran reported with a hint of nervousness.

“Kaalel, have you seen the bridge of the *Beastslayer*?” demanded the voice of Shanal Alo.

“Show me it,” Kaalel told the officers on the bridge.

The viewscreen changed images from the *Beastslayer* floating in space to the vessel’s bridge. All of the controls seemed normal. The crew, however, was all lying on the floor.

“Martyrs of Kharak!” Kaalel shouted. “Hiigaran transports, emergency retrieval of the *Beastslayer* crew. The first teams should be careful of subversion, just in case. Other than that, hurry!”

The viewscreen flashed back to the *Beastslayer* as modified salvage corvettes closed in at speeds reserved for kamikaze attacks. Even so the seconds stretched out far too long.

“Sajuuk help them.”

When he floated up to consciousness, Tasiin was surprised he even existed. He had felt himself being pulled out of his body, the entity from Outside forcing him out. Now he felt a hand pressed on his face, prodding him to wakefulness. An extreme tiredness still weighed down on him. It was not just his body, but his mind seemed slow, unable to think much clearly.

He forced his eyes open, expecting to see Datlai. Instead he saw Dolann Kaalel, waiting for him to awaken. Tasiin sighed and then closed his eyes to return to sleep.

“Tasiin, I know you are awake,” Kaalel said. “We must discuss what happened.”

“If you insist.”

“Tasiin, you are the only one awake. The others are lucky to even be alive. Within the first second

of going Outside, they had what seemed like an extreme seizure. It was like their brains simply could not cope with the sheer amount of.....whatever was done to them. You, to some extent, experienced something similar, but lesser, in the last two seconds.”

“It was about to force me out of my body to join it. Had the *Beastlayer* not jumped, I would not be here. I would be Outside.....”

“We know from the records that you asked the entity what it wanted. Then you were silent. Your stress levels and brain activity increased dramatically.”

“It.....talked to me. It is powerful. Over time.....it has always been.....tormented by useless attacks on it. It became tired of that existence. It thinks everyone is out to destroy it.....it wishes to kill us - you. Not me. It was trying to make me join it. It saw something of itself in me. It was forcing me.”

Kaalel seemed to agree. “While the *Beastlayer* was Outside, automatic scans revealed slight gravitational disturbances. There definitely were patterns in them, but the computer is still analyzing them. During the last few seconds, there were large gravimetric fluctuations centered on the *Beastlayer*, enough to interfere with the jump back, had it not been for the sheer power of the jump.”

“Its thoughts define Outside,” said Tasiin. “It *is* Outside.”

“Did it say anything else to you?” Kaalel inquired.

“A few things. Memories of previous attacks. It is all jumbled. And confused.....”

“Can you tell me anything about it?”

“It.....is too much. I must.....” Tasiin drifted off to sleep. The world faded away.

“Tasiin,” Kaalel said. But by then, tiredness had caught up with him. A calm descended on Tasiin’s thoughts. For once, he was at peace.

Hours later, seeming like only moments to Tasiin, he again rose up to wakefulness. He could feel another close by. A hand rested on his. He opened his eyes.

“Why is this becoming familiar?” Tasiin asked.

“Can one watch not watch over her kiith-sa?” Datlai replied with her own question.

“I know you better than that,” he said. He let the conversation hang for a minute, then changed its subject. “It almost had me. It was forcing me out.”

“I know. I was told.”

"You - I imagined you there. You held me back. You kept me here."

Datlai looked at him, and then began to cry softly. She squeezed his hand and closed her eyes. "I did not understand. I do not know if I should be happy."

"Sadness is a way to appreciate happiness."

Suddenly Datlai smiled. "So you are a muse?"

"Perhaps."

"What now?"

"I will have to tell Dolann Kaalel about what I remember. The *Naggarok*.....I know what it was for.....I must tell them."

"You never were one for light entertainment."

"No," he sighed.

The war room of the *Beastslayer* served as a temporary gathering place. Around the central round table, behind an open area, sat representatives of every Bound race on the project. A semicircular row of seats behind the central area accommodated various researchers, the crew of the *Beastslayer*, and a Turanic and an Imperialist prisoner captured from their assault on Galactic Shipyard 0, with a guard nearby. The Imperialist was recognized by several as the one who had warned of the T-Mat attack. In the background stood a few interested observers, most notably the other of the Kiith Limandatt, as well as those who had also worked on the *Beastslayer* and gathering data on the *Naggarok*. The audience fanned out before Tasiin Limandatt'sa. The last few were entering.

"Do not bother to point out the irony of this situation," a limping Thenar Soban said, while struggling to sit down. Despite his warning, he saw Datlai smiling in the background. No one else understood what was so humorous.

"Perhaps we should begin," Dolann Kaalel said.

Tasiin took in a breath, although he felt less nervous than he had expected. "When the *Beastslayer* was Outside, there was an entity. This being gave me memories of previous ships that went Outside. The last one was the *Naggarok*, roughly one million years ago.

"The *Naggarok* launchers were powerful, certainly. But.....there were a few thing wrong about the idea of it being an exploration vessel. Why could it 'harvest' ships?"

"It might have been a way of gathering resources from whatever matter it could find," Pukna Somtaaw suggested.

"Why was it launched on an intergalactic course at all, though?" asked Tasiin. "Why not jump

Outside and then back in like we did? The *Naggarok* launchers were trying to cover up something. Not even the ship's computers held the true mission, or if they did, the *Naggarok*'s distress beacon that unleashed the Beast deliberately had false information loaded onto it.

"The *Naggarok* was not a peaceful exploration vessel. It was an experimental warship."

Several of the listeners' faces reflected fear. Tasiin continued, "The *Naggarok*'s primary mission was to enter other universes by way of Outside, and then gather data. The launchers intended to destroy the inhabitants."

"The entity from Outside told you this?" Kaalel asked.

"Yes. It gave me memories from those aboard the *Naggarok*. I have even constructed a diagram of the inside of the original *Naggarok*, based on them."

Above the central table, a holographic schematic of the *Naggarok* rotated. "PDA.....trans-hyperdrive.....quantum oscillator in the hyperdrive.....ion cannons.....bridge.....fuel tanks.....sensor array....." Kaalel read off in a whisper. "Pukna, is this consistent with scans of the *Naggarok*?"

After a few seconds, Pukna replied, "Yes, it is perfectly consistent. Using this diagram as a guide.....some of the unclear areas in the scan can be resolved."

"Thank you."

"Why would the *Naggarok* launchers bother with journeying to other universes when there were other galaxies, including our own, they could attack?" Shanal Alo asked.

"Because they *already* were here," Tasiin replied. "They had already won. The *Naggarok*-launchers were genociders."

A silence resonated in the room.

"For some reason, the *Naggarok* launchers wanted to be alone in the Universe. They had already destroyed all others in their own galaxy - but only a few million light years away were other galaxies.....galaxies they had to 'purify.' I remember that from Outside," Tasiin explained. "Have any of you heard of the Galactic Burst?"

A Taiidan researcher volunteered, "Ever since the collapse of the Empire, archeology has begun to reassert itself. A surprising discovery was that the Inner Rim planets experienced a large flux of radiation, one million years ago, probably caused by a chain reaction of supernovae.....Surely you are not saying--"

"The *Naggarok* launchers deliberately set off a chain reaction of supernovae in the galactic core. It would only take a few to set all of them off. Most of the race in the galaxy did not have hyperdrive. When the radiation front arrived, they were doomed."

“Is that possible?” Kaalel asked.

The Bentusi replied. “*If we put all of our knowledge and effort to it, we could do such a thing after centuries of work. But only a mad race would even consider to do.....*”

“Whatever the cause, the *Naggarok* launchers were bent on destruction. The few remaining races fought hard to save themselves, but their cause was desperate. They had to *steal* hyperdrive, but in comparison, their opponents devastated their entire galaxy. They were doomed,” Tasiin explained.

“The *Naggarok* launchers, when they launched the ship, considered the possibility that something might go wrong. Rather than risk their own race, or at least their home galaxy, they launched it to another galaxy. If everything went well, then they could do what they wanted with the galaxy with that ship. If the ship became derelict, no would find it between galaxies. If something went wrong, as it did, that galaxy would be forced to deal with it, as we did.”

The Taiidan who spoke earlier added, “There have been derelicts found from that era. They all indicate a war back then. One, the Ghost Ship, was encountered by the Kushan Mothership. It had been designed to steal vessels. Until now, we never knew why it had been built.”

“It was probably a last means of defense. However, by then it was too late. The *Naggarok* launchers had won. Perhaps, then, it was fitting that the *Naggarok* was subverted by a more powerful entity with the same quest. It was a small piece of justice for the destruction of galaxies.”

The others looked around, breaking into discussion. Immediately Shanal Alo asked Tasiin a question over the noise. “If the *Naggarok* launchers killed everyone who was here, then why are *we* here?”

“Because,” Tasiin began. “Because, we *are* the *Naggarok* launchers. Genetically there are similarities in all species in the Galaxy, despite several outward differences. That is because we all descended from one species.

“One million years ago, our ancestors murdered hundreds of races. The kiith power struggles, the Taiidan civil war, even the Burning of Kharak.....it is *nothing* compared to what we did one million years ago.

“Hiigaran, Taiidan, Turanic Raider, Kadeshi, Frrern, K’naldeq, Zaala, X’n, I’ao, even Bentusi and T-Mat..... we are all one people who did perhaps the worst crime in the history of the Galaxy. Do you not understand? *Everyone* is guilty.”

“Sajuuk help us,” Kaalel breathed. His sentiment was matched by many others.

Tasiin stepped away from the central area into the back. There he found a somber Datlai. Datlai seemed haunted, as many of the others did, as even Tasiin did. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but only said, “Tasiin.” Then, she hugged him, holding on tightly. In return, he embraced her.

The other Limandatt, the Manaana patron following them, approached them, softly saying “Kiith-sa.” They gently touched him, forming a ring. They bowed down heads in grief. After a few seconds,

another neared them. Tasiin looked out of the corner of his eyes and was surprised to see Dolann Kaalel beginning to weep. “Why?” he asked over and over, tormented by knowledge, desperately needing comfort. The Limandatt let him join. Following closely were Shanal Alo, Pukna Somtaaw, and an injured Thenar Soban, giving Kaalel solace, adding to the group with Hiigaran and Taiidan.

Others neared - Sjet, Taiidan, and I’ao on the trans-hyperdrive research group; the three other *Beastlayer* crew; the other project representatives. In time they found their friends and colleagues, and joined them.

The room was silent except for sobs and whispers of comfort. In the background, though, Taiidan saw the Imperialist standing alone, gazing with envy. The only one nearby was the Turanic Raider, although the guard kept a watchful eye on them.”

“They attack us, they war on us,” the Turanic said. “They are not your people.”

“Aren’t they?” the Imperial asked with a twang of sadness. “Hasn’t there been enough bloodshed amongst ourselves? How long will this last?” He walked over to the group, standing on its periphery. Then a Taiidan Republican let him in, amazing Tasiin.

A strangely familiar, but different voice spoke. It was the Bentusi. Instead of its usual power, the voice was soft, weak, close, as if trying to be a part. “For the first time we are.....envious of the Bound.”

“We all know you are here with us,” Tasiin said with an equal gentleness. “You are one of us.” A warm presence filled his mind, expressing gratitude.

Finally a slight jolt passed through them. The Turanic had followed the Imperial, at first trying to dissuade him, but then being calmed.

All were one. Sleeper kiith and large kiith, simple kiith members and kiith-sa, Imperial and Republican, Bound and Unbound, burner of Kharak and retaker of Hiigara, all together in one mass. For one million years ago, their ancestors had sinned. Only now did they consider reuniting, as they mourned for their greatest wrong.

Chapter 14: The Star-Filled Night

“What do you mean by ‘We will not assist’?” Dolann Kaalel asked. He and the other project leaders sat around the Beastslayer’s war room’s central table, the other project representatives in the row of seats behind them. Above the table was a holographic projection of a mothership-class vessel of one of the leading Unbound races in the Council.

“The Council will not intervene on your behalf in this situation.”

“Let me review the situation for you,” Kaalel said, trying to cover up his impatience. “The T-Mat destroyed our shipyard, as well as *eight* Bentusi Tradeships and half of our fleet, without provocation; there is an entity Outside that threatens the entire Universe; and we just found out that our species all came from an ancestral race who destroyed hundreds of civilizations across the galaxies. You are telling us that you will not help.”

“The T-Mat will be....censured for their actions. However, we see that our earlier cooperation was premature. You were willing to risk all by launching your ship without our consent. And....the T-Mat’s fear may not have been unjustified.”

“As for your.....findings on the Naggarok launchers.....We are doing our own studies for verification,” the Council representative stated.

“What about the.....*thing* that is Outside?” Kaalel demanded.

“There has been a vote on that matter. The Bound races are divided evenly into those who support you and those who are against you.”

“And the Unbound?”

“Only the Bentusi support you. It is not our responsibility to protect the Universe. We will not be Bound.”

Kaalel stood up. “You self-righteous-“

“Kaalel,” said Shanal Alo, who grabbed his arm and pulled him down. Kaalel still glared at the Council ship.

“The Council has decided and spoken.”

The hologram winked out.

“I really wanted to banish those arrogant Unbound ones and taken control of the Council myself, but we will not get anywhere by expressing those sentiments,” Shanal Alo said.

“They fear like we did, when the Devourer lived,” the Bentusi said. *“They can see nothing beyond their fear and themselves.”*

“The problem is that there happens to be an entire universe beyond themselves and their fear,”

Kaalel said. "And we happen to be in it."

"More of the Bound support us," a Zaala stated. "Perhaps the knowledge of the common origin has given them hope of receiving equality in the Council. They see us as bringers of that knowledge."

"Or they simply didn't like us having something they did not. Now that they know about the situation, they do not care," Thenar Soban added.

"Council's approval or not, we must eventually stop the entity Outside," Pukna Somtaaw said. "We need to send the ship back Outside. The Council can only punish us after the act."

"Send the *Beastslayer* Outside.....Let's start preparing for it," Kaalel sighed. He touched the ship's intercom control on the war room table. "Tasiin Limandatt'sa, report to the war room immediately." He sat back in his chair, waiting.

A minute later, Tasiin walked in. Kaalel bluntly stated, "Welcome to the war room. We are thinking of launching the *Beastslayer*."

Tasiin sat down across from Dolann. Kaalel noticed the paleness of his skin, the sagging of his face. Tasiin seemed to be pushing himself too much, his mind trying to do too much, too long for his body to handle.

"You seem tired."

"So do you," Tasiin replied. There was a pause.

"We need to focus on the matter at hand," said Shanal Alo. "Tasiin, we now know about the *Naggarok*. However, you said there were other journeys, other attacks Outside. Can you tell us about them? Perhaps there are details that can be useful."

Tasiin replied, "I remember fragments, pieces. Virtually all had no idea what waited for them Outside. Those going there had little time to react. Most, including the *Naggarok* launchers, developed a fear of Outside and never returned. However, a few races tried to actually fight wars with Outside. They did invent a few things of interest."

"What sort of interesting things?" Kaalel asked.

"Mainly mental defenses.....Defenses against a telepathic attack. One physical defense was a specially adapted gravity well. What the gravity well does is make it harder for the entity to concentrate on the attacking ship."

"We have been thinking of something similar," Kaalel said.

"It has to be set up precisely for maximum effect. The computer analysis of the *Beastslayer*'s scans from Outside should help."

"Do you remember anything else?" asked Shanal Alo.

“It is vague.....but the defenses did little. The entity that is Outside is too powerful.”

“There is another issue,” Kaalel said. “The Galactic Council disapproves of us. The Bound races are evenly divided over the *Beastslayer*, but the Unbound races will not help us. It is possible we not be attacked by many races before the launch.”

“Or the entire Galaxy could be consumed with war at this rate,” Thenar Soban added darkly.

“The situation is bad. The Turanic Raiders and Imperials are shouting that we have broken every law of the Council and the T-Mat will not be stopped other than a ‘censure.’ Even the Daiamid is considering dismantling the *Beastslayer*....How is that an Imperial made peace with us here and that half of my own kiith is against us?”

“Compared to Outside, though, the Council is little threat,” Tasiin said. “We have the fleets to defend ourselves against the other races. The entity living Outside, however, could instantly destroy them. Other than an emergency plan for an escape, we should focus on Outside.”

“I agree with Tasiin. The Council could burn like Kharak, for all I care. If we defeat the Outside entity, then I do not think the Council will punish us severely. If we lose.....then the Council might not matter,” Pukna Sombaaw said.

“You said Outside talked to you. If a direct assault will fail, can you negotiate with it?” Shanah Alo asked. “Can you convince it to leave us alone?”

“Perhaps. But it is convinced we will kill it. It might have a larger chance of success than attacking, but not enough.”

“Then injure it,” Shanah said. “Can you injure it enough to give it second thoughts?”

Tasiin closed his eyes in thought. “No. No, that would not work. It would only make it more determined. It would not listen to us at all. Then we would be doomed.”

“Is there any hope?” Kaalel asked.

“Little.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us that might be useful? Any possibilities?”

“No. I do not remember anything of much use.”

“Then we can discuss this later, with new ideas. Get some rest, Tasiin.”

“We should-“ Tasiin began.

“Rest.”

Tasiin stood up to leave. As he walked, he stumbled in tiredness, but was obviously trying to think. He was making plans and calculations while nearly asleep. There was something painful about

watching it.

When he was gone, the Bentusi spoke. *“He must become Unbound soon. His Bound body can not hold him.”*

“That is what is hurting him?” Kaalel asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“But being Unbound requires being linked to a ship.”

“Correct.”

“And he will need to be on the *Beastslayer* to control the trans-hyperdrive and to act as a representative when we send it Outside. So, we need to give him *this* ship,” Kaalel reasoned.

“Yes. *There is no other way. We must give him the ship.....or lose him forever,*” the Bentusi said.

“We could link him at the bridge. We can still watch over the ship from the war room,” Shanal Alo said.

“*We will provide the materials and instructions. He must go Outside.*”

“Then, begin preparations. I only wish this didn’t mean sacrificing the ship,” Kaalel said.

“Better than sacrificing the Universe,” Shanal Alo replied.

“Kiith-sa.”

Tasiin could not pretend to be resting. Equations vibrantly stretched across his awareness, multiple thoughts filling his mind like songs. He never felt more alive.....but it was only painful.

“Tasiin,” Datlai said softly.

He looked at her.

“Follow me,” Datlai said.

Tasiin stood up, but as he did it he felt trapped in his own body. It was too confining, too small, too binding. His mind needed to grow, but it had no room.

Datlai led him along, through the corridors of the *Beastslayer*. Many were unfamiliar, Tasiin having spent most of his time in engineering, the bridge, the war room, or the room granted to his kiith. At last, they arrived at a small chamber. The room was filled with holographic stars.

“What are you doing?” asked Tasiin.

“Giving you a final glimpse of Bound life,” Datlai replied. “What would be more appropriate than your new home?”

Already he felt claustrophobia. “I sincerely hope you do not mean this room,” Tasiin said.

Datlai smiled and placed a hand on his face. Tasiin felt happiness and sadness at once - the sensation reminded him of his Bound body, but his over-Unbound mind shifted its entire attention to the touch, making it seem impossibly vivid.

“The stars,” Datlai replied. She sat down on the floor. Tasiin followed, despite the hardness of the floor.

“Do you remember when we did this on Kharak? We were barely adults back then.”

Tasiin remembered clearly. It was several years before the Sleeping, the Gold List of journeyers to Hiigara still being completed. It was a time of innocence for both.

“We used to identify the stars and our kiith’s constellations,” Tasiin remembered. The memory started to distract his attention from his pain. “I told you about what astronomers knew about each star. You would always find one that I did not know, just at the verge of visibility.”

“I have good eyesight.”

“And there was the time you saw the moon of Khalten.”

“I have very good eyesight.”

“Datlai, it was forty times the distance from our star as Kharak and the size of an asteroid.”

Datlai had a knowing grin. “Soon, the Scaffold would rise with the Mothership inside. You would dream about being on it and traveling to the stars.”

“You would tease the people up there and I would say-“

“Datlai, stop mocking the poor people,” she said. “We would talk about the Mothership, star travel, the scientists.....

“Tasiin, how can one understand something so distant?” It was always a playful question.”

“You would tell me about theories, your own calculations.” Her smile turned into an expression of admiration. “Even then, Tasiin, you speculated about trans-hyperdrive. Once you even wondered if it was possible to go beyond all spaces.”

“If only I knew what I was wishing for,” Tasiin said. Suddenly, Datlai embraced him. It was too much for him. He began to sob. “Why did I leave this.....you?” Datlai seemed stunned. “I should not have - why?” His mind was filled with multiple thoughts, all mourning for losing the past.

“What did I do to you?”

Datlai pulled Tasiin even closer. “Tasiin, you never lose your connection with the past. But don’t lose yourself in sadness. You felt that no one listened to you. You even were right - the larger, more powerful kiithid ignored your work, even though the Bentusi would later be surprised with it. As for me.....you were looking for yourself. You went soul-searching. You needed time to be alone. How can I blame you for following our kiith’s spirit?” Datlai added, “My kiith-sa.”

Tasiin said, “I admire your ability to remain this calm. I can surprise the Bentusi, but I can’t keep myself from.....”

“I.....I have not been as calm as you think. Ever since you attacked yourself during that dream, I have not been able to sleep. While you dream nightmares, I worry about you.”

“Datlai, I don’t want you to do that-“

“Tasiin, I don’t want you to be troubled. But I cannot decide that.” Both of their eyes glistened. Datlai’s head bowed down, resting on Tasiin. He was surprised that for once he was glad he was Bound. “Tasiin, Dillat was a good friend, but you.....I loved you.....as I do know.”

“I.....you are my friend.....”

“Tasiin, I know you. Your friendship is love. The fact that you are here with me, talking about this when days ago you isolated yourself completely is proof.”

He did not answer, but she expected none. Tasiin had never felt so alive, although he did not know what to say or do.

“Tasiin.”

“Yes?”

“What is that star?” Datlai asked, pointing near a bright, yellow star. Tasiin could barely discern it.

“Isn’t this a computer generated hologram?”

“No. This represents what is outside of the ship.”

“But we are thousands of light years from Kharak and Hiigara. How would I know what it is?”

“Tasiin, you never did understand the question. I know you do not recognize it. *Make a story up about it.*”

Tasiin did not feel the pain of his body, or the confinement of it. Datlai listened intently as he strung together a story about a white dwarf orbiting the star, near the home of a race that settled there, descendants of the *Naggarok* launchers. When he was done, Datlai then asked about another star and again listened. Tasiin then pointed out a fast glow to Datlai, who then created a tale about it. The narratives began to involve many stars; whole constellations were invented by them. When the

stories began to involve the entire sky, they began to laugh at themselves.

Tasiin was glad he had sacrificed a few hours of life he could have been Unbound in.

Chapter 15: Unbound

Personal log 17.76 AHL

Tasiin will be Unbound.

I wish I could say more. I wish I could be glad for him. I know Tasiin suffers....why is it that doing the right thing is sometimes the hardest thing to do?

Outside also troubles me. I am certain Tasiin will be the one going Outside. The others are planning an expedition, even a final battle, with Outside, and he is the only one who stands a chance of surviving that. And, I am certain Outside wants to destroy him. But, for the good of the Universe, he must go there.

The Bentusi assure me he will still be.....a friend. I wish they would speak to me now. I wish Tasiin did not have to go through this. I wish Outside never existed. Sometimes I even wish we were back on Kharak.

Tasiin, I know this is for the best. I know there are so many who depend on you. But I still wish that you could tell me about one more star.

Datlai Limandatt

Tasiin Limandatt'sa sat in the captain's chair on the bridge of the *Beastslayer*. Hastily positioned on the floor around him were interfaces to the main computer of the *Beastslayer*. Wires led from the interfaces to various consoles on the bridge.

A doctor held a cable attached to a large plate, which curved to fit Tasiin's skull. "This will be the main interface. It is place on the neck and the back of the head, where it connects to the neurons in the brain, indirectly. The Bentusi have found a way to influence those neurons without physical contact, although we are not quite sure how. We must trust them in that respect. The cable then splits and connects with the two main interface boxes, which in turn connect to the secondary interfaces and then the ship's computer."

"The Bentusi demonstrated it for us. We have recordings and instructions to help us," a Taiidan cybernetic specialist added. "Because the link is not directly between your nervous system and the wires leading to the ship's computer, we could not use much experience from your Karan Sjet nor from the emperor. However, the Bentusi designed the interface to be simple. The link should take only a few minutes to implement."

"You saw the Bentusi?" Tasiin asked weakly.

"Yes," the Taiidan admitted. "They are.....not very different than us. They *did* descend from the *Naggarok* launchers like us. Some things were.....but....."

Tasiin merely nodded in reply.

“The interface itself may be simple, however there are a few other issues that will need to be resolved,” the doctor said. “For example, we will need to inject food intravenously periodically. In addition, we want to make sure the ship’s vital functions - as well as your own - operate if you become unconscious for any reason. Because of this, we will be injecting anesthetic and keeping you in an unconscious state for some time. Are you ready to begin?”

“Almost,” Tasiin responded. “Where is Datlai?”

“In the corridor,” an assistant replied.

“Call her in,” Tasiin said. His mind skipped from one thought to another to another to another in a fraction of a second. He could barely focus on one thought long enough to say it. The seconds seemed to stretch to days as he waited for Datlai to come.

Finally, he found Datlai looking him in the eyes, almost kneeling before him.

“Datlai,” Tasiin said simply.

“Tasiin,” she replied with equal simplicity.

“It is time.”

Datlai only clasped his hands in her own.

“I am ready.” He began to close his eyes. Tasiin noticed Datlai also closed her eyes.

A sudden pain pierced his body and mind as the first injection entered his body. As the endless seconds drifted by, however, his mind quieted. Although his mind still jumped from thought to thought, each one became progressively duller. Eventually he simply faded out. He did not even know when he ceased to be Bound.

When he became conscious again, it took him a small fraction of a second, a long time to him, to realize he was Unbound.

The ship’s life support systems were largely reflex to Tasiin. Much like the breathing of his Kushan body, life support was automatic. Only a few microseconds were needed for Tasiin to realize this, and he shifted his attention elsewhere.

This prompted him to become aware of the ship computer’s processing power. He had, unconsciously, delegated many of his thoughts to the computer. Although his former body served as the core of his mind, he could use the computer to make calculations, test predictions, and process input. The pace of mind that seemed torturous in his Bound life seemed leisurely in his Unbound life.

The *Beastslayer's* trans-hyperdrive was most satisfying to control, most delightful to discover. For years, he had calculated and studied the physics of hyperspace. He had calculated the entry waveforms, but now he could create them at will. He could, with the computer at his disposal, imagine the layers of hyperspace with perfect clarity. The symmetries of quantum wavefunctions danced around him.

Hyperspace sings to the Unbound.

The voice had startled him. It was surprising in that he interpreted the words as sound and not as the pure sensations of the other ship systems. Instantly, though, Tasiin knew the Bentusi had opened communications with the *Beastslayer*.

We welcome you among the Unbound. It is something we have done only once before to one of your people, the Bentusi said.

Tasiin did nothing, save what his unconscious did in controlling the ship. He did manage to hear what sounded like whispering.

I can hear your thoughts, he finally said.

Yes, the Bentusi replied. *Listen more deeply.*

He focused on what seemed to be silence. At first, he could only hear the Bentusi. Then, Tasiin was aware of extremely faint sounds - Bound minds. Tasiin knew the Bentusi were referring to something else.

Finally he heard it. It was not quiet, but it was subtle. Tasiin had tuned it out, but now he could discern it. It was full of hate, malevolence. It was not near him, not from where he was, but from somewhere else. Not Bound, nor Unbound, but something other, something older.

I hear Outside.

The Bentusi said, *Nearly all Unbound ones must listen to Outside. Your kind's Sjet persona was blessed in being deaf to Outside, yet still being Unbound. We, however, have had to ignore it for countless orbits, although we have always known there was somewhere else. Until the Devourer came, we did not pay attention to it. Now, though, Outside must be listened to. Until now, we had no hope of defeating it.*

I am not sure I can defeat Outside. It is strong- Tasiin protested.

We know you are stronger than you believe. Perhaps stronger than you will know. Find your strengths. Find Outside's weaknesses. Defeat Outside so it can release no new Devourers, destroy no more memory, end no more songs.

Datlai waited in the chair behind the trans-hyperdrive control, alone on the now automatic bridge.

She knew this would be where Tasiin would have sat. Datlai did not feel joy, loneliness, or loss at Tasiin's transformation. She simply felt empty.

"Emptiness is loneliness, except you do not even have yourself," Datlai whispered.

"Musing?"

"Tasiin."

"Yes," he replied through the ship's intercom system. Tasiin seemed distant, but more powerful. He was like the Bentusi, someone who was concerned about her, but there was no warmth. "I.....became aware a few seconds ago. It seems like so long ago."

Datlai formed the pretense of a smile for Tasiin's being Unbound. However, she could not keep sadness from creeping on her face. Both loss and emptiness pulled on her.

"Being Unbound was necessary for me."

"I know," Datlai said. She held back the sadness she was starting to succumb to. She could not help closing her eyes.

"Open your eyes," Tasiin said. This time he was not distant.

Datlai opened her eyes and found a holographic projection of Tasiin standing at the front of the bridge, under the viewscreen. She got up, approaching him. Datlai could not help noticing the real Tasiin, sitting apparently unconscious in the captain's chair. Still looking at the holographic projection, she gently touched the real Tasiin, his former Bound self. Tasiin's projection showed the hint of a smile and neared Datlai.

"Datlai. I know what it is like to be lonely. I was in a self-imposed isolation for so long. But you led me.....Had I been Unbound and wanted to be alone, I would have doomed the Universe. Despite what all of the others tried to do, it was not them realize I was torturing myself. You....."

"Tasiin.....I could not watch you turn on yourself," Datlai replied. ".....Is this uncomfortable?"

"No. It is.....you are only more real to me. Not only do I feel your touch, with the ship I can sense your warmth, watch you from any angle, sense the air currents from your breathing, feel your feet on the floor. I can not even describe it....." Tasiin said.

"I had thought you were so distant, but being Unbound has only made you more of a friend," Datlai said.

"No.....I am not only your friend. I realize that.....I love you."

"I love you," Datlai replied. "Do the Bentusi ever fall in love?"

"They have companionship and friendship, but they haven't had love like we have since they became Unbound," Tasiin said.

“The poor people.” She looked at Tasiin’s projection and smiled genuinely. “The poor Bentusi.”

“Datlai.”

“Tasiin.”

“Do you see the star which I have blinking on the viewscreen?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“We missed it last night.”

Datlai smiled. “And so what is the story behind that star?”

Tasiin smiled also.

Chapter 16: Galactic Council

“Three Bentusi Exchanges have reinforced our fleet,” Pukna Somtaaw reported in the *Beastslayer*’s war room.

“Good news, finally,” Dolann Kaalel sighed. “The Galactic Council is *still* divided over us.”

“They need a catalyst,” Shanal Alo said. “Something to convince them to go one way or the other.”

“Such as?” asked Kaalel. Shanal Alo did not answer. “Do you have any other news?”

“Yes,” replied Pukna. She tapped in a sequence at one of the war room interfaces. A holographic map of the Galaxy appeared above all of them, spanning the length of the room. A red dot appeared at the fringe of the map, between two spiral arms. “This is where Galactic Shipyard 0 was. When our fleets fled the T-Mat, the Bentusi sent out several Cargo Barges as diversions.” Several yellow lines, denoting the Cargo Barge’s paths, radiated from the red point, leading to various places across a quarter of the Galaxy. A blue line also emanated from the location of the Shipyard.

“The blue line represents our fleet. The T-Mat have been searching for us for days. New red dots indicate the locations T-Mat fleets have been observed from friendly outposts. The dots appear in chronological order of sighting.”

On the map, small red points began appearing around the endpoints of three yellow lines. After a few seconds, there was a pause, and then red dots appeared at the endpoints of three more of the yellow lines, as the T-Mat searched at those locations in the Galaxy for the fleet. Soon, red points began appearing around the endpoints of the last yellow line and the blue path. Finally, only around the blue endpoint, the location of the *Beastslayer* fleet, did red points appear.

“The T-Mat have found us,” Kaalel breathed.

“Yes,” Pukna Somtaaw said sadly.

“How long until they strike?” Shanal Alo asked.

“They probably will need a few days to gather their forces and pinpoint our location,” Pukna replied. “We are in deep interstellar space, so where we exactly are should not be obvious. Unfortunately, we do not know how well they can track through hyperspace. They may be following the Bentusi Tradeships’ lead at this moment.

“Then we must launch the *Beastslayer* soon, before the T-Mat find us,” Kaalel said. “Tasiin Limandatt’s a.”

“I have been listening to your conversation,” Tasiin’s disembodied voice stated. “I am making plans for our attack on Outside. The gravity well defense can be ready in a day. I have also been looking into the telepathic defenses from some of the previous attacks on Outside.”

“Can you be ready to jump in two or three days, before the T-Mat arrive?”

“That will be difficult.”

“Make every effort to try,” Kaalel ordered.

“I already am.” Tasiin said nothing further.

“Back to the matter of the Council, we should try to convince the other races to come to our side,” Dolann Kaalel said.

“The member races of the Project, including yours and ours, have enough dissent to prevent their speaking on our behalf,” Shanal Alo warned.

“Then we’ll speak for ourselves,” Kaalel said. “Let us get to work on a message.”

Two year ago, the Beast threatened all life in the Galaxy. All races suffered immense losses. The Taiidan Republic lost more ships than the Empire did in the Hiigaran War. If not for Hiigaran kiith Sontaaw and the cooperation of the Bentusi, all would have been lost.

Now, we, the makers of the Beastslayer, have found a greater threat, the source of the Beast, Outside. Now, though, we have a ship to stand guard against Outside. We have a chance to strike back.

We have been attacked by the Turanic Raiders, the Taiidan Imperialists, and the T-Mat without provocation. This happened before we launched the Beastslayer to Outside. At this moment, T-Mat vessels are gathering to attack us, even though we have done no harm.

Many of you are against us. Many believe that we should not go Outside, so that it will not come to us.

But, we have already launched the Beastslayer Outside. We know that Outside will stop at nothing short of the complete destruction of the Universe. Of the billions of years, the Universe has existed, Outside has only become more fanatical. It becomes hungrier as time goes on. Soon, nothing will satiate it.

One million years ago, our ancestors killed thousands of races across the Galaxy. We have the blood of a half trillion lives at our hands. We still do not know if other descendants of our ancestors continue their genocide.

But now, we, the descendants of the Naggarok launchers, have a chance to prove ourselves. We can defeat Outside - and then we will have saved the Universe. If we have killed trillions in the past, we can save an infinity of lives in all of the galaxies in all of the universes, perhaps even the lives of our own descendants.

However, we may fail to defeat Outside. If Outside does not destroy us at that point, we will take responsibility for our actions. We will not endanger the Galaxy again. If we fail, our fleet will leave

the Galaxy for intergalactic space - permanently. We will enter a self-imposed exile. We will never threaten you again.

The member races, the kiith of the Hiigaran personnel, and their allies should not be held responsible. Some of them have even sent orders to us, calling on us to disband. Only the fleet and the Beastslayer are responsible for our actions.

To the Unbound races that oppose us: when the Beast threatened the Galaxy, the Bentusi tried to abandon the Bound races. They were about to leave, when they were convinced to stay. They could have destroyed the Hiigarans trying to keep them here. But they stayed, helping complete a weapon, the Kuun-Lan's siege cannon, which turned the war in our favor. They overcame their fear, even though they risked being killed. Now, we ask you to overcome your fear. You do not have to assist us. You only have to overcome your fear and stop the attacks.

We have been given a chance to atone for our ancestor's sins. Let us prove that we are, in fact, better than the Naggarok launchers by standing together, despite our fears, to save the Universe. Let us prove that we can learn. Let us prove that there is still hope for us.

The Beastslayer project members

Chapter 17: Echoes of the Battle Cry

“Lock the door.”

Tasiin realized he could not feel the Beastslayer anymore. Instead he only had his former Bound body, which seemed to be holding his mind comfortably. He looked and saw the doorway. It, to his surprise, spoke.

Come. We were too harsh before. Join us, and nothing bad will happen.

“Nothing bad will happen to you, but the Universe will fall.” Tasiin turned and saw Datlai standing opposite the door.

We know you better.

“Knowing does not imply understanding.”

Come.

“Close the door.”

Come.

“Stay.”

“Why am I here?” Tasiin asked.

“To make a final decision.”

Choose. Choose wisely.

“But the others have made the decision-“

“Have *you* made one?”

They do not listen to you.

Tasiin turned his back on both of them. “Why can’t you simply let me keep the decision as my own? Why must everything be so difficult? *Why are you doing this?*”

Neither replied.

He faced the doorway and Datlai. Tasiin approached the door again. “I told you we would leave you alone, and that we wouldn’t harm you if you let us be. I *did* mean that.”

Tasiin then faced Datlai. “I told you that I loved you. I did mean that too.”

Come.

“Lock the door.”

“I won’t harm you,” he said, to both of them.

He approached the door, intent. He touched the aperture, then started to gently pull it closed. But the darkness beyond began to overwhelm him.

You do not want to do this.

“Who are you to say that?” Tasiin asked.

Who are you to say otherwise?

Tasiin felt something like paralysis with his question. He could not move either way. He could do nothing.

“I never wanted this.”

“But you have it.”

Tasiin felt as if he just woke up. He checked life support, which had a normal status, and then the other ship systems. Everything worked normally. The dream had been only a few milliseconds long in reality. He checked his former Bound body, finding it to have a somewhat lower level of activity.

He was uncomfortable about the whole experience.

Do you ever dream? Tasiin asked the Bentusi.

We do not dream as you put it, the Bentusi replied. *We do not even rest like your kind do.*

Why did I just have a dream, then?

We do not know, the Bentusi said. *We had only sensed confusion. Perhaps it was a remnant of your Bound life.*

Perhaps, Tasiin replied. He really did not believe that, but he had little other explanation.

In his frustration, he directed the trans-hyperdrive as a limb, touching the space around him. He shaped it subtly, imposing a wavefunction on it. Gently space-time responded, bending slightly for him.

Tasiin stroked the space around him, which responded with faint ripples of gravity. As Tasiin practiced the newfound skill, he found a Hiigaran Scout at the periphery of the fleet, adrift after a computer malfunction. It had sent out numerous distress calls, but it would take time for Repair Corvettes to reach the Scout.

With his nascent fingers of gravity, he took the Scout and pulled it back. Tasiin drew it near the *Beastslayer*. He let go of it when the Scout was near a Carrier. As the trans-hyperdrive still pulsed

at the center of the *Beastslayer*, Tasiin went back to planning for the trip Outside, still unconsciously caressing the nearby space.

“Say again what you want me to do,” said the Imperial captain who had warned the *Beastslayer* fleet of the T-Mat.

“We want you to contact the Imperialists and convince them to not attack,” Dolann Kaalel answered. “We have already presented our side to the Council. The Imperialists and the Turanic Raiders are the only source of opposition to us among the younger races. They may still cause the younger races to hold back their support. If, however, all of the Bound races unite, some of the Bound races will reconsider letting the T-Mat attack us.”

The captain sighed from frustration. “I have nothing personal against you, the people of the *Beastslayer* project. But we cannot forgive your races.”

“The *Imperialists* cannot forgive *us*?” Kaalel asked. “We did not burn a planet because of a forgotten treaty.”

“Or murder civilians who did not bow down before the Emperor,” Shanal Alo added.

“I agree that the burning of your world was a bit extreme, as was the Emperor’s tendency to kill all who opposed him. But you - starting a civil war despite millennia of tradition, storming across the Galaxy to demand a world that hasn’t been you for equally long.....What were you thinking? Had you been more patient, the Emperor would have become so paranoid that the military would have.....arranged.....a quite change of power. The new Emperor would have been more reasonable, and might even have worked some sort of compromise with you Hiigarans,” the Imperial captain said.

“And what were we supposed to do? Wait on our prison world for a few centuries while the desert advanced on us until you came out of the skies and announced it was safe to return?” Kaalel said.

“*You are falling into conflict*,” the Bentusi said. “*Even when you were trying to avoid it*.”

“*Was I that foolish to think we could be one when I told you that we had the same origin?*” Tasiin asked.

The Imperial, the Hiigaran, and the Taiidan Republican looked at each other for a long moment.

“*Perhaps you should tell him about what he will get in return for his cooperation*,” Tasiin added.

A large holographic projection of a Taiidan Imperial Assault Frigate appeared in front of the Imperial captain.

“*The Protector of the Throne*,” the Imperialist breathed.

“We captured your ship after your little attack on us,” Shanal Alo said. “If you do send a message

on our behalf, we are willing to give it back to you.”

“What about my crew?”

“We still have them aboard the *Beastlayer*, in holding cells. We will release them to you upon sending the message.”

After considering, the captain said. “This will not be easy. I have one condition.....two, perhaps.”

“What are they?” Kaalel asked.

“First, that a few of our ships whose captains I trust form a battle group.”

“How many ships?”

“.....About a dozen frigates, and a destroyer,” the captain replied.

“That is a lot to be asking for. But considering the size and power of our fleet, we could risk it,” Kaalel said. “What is the second condition?”

“This is minor, but.....you gave my ship that stupid white and green color scheme, didn’t you?”

Shanal Alo sighed.

“You want it changed back to yellow and red?” Kaalel asked.

“Actually, I have always wanted to see my ship in black.”

“The color of those closest to the Emperor,” Shanal commented.

“And eventually of your beloved Captain Elson,” the Imperialist added.

“Fine. If you help us,” Kaalel said, “We will make your ship any color you want.”

“Excellent.”

“You served during the Hiigaran War?” Shanal Alo asked.

The Imperialist nodded.

“So did I. Out of curiosity, what is your name?”

“My name is Tequal Nal, formerly of the third Imperial fleet.”

“Shanal Alo, formerly of the third Imperial fleet, now of the first Republican fleet.”

“The launch to Outside nearing,” a holographic projection of Tasiin Limandatt’s said. “Civilians are being moved to carriers. You will have to leave soon.”

The three other Limandatt on the *Beastslayer*, with their Mana'an patron, stood around the projection in a semicircle. They looked at him somberly. Uncertainty filled the air.

"We will miss you," Kanell Limandatt finally said.

"As I will you. You have made the transition to this," Tasiin gestured to indicate the ship, "Being Unbound, a little smoother."

"I am not of your kiith, but I feel as if I am a part of it," the Mana'an said. "After this is over, I will join you."

Tasiin nodded in acceptance. Then, the Hiigara'ns made farewells, a ritual in many ways the reverse of greeting. The fact that one of them was only represented as a hologram did not seem to matter. Finally, with the ritual complete, some of them began to turn around."

"Come, Datlai," one said to her, who still held her hand over where Tasiin's heart would be.

"Go on," Datlai replied. She did not turn as she spoke, making no other acknowledgement of the others. The other Limandatt, besides Tasiin, bowed and left the room.

"Tasiin, I do not want to leave this ship."

At first, he did not seem to understand what she meant. But then, he froze as if in fear.

"Datlai, what will you be proving if you get your wish? If you stay here - the universe - "

"What will I prove then? That I can meet my end a few hours later as the T-Mat attack? Or that I could spend the rest of my life as an exile from the galaxy - and probably at the mercy of whatever has become of the *Naggarok* launchers?" Datlai replied.

"If you go Outside, the entity will certainly kill you."

"As I just said, death is certain. I only have to choose the method."

"Civilians are being allowed to leave for Hiigara."

"None of the others of our kiith are going there. There is little for us there," Datlai said.

Tasiin did not reply. Datlai knew realization was sinking in. He seemed to be dreading the idea of her going Outside, but there was something else in his expression. Datlai noticed that he looked as if the Universe had played a cruel trick on him. It was the same feeling he displayed when the dream he had on the Mothership replayed in the night, torturing him.

"When I go Outside, you will be a.....representative. You will be keeping me from yielding to Outside."

Datlai solemnly nodded, not quite sure what Tasiin was thinking.

“Outside pulling me, you holding me back,” he whispered. Tasiin seemed overwhelmed. “But it will happen. It must. There is no other way.”

Datlai wanted to hold him, reassure him. She knew, though, that she could not touch the hologram and that any attempt to do so would look foolish to him and empty to her. Datlai also knew she did not quite understand what distressed Tasiin.

Tasiin closed his eyes and his holographic projection faded out of existence.

“I am picking up an anomaly, bearing 315° by 20°,” Thenar Soban reported in the *Beastslayer* war room. “Analyzing.....it is a T-Mat frigate!”

“Intercept it,” Dolann Kaalel ordered. He looked at the main display, which zoomed in on the Frigate.

“Moving frigates to intercept,” Soban said. “The T-Mat Frigate is moving away.”

“I am reading an energy surge from the Frigate. It’s going to jump,” Pukna Somtaaw said.

“Destroy it before it warns the T-Mat!” Kaalel ordered.

“Firing!” Soban replied.

Kaalel saw twenty ion cannons lash out from a wall of frigates that closed in on the T-Mat ship. As the ships neared, the lumbering, slow Frigate did not turn to fire. Instead, two Kushan Ion Cannon Frigates suddenly stopped their acceleration and began drifting.”

“The T-Mat have taken control of your ships,” the Bentusi warned. “But their influence is limited - their minds cannot hold any others.”

Kaalel watched in dismay as the Ion Cannon Frigates turned and fired on the wall of ships pursuing the T-Mat vessel.

“Do not fire on the ships the T-Mat undermined,” he ordered. “Is it showing damage yet?”

“Only minor amounts! That ship has outrageous amounts of armor!” Soban exclaimed. “One frigate has taken heavy damage from the subverted ships.”

Kaalel clenched in fists. On the viewer, the Frigate moved constantly, despite being pounded on by ion cannons, heavy turret fire, and plasma bombs.

“There is an energy spike. Hyperspace signature detected!” Pukna Somtaaw added.

“All ships firing at full power! Ion Cannon Frigate in the red.....destroyed! Subverted ships attacking another ship.”

The war room's central display showed a hyperspace window appear in front of the T-Mat Frigate. The blue glow moved along the vessel, then closed.

"It's gone," Somtaaw sighed resignedly.

"The T-Mat will not be gone for long," Kaalel said.

Chapter 18: Night of the Soul

Situation Report: 17.77 AHL

The Beastslayer launch to Outside is sixteen hours away. Everything that has happened is hinging on this last day. Outside, the T-Mat, the Galactic Council, the Beastslayer, the Galaxy. What we do will change everything, forever.

The current plan for the Beastslayer is to send it Outside and have Tasiin Limandatt('sa) discuss with it, negotiate with it, anything that will convince it to be reasonable. If and only if that has completely failed, Tasiin will attempt to hurt it as much as possible. I seriously doubt he could do much, as does he, but perhaps it will be enough.

On the topic of Tasiin, he has requested that someone go along, a friend in his kiith. I protested this, but both him and his to-be-companion did not seem to heed my objections. When I asked the Bentusi about it, they only replied mysteriously, "He is beyond our power. What he decides must be."

One other thing about the Beastslayer - sensors show slight gravimetric anomalies around the ship. They have a very distant resemblance to those detected Outside. When they are at their strongest, strange things are reported - fighters being pulled by something invisible, resources saying they saw asteroids appearing out of the distance on a collision course at amazing speeds - and stop in front of them. When I asked Tasiin about it, he did not seem bothered.

The T-Mat Frigate that spotted our fleet has left us in fear of it returning with its own fleet. We do not know when they will come - only that they must be nearly finished gathering. Our fleets have been working at 100% capacity to prepare for the battle. However, they nearly succeeded in destroying us the last time they attacked. They won't take any chances this time. As long as the Beastslayer jumps Outside before they come, though, all of this would not have been in vain.

Analysis of the subverted frigates revealed that the T-Mat used something similar to the Ghost Ship the Mothership encountered. The T-Mat probably designed it from information the Bentusi had acquired about it and had sold to the other races. Ironically, the information had been bought from us by the Bentusi. The final irony is that the Ghost Ship was meant to be turned against the Naggarak-launchers but was turned against us.....and we are trying to atone for what the Naggarak-launchers did.

The carrier Tel-Sall is on its way to the Taiidan Republican colony in the Sharkal system, which has agreed to take in the civilians who were not a significant part of the Beastslayer project. The rest of us will have to face the T-Mat....or self-imposed exile. Even so, there were surprisingly few who chose to leave. On the contrary, a few ships have actually joined us, actively supporting our decisions. Kiithid Sjet, Somtaaw, and LiirHraal, as well as the Taiidan Republican Second Main Fleet, the Frrern, the I'ao, and the Bentusi promise that more ships are on the way.

The Imperialist Taiidani and the Turanic Raiders have stepped down their demands in the Galactic Council. The Bound races now support us strongly. Rumor has it that some of the Unbound races are reconsidering their position. Hopefully, the Council will decide to intervene in our favor. From

our agreement with Imperial captain Tequal Nal, we granted him twelve frigates and a destroyer for his communications with the Imperialists. He has so far not attempted to hyperspace away or attack us.

The crew of the Beastslayer has transferred to other ships. I am in command of the carrier Jal-Tor; Shanal Alo commands the carrier Martyrdom; Thenar Soban commands the Avenger of the Burning; and Pukna Somtaaw commands the Explorer-class warship Naab Corum. Complete control of the Beastslayer has been formally granted to Tasiin Limandatt('sa).

.....Sometimes this seems so strange, leading war fleets again and battling Unbound races. Just after the Hiigaran Landfall, I had served aboard a research vessel, and after years of work, I received command of a Destroyer. After the Beast came, I decided to retire to that I thought would be a peaceful leadership of the Hiigaran team of the Beastslayer project. I thought I would never face an enemy fleet on the viewscreen again. Yet here I am now, preparing to do just that.

But it's too late to turn back. This has all gone on long enough. By Sajuuk, we will end this one way or another.

We will.

*Major Dolann Kaalel
Former Project Coordinator
Hiigaran Team
Commander of the Jal-Tor*

Come.

“Stay.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Tasiin felt himself awaken. He felt tired after each dream, which haunted him often, every few minutes in real time. Even being Unbound did not help.

He took some solace in the presence of the Bentusi, in the friendship of Datlai. But compared to hours ago, they seemed.....small, young. It was like he was trying to be warmed on a cold night by starlight.

The *Beastslayer* itself seemed snug. His thoughts raced at speeds he could not even have dreamt of as a Bound person. If it wasn't for his newfound limbs of gravity through the *Beastslayer's* hyperdrive, he would feel far too confined for comfort. Already he began to use the fabric of space as a part of his mind and as a place to hold memories.

Tasiin.

Only then did he realize Outside had been silent since the dream. It had been watching him, observing him, analyzing him. It was preparing like Tasiin for the coming confrontation.

And then it had taunted him.

Outside resumed its deep, penetrating murmur, permeating through the entire Universe.

You find us and our plans amusing? Tasiin asked it, not expecting an answer. None came. *You....*

Tasiin caused flickers of gravity in space-time as he turned inwardly. He could not help but wish he was back on Kharak. Tasiin felt like he was huddling around a dim light in infinite darkness.

Neither the fleet, nor the Bentusi, not even Outside would know the subtle, gentle undulations of space-time emanating from the *Beastslayer* was sobbing.

A Hiigaran carrier group emerged from hyperspace. It moved closer to the *Beastslayer* fleet. Flanked by over two-dozen capital ships, it granted itself to the larger fleet. Messages of welcome were exchanged, followed by strategy briefings, and soon the carrier's captain was contributing tactics to the fleet.

Walls of Defenders roamed the area. Resource Collectors moved at the fastest possible speeds to collect every scrap of resource from the region. From the massive Bentusi Tradeships, Super Acolytes glided out and arranged themselves in formation. Around the *Beastslayer* were dozens of frigates, ready for attack.

War was coming. The *Beastslayer* fleet had to be ready. And so the ships prepared as best as they could. They would not let all that they had done mean nothing.

"It is hurting me.....thoughts disturbed.....cannot....." Tasiin said in pain. An infinite grief filled his words.

Datlai looked upon the myriad controls. Quickly she scanned them, trying to find desperately the correct one. Frustration quickly set in, followed by fear.

The bridge's light darkened. Then a redness appeared on the far end of the room. It expanded, filling the bridge like a cloud. The red glow quickly enveloped Datlai.

After a few seconds, the hologram faded out, replaced by a saddened Tasiin. "Had Outside actually tried to layer a piece of itself on the *Beastslayer*, that piece would have successfully subverted the ship. You would have had the unfortunate experience of becoming a part of that.....thing."

"This is.....difficult," Datlai replied. "I never piloted or commanded a ship before."

“If you go Outside, though, it would be good to learn. There might be an emergency or a situation in which I would be.....unable to control the ship. If you could be ready for anything I could focus on the task at hand.”

“I understand. However, it is strange that.....you are here,” Datlai said, looking towards the captain’s chair, where Tasiin’s Bound body sat rather placidly. “It is very difficult to learn how to run a ship this quickly.”

Tasiin’s face showed a kind of sympathy. His holographic hand reached out, nearly but not quite touching her. “If it is any grim, morbid solace, you would have been together with me. Our thoughts would have been linked. The problem would be that we would have been completely helpless about it, unable to do anything but carry out the wishes of the spawn of Outside.”

Datlai nodded somberly. “Why would the descendant of Outside necessarily be intent on destroying us? If it is like only a cell of Outside, maybe it would not know why it would hate us-“

“Datlai, it is because of what it doesn’t know that it would try to consume everything.”

She nodded again, unsure what Tasiin meant.

“When Outside plants a piece of itself on board a ship, it changes the structure of space-time in the ship’s vicinity. By carefully manipulating gravity, it can - inscribe - a tiny portion of its consciousness into the ship inside whatever materials are convenient, in whatever form is convenient - electrical currents in the hull, neural impulses in the crew, a computer program in the ship’s databanks. In the *Naggarok*’s case, it was a nanotechnological entity that we know as the Beast. This piece is itself as sentient as any Unbound mind, if not more so. However, it knows that it was part of something far greater, and it is desperate to rejoin that greater self. So the entity consumes anything it can find in hopes of equaling that greatness, or rejoining it. It plots to consume the galaxies, the universe, and believes that it will be immortal in an attempt to mimic Outside. Unfortunately for us, that involves stealing ships, killing crews, and its unwillingness to leave anyone alone, except as tools of itself - like the Taiidan Imperialists were of the Beast,” Tasiin explained. “You do understand why all of this, the mission to Outside, the direness of something like the Beast, correct?”

“I have always known about the importance of this, Tasiin,” Datlai replied. “I *did* lose Dillat to the Beast. But I thought it might be possible to avoid the infection by some way other than vaporizing the ship.” She sighed from the exhaustion of it all. Even after the conversation and two hours of practice, she was no closer to being adept at working the basic functions of the ship. In reality, it would probably make no difference, but it would ease Tasiin’s mind, and he had gone to the trouble of setting up a general interface to the *Beastslayer* at what was the trans-hyperdrive control.

Datlai looked up, and to her surprise found that Tasiin looked, subtly.....haunted. She had seen him like that before, when he awoken from the dream a few weeks before, when he had been watching the Burning of Kharak. But now, there was something else, a distant, but deep, sense of futility.

The expression lasted only for a moment, as Tasiin tried to cover it up. Datlai, however, had noticed his pain. "I will do my best to learn," she said, her own demeanor reflecting the sympathy Tasiin had shown her earlier.

Tasiin seemed to take time to analyze her. Then he quietly assumed a neutral expression. Datlai did not react.

"You almost know how to do the important things," Tasiin said. "You are simply being confused and distracted by the lesser tasks. Remember, the red control on the left I set to scuttle, the blue control on the right is for trans-hyperdrive jump....."

"There are three main kinds of T-Mat vessels," a holographic projection of Shanal Alo said in the *Jal-Tor* war room. Shanal Alo was giving a strategy briefing to some of the more inexperienced officers aboard the carrier. Dolann Kaalel watched the briefing. Because Shanal Alo had served in both Imperial and Republican fleets for a number of years, Kaalel agreed to let him speak instead of addressing the officers himself. Nevertheless, Dolann felt drawn to the meeting, so he settled his immediate priorities, and then attended.

"They are the Frigate, the Destroyer, and the Megaship. All three types can take heavy damage. We believe the Frigate and Destroyer can take up to half the damage a Bentusi Tradeship can withstand; the Megaship can take approximately 35% more than a Tradeship. The Frigate packs a powerful, low-coverage ion cannon, and the Destroyer holds two such weapons. The Megaship, on the other hand, holds one weak, but high coverage beam. This is used much like a carrier's weapons - as a defense against Strike Craft, or unescorted, solitary frigates. Its main use is, again, like a carrier. They can launch Frigates from them, possibly building - or growing - them on the underside of the ship. The Megaship's ion cannon is quite long range, so it is a threat to Strike Craft that come in the vicinity. Therefore, fighters and corvettes will concentrate fire on the T-Mat Frigates and Destroyers. Capital ships will have a well-rounded attack plan, due to the threat of Frigates and Destroyers to the entire fleet.

"How much losses are expected for Strike Craft," one member of the gathering asked.

"Not as many as you would think. The T-Mat will be focusing on the Bentusi Super Acolytes because of their firepower. However, the Bentusi, will keep them clear from the Megaships if possible. During that time the T-Mat may easily ignore the other swarms of Strike Craft such as a sphere formation of Attack Bombers. The T-Mat have heavy advantages for a capital ship battle, but we can slowly peck away at them with fighters. The only reason why we weren't more successful at Galactic Shipyard 0 was that the T-Mat caught us completely by surprise."

"What about the T-Mat's subversion weapon?" another asked. "How much of a threat is it?"

"The T-Mat are Unbound - they control their ships like we control our bodies. If they try to take too many, they become overburdened and slow. It would be like if we had to control a thousand limbs. They would all be useless, get in the way of each other. We believe it might be possible for them

to take over our entire fleet for a fraction of a second. This would be useful if they were trying to extract data. However, that is not their intent. The T-Mat would quickly become exhausted mentally, and we would still have our fleet. We think that a T-Mat Frigate or a Destroyer can subvert two or three of our frigates; a Megaship might take a carrier and a few frigates,” Shanal Alo explained.

“You said there were three ‘main’ types of T-Mat ships. That implies a non-main type.”

Shanal Alo answered, “Yes, it does. We have to rely on the Bentusi for information on things like this. The Bentusi say that there is an even larger T-Mat ship, a Mothership. There are believed to be two, maybe three in existence. It has a circular center with five long arms radiating outward from it. The arms give it a span about twice that of a Megaship. It is believed it can take about twice to three times the amount of damage a Megaship can take. For firepower, it probably has a powerful ion cannon, as well as the low power, high coverage ion cannons for fighter defense. The primary use of a T-Mat Mothership is somewhat like that of a planet. As a heavily space-faring race, the T-Mat have rejected using real planets for strongholds. Instead they use a massive Mothership as a mobile center of operations.”

“Will we see one?”

“I hope not. By the gods, I hope not. But if one arrives - which may happen if the T-Mat are or become desperate - focus fire on the arms. If one can be sheared off, the central section will have a massive hull breach.

“Any further questions?” Shanal Alo asked. When no one answered, he said, “You are dismissed.” The officers filed out of the room.

“They seemed a bit nervous, but they covered it up. Many crew members would pale before such a huge challenge. You have a good crew, Kaalel,” Shanal Alo said to Dolann.

“I know. Do you really think one of those Motherships will show up?”

“I meant it when I said I hope not. But given how much the T-Mat seemed bent on destroying us, I think there is already one on its way. The only thing working in our favor is that they are slow. Our fleet, if need be, could limp out of the Galaxy, outracing the T-Mat fleet. In that case, self-imposed exile might not be such an illogical thing,” Shanal Alo replied.

“Let us hope that it doesn’t come to that.”

“I already am. *Martyrdom* out.”

The image of Shanal Alo faded out. Kaalel was about to leave the war room, when a voice from the bridge announced, “Sir, the *Beastlayer* is hailing you.”

“I’ll take it in here,” Dolann replied.

“Is there something that still needs to be addressed?” Kaalel asked.

“There is. This is very important, but it involves much explanation,” Tasiin replied.

“I have already been listening to explanation for a long time now. A few more minutes will not hurt.”

“The original purpose of the Beastlayer was to develop ultra-fast travel through trans-hyperdrive. If you remember, there are several layers of hyperspace, somewhat like the energy levels in an atom,” Tasiin said.

“I remember.”

“But Outside, by its presence, changes the spacing of the levels of hyperspace. It is like.....this will be stretching the analogy, but imagine the atoms in a metal. Each atom would be like a universe. Holding the atoms together is something called a metallic bond - essentially a vast electron cloud permeating the metal. Suffice to say, the way the electrons in this cloud interacts with the electrons in an atom changes the energy spacing of the atomic energy levels. Similarly, Outside interacts with universes to change the amount of energy hyperspace has,” Tasiin explained. “Do you understand?”

Dolann did not quite follow all of it, but knew enough to draw some conclusions. “So you are saying if Outside as a space is destroyed - and considering your remarks about the entity ‘being’ Outside, that might be necessary.....if we win, hyperspace will change?”

“Yes. I have done some calculations on what would happen if Outside suddenly disappeared. Normal space would not be affected, or only in negligible amounts. Regular hyperspace would require a larger amount of energy to enter. The exact amount is uncertain, but we would certainly need to upgrade the hyperdrives of most ships for them to still work. I am estimating that roughly 1.5 to 2.5 times as much energy for normal hyperspace would be necessary to jump. Beyond that, the energy requirements become enormous. I believe there is still a reachable, infinitely-high hyperspace - with approximately six trillion times as much energy needed than the present.”

“Would anything other than the energy requirements to jump change?” Dolann asked.

“No. I do not believe anything else will change. That is good, because the atoms making up your body will not dissolve if Outside is defeated.”

“Good. Thank you, Tasiin for the warning. We will examine what will happen to hyperspace carefully.”

“You do not understand. Do you not see what is wrong if we win?”

Dolann shook his head. “Trans-hyperdrive would be more difficult, but we don’t have that. Interuniversal travel, if your atom analogy is correct, would be impossible. I do not think there is anyone who uses either.”

“The Naggarok launchers.”

Kaalel was silent.

“The purpose of the Naggarok was to jump to other universes to continue their genocidal quest. When it disappeared, the Naggarok launchers developed a fear of Outside, but they probably still hope to one day to use Outside for their own will”.

“Even more importantly, they use trans-hyperdrive regularly. It is one of the biggest advantages in their quest. If my calculations are correct, they would lose that advantage, capable of jumping only to the second or third level of trans-hyperspace.”

“Outside showed me what the Naggarok launchers were intending to do. From that, I remember that they.....worshipped hyperspace, somehow. I believe they, to some extent, are trying to defend hyperspace and trans-hyperspace as a holy place. They do not allow anyone else to trample their sacred.....”

“Garden,” Dolann finished for him. “Like the Garden of Kadesh. We encountered them while journeying to Hiigara; a few others have sent expeditions to their space. The Turanic Raiders, for example, as well as some Hiigaran expeditions.”

“The Kadeshi were willing to sacrifice themselves to defend their ‘Garden.’ What if we had utterly destroyed that Garden, instead of merely entering it? That is what we will be doing to the Naggarok launchers. They deserve it, but they will devote all of their efforts to finding those responsible and crushing them out of existence. Seeing what they have done when they have merely perceived a threat to trans-hyperspace, I doubt we would want to know what they will do when they find us.”

“The Naggarok launchers are a threat, one we will have to deal with eventually. They are, in fact, the greater short-term threat. However, eventually something like the Beast, planted by Outside, could successfully consume the entire universe. We cannot let that happen by allowing Outside to place itself here. In a few millennia, when the Naggarok launchers find us, we Hiigarans may be Unbound. We could stand a fighting chance against the Naggarok launchers. But against Outside.....You hurt it. Has anyone else managed to do that?”

“No. I did not argue that we should not try. We must continue. There is no other way. But even if we do succeed, there will be consequences.”

“There always are, Tasiin. What matters is if we still survive them. If we win Outside, we can win here too.”

“One final thing, then. A trans-hyperdrive jump takes a few seconds to complete. However, if Outside disappears, and the Beastlayer is still Outside, with an incomplete jump.....” Tasiin did not bother to finish.

“We would lose you as well. Is there some way you could prevent that?”

“Yes, but that might not be the best option. I believe I can use the Beastlayer’s trans-hyperdrive to.....hold on to this universe, in a sense. It is hard to describe, except that if Outside disappears,

the Beastslayer could conceivably 'fall' back into this universe. The problem is that it would also allow Outside, for the time we are here, to reach into our universe. At the present, its influence here is extremely weak. It would take millions of years of effort for it to do anything useful for itself, and over the million years, entropy would consume all that it had done. But if I hold onto here while I am Outside....."

"How long will it be able to influence us?"

"It would influence us as long as I am Outside, holding on to the universe. Perhaps a moment, perhaps a few seconds, perhaps a minute."

"Could you hold it back? Or, perhaps, distract it?"

"Perhaps."

"Then the decision is for you. If you feel that you can restrain Outside, then you may do what you are asking, if you wish."

"I will consider it."

The communication between the *Jal-Tor* and the *Beastslayer* ended.

"So, that is the price we will have to pay. Having what remains of our ancestors eventually come to destroy us. But considering how much we fight amongst ourselves, that might not be so bad."

Tasiin was warmed by Datlai's present success in mastering the Beastslayer controls he had set up for her. It was a small relief to know that there was someone else he could depend on.

A small relief only.

But, he did not let her know what he was truly feeling. As he talked to her, the Bentusi, the commanders of the fleet, parts of Tasiin resigned to the dark around him, parts abjectly tried to hold on to whatever was left from before. He felt like he had become pathetic - once he had desperately wanted to be alone, and now that he was the closest he had ever been to achieving that, he desperately, wanted to go back.

Does it ever end? A gentle rippling of space emanated from the core of his being. Tasiin listened to the faint variations of gravity that filled his vicinity, as if expecting an answer.

Is this all there is? An infinity of darkness?

No reply. Outside's murmur subdued slightly, but he was not interested.

Why?

After an eternity of waiting, a few milliseconds in real time, he retreated again to Datlai.

“What are you feeling, Tasiin?” Datlai asked. She sat in her makeshift quarters, formerly the room of her kiith. “I know you can hear me. But, you do not have to answer. Only know that I am here for you, if at some point you decide you need me.”

Datlai closed her eyes. “And you - the Bentusi.....are *you* still there?” she asked.

“We listen to all that moves through the Void,” the Bentusi replied.

Datlai felt this conversation would be strange. Surely Tasiin noticed it, and had to actually allow it to happen. If he wanted, Tasiin could have severed communications with the Bentusi ships nearby. Perhaps he was curious, or wanted to know what Datlai was thinking. Perhaps he wanted to see if he could find out something about himself by listening.

“Do you know what is troubling Tasiin?”

“We know that he is distant. He moves beyond us as we listen. He seems stronger. We do not know how, but we know that he is beyond Unbound,” the Bentusi replied.

“How much stronger?”

“We are unsure. However, Tasiin’s mind - his song - is.....resembles Outside’s. It fills the space around us. It is deep. It arches over us. He does not permeate the universes or even this one like Outside does. He does, however, resemble it when he is near us.”

“So Tasiin is beyond Unbound, then. Far beyond Unbound.” For the briefest moment, she caught a fleeting glimpse of what Tasiin was going through.

“We suspected it when we found his work. We brought him to us, through your kind, and saw glimmers of an Unbound mind. Never did we think that he would come this far.”

Datlai absorbed it all. “Do you think he will survive an encounter with Outside again?”

“We do not know. Perhaps he will fail. Perhaps he will succeed. Perhaps he will betray us. Perhaps he will surprise us.” Datlai somehow knew the Bentusi deliberately left ambiguous whether they meant “surprise” positively or negatively.

“Perhaps. I will be there to find out.”

“We will wait for you.”

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

“Farewell.”

Datlai still held her eyes closed. “I know you are here, Tasiin.”

“Yes,” replied Tasiin, in his Bound voice he used with her instead of his Unbound way of speaking.

Datlai did not bother looking. Only on the bridge, the war room, and a few other rooms could the ship display a hologram. If she tried, Datlai would not see Tasiin. Instead, she imagined him sitting next to her, both whispering to each other.

“The Bentusi are wrong in thinking there is only Bound, Unbound, and beyond Unbound. There are several stages beyond Unbound. The final one is Outside.....or me,” Tasiin said, saddened. “A life as an entity that is made of space itself.”

“Tasiin, you are not Outside,” said Datlai.

“No, but Outside is the only other of my kind. There is no one else. When I was Unbound, the Bentusi understood what I was. Now.....”

“Tasiin.....are you admitting that you are.....lonely?”

Silence followed.

“I know you that that no one can understand you. It may be that no one has ever transformed from Bound to Unbound to beyond Unbound like you, so no one has felt what you have. But Tasiin, you are still.....Tasiin. You still are, at the core, the same person.”

“Perhaps.”

Datlai thought for a few moments. Tasiin wanted to be persuaded that someone understood him. However, she knew that Tasiin had probably already thought about the main reasons she would use to reassure him, and had convinced himself that those reasons were not enough. So, Datlai tried an indirect way to reach out to him. She smiled as she thought about what she would say.

“Do you remember the first time we met Kesahl Paktu, when we were once out stargazing? She kept on saying that we should be doing something useful, or working on our studies.....until you not only convinced her that you not only did not have to study, but that due to quantum physics, she did not exist until we looked at her, so therefore she could not say anything until she did?”

“I do have to admit I was surprised she fell for that,” Tasiin said, with a hint of a laugh.

“Then, sometimes when we met her again, we pretended she didn’t exist.”

““Can I exist now?”” Tasiin recalled.

“And one time, she met Dillat, who replied, ‘Not for a few more minutes! We are trying to have a conversation!’” Datlai could not help but laugh.

“I remember.”

“Being beyond Unbound didn’t change that, did it? Can you really say no one can share what you are thinking?”

“I suppose not.” After a few seconds, he added, “Thank you, Datlai.”

Datlai held her smile. She playfully replied, “Anything for my kiith-sa.”

Tasiin was charging the *Beastlayer*’s trans-hyperdrive. It had already taken some time, and would need a few hours more. One done, the Beastlayer could jump Outside after the final farewells had been made. If need be, the Beastlayer could release the energy it was now gaining and fall back to normal space, assuming the space it was in - Outside, or perhaps, the bridge he would be building between the universe and Outside - still existed. He doubted, thought, if that would ever happen.

At least Datlai had convinced him that he was not completely alone. She was on the bridge, at the seat before the control that Tasiin had prepared for her, which was once the trans-hyperdrive control. On her side were a few things Datlai had taken from her quarters: the book most Limandatt had to write down their musings; a small cubical box given made for her by Dillat Limandatt, painted with scenes from the journey to Hiigara on four sides, and on two opposing sides, scenes depicted from her and Dillat’s Dreams aboard the Mothership; and a polished stone taken from the place where Tasiin and Datlai had used to gaze upon the stars and the Mothership, wondering what life would be like on a distant Hiigara. He wondered what she had felt whenever she saw the stone during all of the years he was trying to distance himself from the universe. Despair, or torment. Self-pity, maybe. Possibly, possibly, empathy. Even hope. He decided not to ask. But it was obviously meant enough for her to take the stone with her from Kharak all the way to the *Beastlayer*, one of the very few things of hers that the Mothership would be allowed to carry.

Then again, the painted cube from Dillat might be just as painful. To know that one of her best friends had become part of something as grotesque as the Beast.....He was glad she did not hear Outside, the parent of the Beast.

Datlai was whispering a prayer to Sajuuk. Tasiin listened, like he did with many things, with a distant sadness. It seemed.....childish. The only thing that was larger than himself was Outside. He remembered that Outside knew of nothing greater than itself. He could not convince himself there was.

However, as he thought about the matter, he realized he was no different than Datlai. He had asked into the darkness, expecting a reply. Even now, he would look into the void filled only with those who were Bound and Unbound and would search for something. He was calling out to something greater, as Datlai was.

So, his voice joined hers on the bridge. He did not explain his reasons. Whether or not there was something greater than himself was irrelevant to his doing it.

Tasiin felt closer to Datlai, a Bound person, than he did to Outside, one who was beyond Unbound.

Dolann Kaalel sat in the command chair aboard the *Jal-Tor*. All of the crew was silent as they waited for something to happen. But, nothing had happened in the past two hours. The *Beastslayer* was slowly charging its trans-hyperdrive module; the *Jal-Tor* was slowly producing Strike Craft. A few ships had hyperspaced in, mainly small groups of frigates sent in by the less prominent of the member races of the *Beastslayer* Project.

“Trans-hyperdrive 87% charged. Forty-seven minutes until it is fully charged,” Tasiin Limandatt’s voice announced.

Dolann did not reply to that, but instead asked, “What ships are we currently producing?”

“Twenty Interceptors, twenty Attack Bombers, twelve Defenders, and ten Heavy Corvettes, sir,” someone replied.

“Good. Continue,” Dolann Kaalel sighed.

The minutes slowly drifted past him.

Tasiin felt something. The quantum waveforms around him were changing. They pulled on him, impossible to ignore. It took only a few nanoseconds for him to realize what was happening. For a brief moment, he tried to use his limbs of gravity to stop it, but that began to drain the *Beastslayer*’s energy reserves too much, and so he relented.

It was too soon. But it was happening.

He sent out an alert to the fleet. Then, Tasiin diverted all of the *Beastslayer*’s energies into the trans-hyperdrive.

“We have hyperspace signatures! Multiple vectors, incoming ships. Range - one hundred kloms. Most of them have high energy readings,” the tactical officer shouted.

“By Kharak, the *Beastslayer* won’t be ready for forty minutes!” Dolann Kaalel exclaimed.

“They’re T-Mat ships,” the tactical officer confirmed, dread filling his voice.

Out of hyperspace windows that appeared all around the fleet, T-Mat vessels appeared. Some portions of the vast fleet approached the *Beastslayer*. From others, ion cannons lashed out. Blue beams hit the outer ships of the fleet. The T-Mat’s intentions were clear.

At the very center of the fleets was the *Beastslayer*, still not ready to seek its destiny.

Chapter 19: The Children's Crucible

“All fighters launch!” Dolann Kaalel exclaimed. “Main Hiigaran fleet, block the primary T-Mat attack group. We must protect the *Beastslayer* at any cost. How many ships are attacking?”

“Approximately 28 Megaships, 72 Frigates, and 36 Destroyers. There are some others - some from the other Unbound races, and a few Imperial ships. No signs of subversion among them. However, approximately twenty-four of our capital ships have been subverted.”

“All offensive weaponry, come online. Target the nearest Megaship,” Kaalel said. “Fire at will!”

The three Bentusi Tradeships surrounded the *Beastslayer*. Super Acolytes flew out to the nearest T-Mat ships, firing their brilliant ion cannons simultaneously. The Megaships began firing their own weapons, destroying the Bentusi fighters, one by one. Flashes of yellow and blue were exchanged by the ships of the Unbound races.

“There is no need for this,” the T-Mat broadcast. *“Bentusi ships and newly Unbound Hiigaran - leave and disable your ship’s trans-hyperdrive. We will let you flee.”*

“We cannot do that. Outside must be stopped, whatever the cost.”

“You risk all Unbound ones. You-“

“You are killing us. We must protect the Bound ones.”

“Your job was to monitor the Bound ones; destroy them if they threatened us. They threaten us. You have lost your way,” the T-Mat accused.

“We have seen them do thing we cannot do. Their songs are as stirring as ours, if not as loud.”

“You are soft. We help the Bound ones, but only if we are not threatened by their actions.”

“You often use ‘threaten’ for any action that does not serve your purposes,” the Bentusi said. *“Sense those around you, even the Bound ones. They continue to fight for what is right, even though their ships burn with your wrath. They are trying to make up for what our ancestors did one million years ago, and you let your fear get in the way. They are not motivated by self-interest. They are fighting for all of us.”*

“We cannot let Outside touch us. We lost some of ourselves to the Devourer, and we may yet lose more to its remnants. The Bound ones cannot release the Devourer again.”

“We have an opportunity to end Outside forever. We only need to let the Bound ones continue.” Despite what the Bentusi said, the T-Mat continued their attack, ion cannons lashing into Bound capital ships and waving across the Bentusi Tradeships. With a sadness, the Bentusi said, *“We regret that we must prevent you from stopping us.”*

“Lies!” the T-Mat exclaimed, filled with rage. *“They are meant to be little more than servants. They are lesser. A thousand of their stories does not compare to one of ours! The Universe appears before us, to them it is hostile. If you wish to make their lives filled with joy by giving them insignificant scraps of our fortune, we will not stop you, but you risk all of us for them! We must do what we must do for all Unbound ones!”* The T-Mat let the power of their words radiate out from their ships.

After a long pause, the Bentusi replied, with an undertone of anger, *“If that is what being Unbound means, then perhaps we deserve whatever Outside does to us.”*

The T-Mat were in silence for an even longer time, partly in shock, partly in fury. *“You are traitors,”* they finally said, and then ended the conversation with them.

But, the T-Mat still had to listen to one other.

“You are arrogant if you think you appear as anything more than children throwing a tantrum before me. I stand behind everything the Bentusi said. It is sad that being Unbound doesn’t purify you, but rather corrupts you.” Then the *Beastlayer* cut communications and fired its small compliment of missiles at the T-Mat ships.

The T-Mat seethed, but calmed themselves. The Hiigaran was only newly Unbound. His.....irrational beliefs would fade away. So, the T-Mat focused their attention on the Bound ones and the Bentusi.

Shanal Alo viewed the incoming T-Mat ships. Slowly, Frigates and Destroyers advanced, while Megaships escorted them from behind. Blue ion cannons fired out of the Megaships, destroying the scattering Bentusi Super Acolytes.

The bridge shook as a Frigate opened fire.

“Hull integrity at 93% and falling.”

“Republican ships, target all fire on the flank of T-Mat ships at 35° by -20°.”

“Energy cannons targeted.”

“Fire!” ordered Shanal Alo.

The claws of Taiidan Attack Bombers advanced on the dozen Frigates that were firing at the Taiidan fleet. Plasma bombs shot out of the fighters into the T-Mat vessels. They maneuvered into spheres, pouring continuous fire onto the Frigates.

“All ships with ion cannons, target the Destroyers in the center of that fleet. Assault Frigates, distract the Frigates.”

A wall of Taiidan ships closed in on the T-Mat fleet. Fifty ion cannons blazed across space, tearing

into the Destroyers. Slowly the Destroyers began to wither away. Meanwhile, the viewscreen began to light up as the T-Mat Frigates fired on the Taiidan ships. Some Taiidan ships began spinning in space, turning on their comrades.

“Eight of our capital ships have been subverted.”

“Do not fire on them,” Shanal Alo said. “All capital ships, continue firing on the Destroyers.”

A flash of white light filled the bridge.

“T-Mat Destroyer destroyed. Two are still active.”

The T-Mat Destroyers began to turn, waving their ion beams around. Then they began tumbling, venting plasma. The Destroyers’ hulls were cratered and scorched. Finally, the T-Mat ships broke up, scattering debris into the nearby Frigates.

“Excellent. Group 3, advance on the Megaship at 70° by 110°. Everyone else, target the Frigates and fire at will,” Shanal Alo ordered.

At his command, the red glow of Taiidan weapon fire bathed the Frigates.

Imperial captain Tequal Nal sat in the commander’s chair of the *Protector of the Throne*. He looked around at the crew, who knew the *Beastlayer* project leaders as their captors. Tequal sensed varying reactions, from hostility from Ensign Kelsak in the front to a determined calm of first officer Lieutenant Ulksar at his side. *They gave me back the ship. We can learn to trust each other*, the captain thought, as if broadcasting it to the crew.

“*Protector* to all Imperial ships, bring all weapons online. Target the T-Mat Frigate directly ahe-“

“Captain, I cannot let you do that.” Behind him was Lieutenant Ulksar, pointing a gun at his head. From his peripheral vision, he could see it was a *Tralsak*, one often used for assassination when the Empire was becoming decadent and corrupt. The lieutenant grabbed Tequal, holding him in place.

“Lieutenant-“

“Quiet! You were about to betray us for.....some Hiigarans, Republicans, the Frern, and their masters, the Bentusi.”

“Look around you!” the captain shouted. On the viewscreen, several Hiigaran frigates were attempting to destroy a T-Mat Destroyer. One by one, the ion cannons of the Destroyer sliced apart the Frigates, a massive explosion of plasma following quickly. A Hiigaran destroyer pushed ahead, its front section glowing red from damage. It rammed straight into the T-Mat ship, causing it to shake and pull back somewhat. It was too late for the Hiigaran ships, though, which now hung derelict in the battle. “Do you not get that we are all in danger! Not only from Outside, but from the T-Mat, who-“

“-Are our allies-“

“-Just like the Beast supposedly was.”

Ulksar was quiet for a moment. “I am relieving you of duty, captain. Ensign Kalsak, Tel’Doth, escort him to the brig.”

Tel’Doth, the sole Turanic Raider on the bridge, had merely been watching with a hostile curiosity, but now flatly refused to carry out the order.

“Tel’Doth, I know we have had some.....difficulties with the Turanics in recent times-“

“It was a war!” Tel’Doth exclaimed.

“-But, you want to serve the Hiigaran and Republican fleets?”

“We might not like either of them, but we have cooperated before, when the Beast came and it was to our benefit. The only reason we ever served the Empire, or the T-Mat, was because you offered us resources that we could use for the future of Turan. We don’t want a future with the T-Mat like this, or with Outside.”

“You-“ Ulksar didn’t finish the sentence. Instead, he clutched his head in pain and fell onto the captain’s chair.

Captain Tequal Nal turned around to find one of the bridge’s security officers withdraw his extended fist. Two others were behind him. “We always intended to defect. You spared us a mutiny.”

Tequal Nal didn’t let the idea of mutiny cloud his mind.

“Good work. Did the fleet target its weapons?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fire!”

The ships of his fleet, as dark as the void between galaxies, opened fire.

Frrern Attacker corvettes moved to intercept a trio of Frigates. Designed during the last days of the Taiidan Empire and the chaos that followed it, they now fired their heavy plasma bombs at the Frigates. The bombs crashed into the Frigates, which were approaching the *Beastlayer* slowly. The wing of Frrern corvettes fired salvo after salvo into the capital ships, which began to turn, as if in annoyance. A pair of Kushan Ion Cannon Frigates approached from the side and then fired their ion beams into the T-Mat ships. The T-Mat vessels began moving to focus their weapons on the new threat, but were outmaneuvered by the Hiigarans.

Then, a Taiidan Republican Missile Destroyer, subverted by the T-Mat, fired its missiles at the

Frrern corvettes. The Frrern ships took heavy damage as the Destroyer's weapons guided themselves into the hulls of the corvettes.

I'ao fighters coasted into the scene, towards the Missile Destroyer. They began circling it, swarming it, their high speeds outracing the missiles. The Frrern corvettes resumed attacking the T-Mat ships. The Frigates shuddered under their collective fire.

"The fleet's tertiary flank is collapsing! Only four frigates left against multiple capital ships and a Megaship!"

"Somtaaw groups 3, 5, and 8, prepare to intercepts T-Mat at tertiary flank," ordered Pukna Somtaaw, commanding the Explorer warship *Naab-Corum*. She took in a breath, and added, "Target the siege cannon on them."

"Aye!" The weapons officer sounded excited at the prospect.

Slowly the *Naab-Corum* turned. A low rumble signified plasma being diverted from the fusion drives to the weapon. It took endless seconds, but finally, the huge globe of plasma shot away, towards the T-Mat ships. The T-Mat did not even bother to attempt to escape. Instead, their fleet approached straight on. The shot plowed into a Megaship.

The shock wave erupted, destroying one already-damaged Frigate and crippling two more Frigates and a Destroyer. Where the shot had impacted the Megaship, there was a gaping hole, like a giant wound on the semi-organic ship.

"Somtaaw ships, intercept and destroy them. Fire at will!" Pukna said.

Thenar Soban stared into the T-Mat Megaship, on the viewscreen, which was beset by several dozen ion cannons.

"This thing is worse than the Headshot Asteroid in the Hiigara War," he said. "Continue firing."

The Megaship looked like it was slowly eroding. Even so, it was taking far too long.

"Burn, you Sajuuk forsaken....." Thenar added.

T-Mat ion canons lashed out at the Hiigaran fleet. They pierced the Kushan ships, slicing them apart.

"Three of our frigates destroyed! Four....." reported an officer.

"I meant *them* not us," Thenar said to no one in particular.

"Hull integrity at 65% and falling." The Heavy Cruiser rocked under the assault. But then, without

warning, the T-Mat Megaship collapsed slightly, as if giving up, and then exploded. An intense light filled the room, as well as cheers.

Quickly, though, the joy died down as the ship continued to shake under the T-Mat onslaught.

Datlai saw the cluster of green points begin to wink out on the holographic display of the battle Tasiin was projecting for her on the bridge. He stood to her side, apparently watching the battle himself.

She turned to the projection of Tasiin and asked, “Tasiin, I may not know much about starships, but I know that we are losing too many ships there,” she said, pointing to the cluster of green. “You said you lived in space itself. Can you somehow.....stop the T-Mat there?”

He sighed. “Datlai, I do not really transcend the laws of physics; I merely use more subtle aspects of them. What you are asking would require a huge amount of energy. I am using most of the ship’s energy to charge up the trans-hyperdrive, which is 93% complete. Any spare energy is being used to fend off the T-Mat attempts to subvert the *Beastlayer*, or will be used when we actually are Outside,” Tasiin replied. “.....Or for this.” He gestured to include the entire bridge.

“If we lose this, we won’t be going Outside, will we? Aren’t there.....reserves of energy?”

“Yes, but they.....”

“Please.” Datlai stared into Tasiin’s eyes, or rather, the illusion of his eyes. He looked back at her, and seemed to consider it for a moment.

More green dots disappeared.

Tasiin closed his eyes.

Tasiin reached out with his limbs of gravity, finding a T-Mat Megaship. Those aboard were confident of themselves and their superiority. Using the *Beastlayer*’s energy reserves, he closed his hands of gravity around the T-Mat ship, as if holding it. As the tides on the T-Mat ship grew beyond what it was meant to handle, the Megaship twisted in place, pieces breaking off. The T-Mat aboard seemed shocked at what was happening, unable to comprehend what Tasiin was capable of. The T-Mat Megaship finally exploded.

Although Tasiin felt a little exhausted, he still found enough energy to turn against other T-Mat ships.

Datlai had watched the T-Mat vessels turn around aimlessly, partly imploding, partly exploding, breaking up even as no weapons hit them.

“The *Beastlayer*’s energy reserves have been used up,” Tasiin said. “I cannot do any more.”

“What *did* you manage to do?” Datlai asked,

“One Megaship, two Destroyers, and three Frigates destroyed. Another Megaship was heavily damaged.”

Datlai looked into his eyes, and then smiled. “If you could do *that*, I don’t think you need to be worried about Outside.”

“The.....whatever it was came from the *Beastlayer*.”

“Thank you, Tasiin,” Dolann Kaalel whispered, and then looked back up at the viewscreen. “Continue firing. I hope the Bentusi reinforcements arrive soon. They will be bringing anyone else-“

“The Bentusi.”

“Yes.” After a silence, Kaalel asked, “What is wrong?”

The viewscreen changed images to one of the three Bentusi Tradeships. Its entire hull was scorched, cratered, scarred. Blackened pieces of hull drifted off the ship. It slowly approached a T-Mat Megaship, while ion cannons tore at it. The Tradeship launched a final wave of fighters and then a Cargo Barge. The Bentusi ship, a shadow of its former self, continued to move close to the Megaships.

“Bentusi ship, please, pull back while you still can!” Kaalel exclaimed.

“*It is too late,*” the Bentusi replied. There was a deep grief and sense of exhaustion filling their voices. “*Our Body is dying. We can still do one more thing for your people. Go on to defeat Outside.*”

T-Mat ships near the Bentusi Tradeship turned on it, firing everything they could. But Dolann Kaalel could see the Bentusi were right. The Tradeship rammed the Megaship, both ships shattering at the point of impact. Massive breaches appeared on both vessels. Finally, when the Bentusi vessel was two-thirds destroyed, a massive explosion radiated out from it, finishing off the Megaship and destroying a few of the nearby T-Mat ships. Wreckage filled that area of space.

After a long moment, Dolann said, “Let’s make sure their deaths meant something. Main Hiigaran fleet, destroy the fleet at 35° by -20°.”

The *Jal-Tor* turned and fired its energy cannons at the T-Mat Frigates and Destroyers. Interceptors and Attack Bombers rushed past the Carrier, joining with the capital ships. A wall of Ion Cannon Frigates opened fire on a Megaship, looming beyond the other T-Mat ships.

“*Beastslayer*’s trans-hyperdrive is 95% charged.”

“Our fleets seem to be gaining the upper hand.”

“Excellent,” said Kaalel. “Prepare to-“

“Detecting hyperspace signatures! They’re T-Mat! Reading three Megaships, several capital ships.....and something big.”

Dolann Kaalel did not even have to wait for the ships to fully emerge from its hyperspace window to identify it. Long, radiating arms emerging from a circular center. Twice the span of a Megaship.

“Sajuuk help us.....a T-Mat Mothership. Main Hiigaran fleet, break off and destroy that thing before it comes near the *Beastslayer*. Target one of the arms. Pukna Somtaaw, fire your two ships’ siege cannons at it!”

The T-Mat Mothership slowly approached the *Beastslayer* fleet. The escorting T-Mat ships opened fire, destroying several ships quickly. Ion cannons from the *Beastslayer* fleet hit one of the arms, doing little.

The two Somtaaw Explorer warships turned, firing spheres of plasma. The shots blazed across the battle, and slammed into one of the arms of the T-Mat Mothership. The T-Mat fleet shuddered slightly, then continued to push forward.

Fighters quickly followed, firing projectiles, energy cannons and plasma bombs into the T-Mat Mothership. Ion cannons lashed out, scraping it. Ships began turning on the others, their weapons aiming at their comrades instead of the T-Mat. Even so, the fleet continued to pound away on the Mothership, while the T-Mat and their undermined escorts thinned out the fleet.

“Destroyer lost. Heavy cruiser lost.....”

“Tasiin,” Dolann Kaalel said. “Prepare to jump to normal hyperspace. We cannot hold against the T-Mat.”

“*The trans-hyperdrive is 96.7% charged,*” Tasiin replied. “*We cannot change our minds now.*”

“Tasiin-“

“*We must continue.*”

“We have no choice-“

“Hyperspace signatures detected!” an officer reported.

“We cannot take this. All ships prepare for emergency hyperspace jump!”

“Sir, they’re Bentusi! Seven Tradeships appearing.”

The new Bentusi Tradeships immediately fired their yellow ion cannons at the T-Mat, as well as launching Super Acolytes.

“The Council has agreed to support you. They have sent their ships here to assist. They on our side.”

All around the battle, hyperspace windows opened. Hundreds of ships emerged, immediately attacking the T-Mat. Strike Craft poured out of carriers and glided into the battle.

“Reading ships from dozens of races - including the Turanic Raiders.....and the Imperialists.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Dolann Kaalel, who was echoed by many on the Jal-Tor bridge. “Hiigaran ships, continue to attack. Take down the T-Mat fleet.”

“The Bound ones have betrayed us,” the T-Mat said. They directed it not to the Raiders or the Imperialists, but to the Unbound races of the Council. *“As well as themselves.”*

Even so, the leader of the Imperialists replied. “We may never forgive the Hiigarans. But at least we are not risking the entire Universe to get revenge for them. You are even worse than them.” With that Imperial ships fired a salvo at the T-Mat.

“The Bound ones mean nothing to us. Their Unbound allies, though, should see their obvious errors and their repeated hypocrisy. We cannot risk the Devourer coming again.”

“We do not want the Devourer to return. However we cannot let fear consume us,” the Bentusi replied.

“Fear lets us survive when life is dangerous,” the T-Mat said.

This time the reply was from Tasiin Limandatt’sa. *“But it destroys us if we let it control us.”*

Another Unbound race added, *“Call off your attack.”*

“When we do not have to fear the Devourer, we will withdraw.”

The Council fleet began to surround the T-Mat fleet. Ion cannons slashed the Mothership’s outer hull. Fighters - Hiigaran, Republican, Bentusi, Frrern, Turanic, Imperial, among so many others -

fired side by side on the T-Mat. The Motherships and Megaships picked away at the Strike Craft, one by one, while the Frigates, Destroyers, and the Mothership waved their powerful ion cannons through capital ships.

Three Frigates opened fire on the *Naab-Corum*. However, an Imperial Heavy Cruiser as well as Turanic Ion Array Frigates turned against the Frigates, raking them with relativistic plasma. A Bentusi Exchange also joined its weapons to the skirmish. The Frigates began to withdraw, but it was too late for them. They began to tumble, and then they exploded. All four groups - Somtaaw, Turanic, Imperial, and Bentusi - turned once again to the Mothership.

“Hull integrity at 51%.”

Dolann Kaalel felt tense, but excited. “Keep firing.”

“*Trans-hyperdrive fully charged,*” Tasiin Limandatt’s said from the *Beastslayer*.

“Good luck to you, Tasiin!” Kaalel said.

“May the gods be with you,” Shanal Alo added.

“Make all of this mean something,” agreed Thenar Soban.

“From one *Beastslayer* to another, good luck!” said Pukna Somtaaw.

“*May you find your true strength. Help ensure that Outside ends no more songs - including your own,*” the Bentusi finally added.

Kaalel could almost hear Tasiin take in a breath. “*Engaging trans-hyperdrive.*”

Tasiin felt a hesitation. There was no backing out of confronting Outside, though.

You have been a good friend Datlai, he thought. For the universes, I have hesitation. For you, who has gone through so much for me.....

Tasiin activated the trans-hyperdrive. He felt joy as the waveforms he had helped calculate surrounded him, his creation a part of his essence.

Amid ion cannons and projectiles, the *Beastslayer* was enveloped by a brilliant blue glow, and jumped to Outside.

Chapter 20: Bright One

Outside felt the quantum waveforms in its being change. The undulations pulled on the entity, shifting its attention. Outside's thoughts resided on many scales of time - from flickers in spans so short that they were little more than the normal froth of activity in the vacuum to slow, ebbing tides that took millennia to complete.

Now, however, Outside's thoughts focused on a particular scale of space-time. The wavefunctions were parting to reveal another entity.

The bright one.

Come.

The Bright One was.....bright. Outside had never in its long life, from the decay into universes of the perfect symmetry of Nothing itself onward, sensed anything remotely like the bright one. There were differences - the Bright One still had a flickermind at its very core and merely used space-time as a place to reside, whereas space was the very essence of the entity. Nonetheless, the Bright One was by far the closest entity to Outside, ever.

Come.

The one who had caused the entity pain was with it, Outside.

Come.

Outside coalesced around the Bright One.

Come.

The *Beastlayer's* trans-hyperdrive propelled Tasiin Outside. The waveforms began to calm. The song of Tasiin's creation faded out, replaced by the familiar murmur of Outside.

Outside surrounded Tasiin. It was already pulling on him, luring him. Tasiin held onto normal space and set up precautionary measures, activating the gravity well defense conjured up days ago and taking care to hide Datlai's thoughts from Outside. He felt the gravitational waves accompanying its thoughts, much like those accompanying his own.

Outside, he finally said.

You have come, Outside replied. *We have been waiting.*

I will not join you.

With what seemed like a sigh, the entity replied, *We are patient. No one can harm us while we wait. Only entropy slows us down. You wish to join - we sense it. It has always been at your core.* Tasiin

felt Outside trying to pull on him.

No. He felt a slight flash of pain reflect from Outside, causing it to flinch for the briefest of moments while he set up mental defenses. Outside quickly returned.

Yes. Do not lie to yourself. We have been watching over you. We see all in the universes. You we see clearly.

Datlai could not tell what was happening between Tasiin and Outside. The ship held still in the infinitely dark void displayed on the viewscreen. The holographic displays Tasiin had set up for her had faded out when the *Beastlayer* had jumped. There was nothing that told of any danger, nor any way of knowing if Tasiin was even alive.

Except.....there was something wrong about Outside. Datlai could not name it. She simply felt.....there was something very, very wrong about Outside, that she should not be there, that no one should be there. What had been uneasiness before the jump had turned into fear.

Beyond that, Datlai also felt something else - like whispers too quiet to discern, flashes of light just beyond her field of vision. Datlai almost, but not quite, could imagine what was happening. To her, the confrontation appeared vague, distant.

“Tasiin,” she whispered.

There was no reply.

“If you are still listening - and I do not doubt that you are - “ Her words hung in the air as what she was about to say escaped her, leaving her only with the fear, something which seemed so ancient, but still appropriate. For a moment, she felt frozen, unable to think of any way to phrase what she was thinking.

She forced herself to focus, saying anything she could.

“Tasiin, Outside may.....say it understands you. But it doesn’t understand.....completely. Neither do I.....yet we still have shared so much. Don’t be tempted.”

Datlai wanted to say far more, but could find no other words. She stared into the darkness of Outside, hoping to see a sign.

“Stay with me. Please.....”

No.

The Bright One had gained a flicker of energy and will. Outside could not discern its cause, although it knew something had happened. The entity sent out small portions of its mind to watch the Bright

One for any clue as to what was driving it.

You always have wanted this. Your kind never understood you. Yet you resist.

No, the Bright One replied defiantly. *I never wanted death upon them. I wanted to be alone, not a murderer.* The Bright One tried to push away Outside, causing no major harm but nevertheless giving a slight pain.

You would have let your universe die, Outside said. It noticed the Bright One stopped resisting, freezing up. *You would have assisted us by inaction. Part of you would even have been glad for what we had done. You know that. You even are admitting it to yourself.*

Outside carefully watched the Bright One. The Bright One was turning inwardly, fear consuming it. Gravitational ripples filled the vicinity as the Bright One tried to consider, to speak, to do anything. Outside knew it had touched something deep inside the Bright One. Both knew Outside was right. *We understand you. We would be accepting of you.*

The Bright One seemed to be circling around its ship. Anguish and turmoil permeated through the space around the Bright One. Outside was not without any sympathy, though. Outside reached out to the Bright One. *Come.*

Instead the Bright One recoiled, retreating from the entity. It tried desperately to say anything. *No.....if you.....understand me so well.....then why is it so hard.....for you to convince me to.....join you?*

Outside considered for a moment. It was, in fact, surprised with the Bright One's amount of sheer determination. Something was opposing Outside, something subtle, but powerful to the Bright One. Outside could feel it, and for the briefest moment it could sense.....something. But, Outside was infinitely patient.

You must convince yourself this is right. You do not understand yourself. We are patient.

The Bright One was quiet for a moment. It seemed to be huddling around its very core, holding onto its innermost self. Outside did not force the Bright One to do anything. Its will would not easily break. Instead Outside only needed the Bright One's attention, which it had, to reassure the Bright One with its glow.

Slowly, carefully, the entity reached through, beyond the Bright One. The Bright One still held onto its center, watching. Outside extended itself through the bridge the Bright One was creating.

What are you doing? The Bright One asked. It was still uncertain, however seemed to be regaining some of its former strength.

Learn, Bright One.

The Bentusi Tradeship's ion cannons arced across space, tearing into the T-Mat Mothership. T-Mat weapons impacted on its hull, scarring the ship. The Bentusi vessel nonetheless focused on the Mothership, joining its fire with the other Council ships.

But, a sense of uneasiness fell upon the Bentusi. They paused, as well as the T-Mat, and indeed all of the Unbound races present. *There is something very wrong here.....a presence.....* Quickly uneasiness turned into terror as recognition set in.

Outside is here.

The Tradeship stopped, its innermost part restructured in moments by a torrent of gravity waves, parts of the interior distorted beyond any recognition, twisted into a perverse construct of organic material, matter, and electrical currents. A set of nanotechnological entities, shocked from their unceremonious birth, hungry for knowledge, and desperate to rejoin what they once were a part of, consumed the Bentusi ship from the inside out, tearing through the hull at incredible speed.

"We are being devoured.....devouring us.....cannot be.....are Unbound.....will not.....tearing at us.....will not be Bound....." The Bentusi lost coherence as the spawn of Outside raced through the ship. Ships of all Unbound races turned to fire on the Tradeship, trying to stop the infection from spreading to other ships. The Bentusi on that ship began losing contact with one another as the entity spread, leaving only isolated pockets intact.

Tasiin had sent a part of himself to watch what Outside would do. For a few moments he did not believe that Outside would.....for a significant fraction of a second, Tasiin was shocked. He did not understand why Outside would think its demonstration would cause him to finally give in.

Tasiin shook himself out of his inward retreat, and focused his thoughts on the universe, on the Bentusi. He felt the presence of Outside's creation, endlessly hungry, consuming a Bentusi ship. Only a few Bentusi remained, and they seemed.....ravaged, weary, and fearful.....until they recognized him.

They barely seemed capable of speech or thought anymore, the approaching entity robbing their abilities from them. Instead, Tasiin felt a warm glow from the Bentusi. They sensed him and were taking solace from him. Slowly, the last of them began to fall.

Tasiin knew that he could not undo what Outside had done by this point. It was too late for this ship.....but not for anyone else.

He withdrew from what he knew must be done. For the briefest time, he could not bear to kill this group of Bentusi, even if it meant saving everyone else. Quickly, though, Tasiin forced himself to approach the ship.

If Datlai was not here, but stayed on one of the ships-, he thought.

Tasiin reached into the core of the once-Bentusi ship. He sent the final Bentusi feelings of respect

and gratitude, as if bowing before them. Then, Tasiin, with his limbs of gravity, accelerated the reactions in the subverted engines of the vessel, driving them far beyond self-sustainment, far beyond the Tradeship was meant to handle.

A final outcry of pain radiated outward, this time from the entity who had been created by Outside, and a final feeling of triumph glowed from the Bentusi, as the Tradeship was consumed by plasma.

By then, however, Tasiin had moved to confront Outside. The Bentusi had been one of his few companions, second only to Datlai. For a moment, emotion overpowered him, rage filling him. A torrent of gravity lashed out from Tasiin, powered not just by the *Beastslayer*, but seemingly from the space around Tasiin. Waves of immense energies raced through Outside.

As Tasiin's anger and grief faded, though, he realized Outside was replying.....in pain. He heard what was like a scream fill Outside, a shriek of one who was injured severely.

You.....have.....hurt...us! Outside cried out, as if it did not believe such a thing was even possible.

Tasiin, to a small extent, felt pity for Outside. It had miscalculated, gone too far, and for the first time ever, was being punished and humbled. Outside simply couldn't understand what was happening.

We do not want to harm you, Tasiin said to Outside. We want to leave you alone, as you want to be left alone. We have received only grief and pain from here. We will not come here again, if you do not harm us again. Stop placing your essence on ships - stop releasing monsters on us. Do not let your punishment spread to anyone else.

Outside's response was uncertain, but nonetheless clear. *They do not understand us like you do. They would kill us, if they could. We cannot let that happen. We must destroy them before they destroy us.*

"Datlai."

Tasiin's holographic image reappeared on the bridge.

"Tasiin?" Datlai asked with hope.

"I am still here."

Datlai simply smiled.

"Do not worry.....your presence helps me, and means much to me."

"Anything for my kiith-sa," Datlai replied. She said it without the usual humor, suddenly feeling distant. Datlai looked up into Tasiin's eyes and added, "I love you, Tasiin."

There was a slight, but noticeable pause.

Tasiin replied, "I love you."

Come to us.

"Stay with us."

Tasiin recognized the doorway he stood in. His Bound body comfortably held his mind, as it always did. On one side was the infinite emptiness of Outside, appearing malevolent, yet tempting, its thoughts resembling his. On the other side was Datlai, pulling on his hand, demanding of him the impossible, but caring deeply about him.

One who understood him against one who loved him.

Come, enticed Outside.

"Stay," pleaded Datlai.

Tasiin did not reply. He simply stood in the doorway, eyes closed, refusing to do anything. "Have I come so far and yet I am still tormented by this.....?" he asked after what seemed like an eternity of waiting.

Datlai took a step towards him. "Tasiin, you have come very far."

Tasiin felt Outside coalesce near him.

But you have always avoided this. Time is consuming us. You must choose.

Tasiin looked into the darkness of Outside. For the first time ever, he wanted to laugh at it. "So, if I simply wait, time will consume all of us and I do not have to be forced either way."

"Time here is not necessarily what it usually is. There is no way out of this, Tasiin, even though it's painful."

We have been gentle so far. We can force you to choose.

"Not choosing is still a choice," Tasiin asserted.

Suddenly, he felt as if he had gone too far. Tasiin could not move, could not resist, could not *think*. Something binded him, forcing him to watch.

This is what the others did, Outside said.

Tasiin watched Kharak burn with infinite detail. The fireball from the Imperial weapon consumed the proud cities, melted the great deserts instantaneously into glass, evaporating the polar seas into convecting froth of steam. Thousands of his kiith, the kiith he now led through accidents of chance and fate and time, the kiith he had turned his back on in that distant past, perished in one great

moment of grief. The firestorm tore into the seemingly ancient place where he and Datlai dreamt of the future, devastating the landscape, turning the clear skies dark with smoke and ash and debris and steam and grief and sadness. Tasiin could not help but cry.

“But this is what it did,” Datlai replied.

Tasiin, still sobbing over the image of Kharak burning, now had a new vision. A proud Hiigaran carrier, which had survived years of service, battled with a small Beast fleet, its gun easily tracking the outnumbered Strike Craft. The carrier turned, preparing for an attack run on the lone frigate - the Beast Motheship hyperspaced in directly behind the carrier. The infection beam tore into the Hiigaran ship, sending it tumbling, Tasiin reading the name he already knew was there - the *Caal-Shto*. The Beast, desperate to mimic its creator, rampaged through the ship, consuming it. The crewmembers, from the most experienced veterans to the most innocent crew found themselves being devoured, physically and mentally. The image focused on one crew member particularly - one who was once part of Tasiin’s kiith - who cried out in pain, anguish, then finally in vain for his friend on Hiigara who did not love him as she still loved Tasiin and unconsciously grieved for losing Tasiin, who occasionally would cry out in her dreams not his name, but Tasiin’s.....

The image was just as powerful as the preceding one. Tasiin felt some of the paralysis release and he fell, sobbing, grieving for the past. Both Outside and Datlai stared at him, their gazes reaching into the deepest, darkest corners of his mind.

“*Stop this!*” Tasiin cried out. “**Stop!**”

Decide.

“*I don’t want to! I never wanted to-*“

“Often we must decide that which we fear most.”

Stop this torment, Tasiin thought, as if he was saying it. *I do not want to harm you*, he thought towards Outside. *I love you*, he added to Datlai. *Is that not enough?*

Come.

“Stay.”

Outside watched the Bright One now with a curiosity as the entity slowly recovered from its injury. In reality, the Bright One’s vision had lasted only a few nanoseconds, but to the Bright One, a much greater time had passed.

We saw that, Outside said. *We know your thoughts. We are not that harsh. We accept you.*

The Bright One showed signs of uneasiness. It once again tried to retreat inwardly. The Bright One was deeply troubled by the fact that Outside had seen its subconscious thoughts.

Outside had learned about the Bright One's source of will from its vision. Outside slipped through the Bright One's defenses, peering near the core of the Bright One, finding -

A flicker life.

Outside was disturbed by it. But the mind was in the Bright One's vision as Outside had been. Somehow, the other mind was driving the Bright One.

A flicker life, Outside finally repeated, broadcasting the thought to the Bright One.

The Bright One paused shortly before replying, *Not just a 'flicker life'* -

Outside let its attention drift away from the Bright One's words. *Flicker life*. It summoned all of its strength, concentrating immense energies. *Flicker life*, it dwelled. Then Outside rushed inwards, to plant its essence on the Bright One's ship. *Flicker life*.

Datlai looked into Outside, feeling only the uneasiness that accompanied it, knowing something was happening.

Suddenly, she shuddered as a series of voices and images flashed through her mind, and subsequently felt a chill.

"Datlai," Tasiin said.

"Yes?" she asked, trying to recover some of herself. There was something that disturbed her, though.....

"Outside tried to part of itself here."

"And it failed," Datlai finished for him.

"I blocked Outside."

Datlai smiled wanly, distantly. She looked at Tasiin's face, analyzing it concernedly. Tasiin seemed like he was about to drift away, when Datlai finally voiced what she had felt in the last few seconds, something that was growing stronger.

"You had the Dream, didn't you?"

Tasiin answered with silence.

"Tasiin....." she finally said. "I can.....*hear*.....your thoughts....."

They looked at each other with distant, yet understanding expressions. Neither could really find anything else to say. Somehow, they felt it was more appropriate not to disturb the moment of closeness anyway.

We have failed, Outside cried, nearly moaning. Do you not understand? The others are indifferent to us. We cannot let them continue; we cannot let them harm us.

Not all of the others want to harm you, Tasiin replied.

All who have come here, other than you, wished to harm us. All wished we did not exist. All wish to harm us.

Tasiin sighed. No. It does no good to listen to all of the others, to the infinity of voices. What matters about the others is the one voice, one mind who cares for you, the one who.....understands you.....loves you.

He felt that Datlai was warmed by what he had said. She had only heard the basic meaning with none of the subthoughts or subtleties that accompanied each moment of conversation with Outside. Still she had grasped the most important parts of the message and approved.

Outside seemed to consider what he had said for a long moment.

You.....are.....that one. You are an echo of us.

Tasiin felt angst from that last statement. He realized that Outside may very well have been fueling, or at least triggered, his growth to a beyond Unbound mind. All of the pain and grief and sadness from the last weeks, perhaps because of Outside.....

Tasiin tried not to react. But, instantly whatever remnant of his calmness broke apart, dissolving into nonexistence. Gravity waves rippled out from the *Beastslayer*. He knew Datlai would hear it as the sobbing it was. Her mind tried to console his by attempting to encompass his sadness and tiredness, trying to warm to cold reaches of his heart. But, try as she did, Datlai could not help Tasiin and instead fell into his own despair.

Tasiin forced himself to speak even as part of his mind reached to comfort Datlai, as Outside watched. *I do not want to harm you. But I am never going to join you. You wish for me to join, but then there really would be no other. You would be alone. And then you would have an excuse to kill everyone else. But it is not a valid excuse. It is not justice for what has happened to you at the hands of others. It is simply hate. You are inflicting more pain than you are the victim of.....* Tasiin let his words hang, echoing throughout Outside.

Outside receded from Tasiin, introspectively contemplating. During the pause, he hovered near Datlai, who was unsure about what the situation meant. Tasiin gazed wearily at Outside's core. The murmur of its thoughts that filled all universes was subdued to faint whispers.

No! Outside finally exclaimed. It was crying out not to him or his words, but to all of existence.

A set of memories came to Tasiin.

Outside was slowly becoming increasingly tortured by its few encounters with others. The ships from the very few universes with life would come and futilely try to attack. Outside wearily defended itself, growing numb to the destruction of the attackers. It tried to ignore the others, largely, passing the millennia away with the vast, deep melodies of its thoughts.

However, a few would not let Outside be. Their ships, dark as the void between galaxies, as much art as technology, far advanced beyond most, came Outside. First they came individually, then in pairs, in fours, eights, by the dozens, as their beyond-Unbound pilots launched a war against Outside. Beams of focused gravity waves emerged from the ships, absorbed easily by Outside, who arranged for the ships' destruction.

Finally, the annoyance Outside felt grew into a full-fledged hatred, as that race launched a massive assault. Thousands of ships jumped Outside, firing their gravitational weapons. Their technology created a bridge like Tasiin was using, if far cruder, so that more ships could come. Outside tore the fleets apart, the ships imploding under extreme gravity. Outside's wrath scathed through the vessels, dissolving apart their atoms and absorbing the debris into its being. Then, when Outside had won, it decided to stop the next wave before it could start. It reached down the bridge, observing the warriors who plotted to do more; planning to gain a victory in the war. The entity would tolerate no more.

Outside changed the physical constants of this universe in a tiny bubble. Tasiin recognized it from his life as a physicist as collapse of the vacuum - unstoppable, infinitely destructive, and unknowable until it was too late. The bubble expanded through that universe at the speed of light. It destroyed all matter in its path. The warring race was completely obliterated when the front arrived at their homeworld and colonies, dissolving them into their constituent quarks and leptons. The bubble did not stop, but consumed a galaxy, several galaxies, racing throughout that universe, devouring all.

When millions of light years had dissolved, Outside realized it was.....pleased.

You destroyed an entire universe, Tasiin whispered. He realized the entity had been soft in merely infecting a Bentusi ship - it could easily have destroyed his universe.

Outside simply remained silent.

You killed-

Forgive us, Outside said. *We.....* It trailed off.

I cannot forgive you. Only those you killed could have.

Tasiin observed Outside as it once again summoned its strength. Outside attacked him directly, exerting itself on him, its flickers of gravity trying to permeate the space. Tasiin felt it pushing against him, trying to do something, anything to him. Tasiin, though, was only being mildly injured by Outside; as he pushed back with all of his own strength, Outside retreated.

End this, Outside commanded him, wearily. *End this!*

Tasiin was not sure what it all meant.

Why? he asked.

Because..... replied Outside, *We cannot.*

We cannot harm you. We have been trying to end this confrontation, but we cannot. Our light is a dim glow filling this existence, whereas yours is a bright point, radiating light that holds back all, Bright One. We cannot harm you.

Then listen to me, Tasiin said. *End this confrontation now reasonably, and we will leave you alone.*

No..... Outside faded out for a moment. *You do not understand*, it told him resignedly. *Listen to us, Bright One.*

A flood of memories, experiences, and feelings deluged Tasiin. He felt.....everything. Joy, anger, understanding, confusion, triumph, sin, floating among the universes. Outside was giving him the most precious memories of its long existence.

It almost distracted Tasiin from the changes in the structure of space around him. His core thoughts drifted away from the memories, trying to advance on the center of the changes. There were echoes of more of the centers, spread throughout Outside. The new.....whatever Outside was doing was simple, yet hard to understand, familiar, but not familiar. Tasiin started to feel binding effects from Outside. Suddenly, he understood.

Singularities, Tasiin breathed. *You are destroying space itself.*

Outside responded resignedly. *It will be easier. You want this.*

You said I wanted to join you, Tasiin said.

Yes, you do. Your mind is filled with contradictions, Bright One.

Stop this, protested Tasiin.

You do not understand. Someday.....

Tasiin could feel singularities in the space all around him, slowly tearing Outside apart. They devoured its gravitational thoughts, slowly but surely. Tasiin held the singularities back from himself.

You have within you an echo of our core. You are our echo, our reflection, said Outside. *Go on.*

Why are you doing this? demanded Tasiin.

You cannot be harmed. You will not yield to us. You will not let go of your.....friend. Outside

seemed amused by the thought. *Look back at your companion.*

Tasiin did turn back to Datlai. She was still hovering around Tasiin, still recovering from trying to hold part of his sadness. Datlai could still feel his thoughts, occasionally whispering her own to him.

Tasiin realized what she had become.

Datlai's mind was Unbound.

Datlai, he whispered.

Do you not understand? asked Outside. *You are not unique in ability, but in application. Your inner turmoil helped make you what you are, giving you the means to become bright, to radiate with your light. Your companion has followed you so long that your companion is in turn becoming brighter.*

Tasiin absorbed it all.

Soon enough, all of your kind will stumble upon their means of brightness. They would turn against us and dissolve us. You understand us. They would not. Outside finished, seeming exhausted merely from the conversation itself.

The singularities grew. Tasiin began even to push them away, to expand. He slowly began to fill in some of the emptiness that appeared in Outside.

Dream well, Bright One, Outside added.

Tasiin continued to expand, growing even further.

I do not want to do this, Tasiin said. *I do not want to go on any further with this.*

Tasiin felt something pull inward on him, and not Datlai. He fell into a lapse of unconsciousness. Quickly, he recognized where he was.

The doorway, still beckoning, began to dissolve.

"Why am I still here?" Tasiin asked.

"You must finish this," Datlai responded.

Tasiin despaired. "Does it ever end?" he asked.

Datlai looked at him, sadly, pityingly. "Tasiin.....there is one thing you must yet do."

"What?" he asked with an infinite tiredness.

Datlai receded from him. She was still there, somehow, but.....

The voices, the ones that had originally asked of him the impossible while he Slept aboard the

Mothership, spoke again.

“You must find what is on the other side.”

“It is necessary to.....”

“You must *become* the other side.”

“It is what must be done.”

“There is no other way.”

“No,” Tasiin replied. “I will not.”

“*But you must-*“

“I don’t want it,” he said.

“We will be harmed if you don’t!”

“You cannot-“

“I did what was asked of me,” responded Tasiin. “*No more.*”

“We must see-“

“You must become-“

“*Help-*“

“*You will.*”

“*I don’t want it!*” Tasiin replied with grief and anger. “*I never wanted it!*”

“*You must.*”

“**I don’t want it!**” Tasiin finally shouted.

He felt himself being released by the Dream, and found himself beyond Unbound again. Outside was fading away, still trying to touch him. Datlai’s mind was hanging on to his won.

Remember us.....Someday you will understand, Outside whispered. It did not resist him anymore. For the briefest of moments, he pushed back the consuming singularities.

But then Tasiin whispered, “*I don’t want it.*” He stopped pushing, stopped resisting. The singularities began to impede into the space around him, devouring his outermost thoughts. It was painful.....but satisfying.

Tasiin retreated to Datlai, holding onto her mind as her held onto his.

Datlai did not know what to make of what she saw in Tasiin's Dream. It had all happened quickly. Emotions had vividly colored all of it. It meant something to Tasiin.

She could feel the nonexistence approaching, but Tasiin was shielding her from it.....them. Even as he did, Datlai could not help but noticed his closeness.

Nonexistence, the singularities, grew closer still. She could not even hear anything of Outside anymore. Tasiin's thoughts were now also fading away.

Tasiin, do something, she plead.

In response, she heard.....crying. *I don't want it*, Tasiin said. *I don't want it*.....

Datlai suddenly had an epiphany and understood.

Then I will not ask it of you. Don't.

Quickly, Datlai activated the *Beastslayer's* trans-hyperdrive.

The remnants of Outside still listened. The Bright One carrier with it Outside's defining memories. There was nothing to fear.....

The Bright One was not Outside, nor the companion. It was.....itself.

Outside was satisfied.

The final thoughts began slipping away, and Outside began to feel fear.

But then, a strange, wonderful song, the song of the Bright One leaving, filled space. The waveforms gently caressed Outside, calming it.

The last sliver of Outside plunged into nonexistence.

Dolann Kaalel watched the scarred, battered remains of the T-Mat fleet suddenly stop firing, from the bridge of the Jal-Tor. Throughout the battle, several ships continued firing, their weapons lighting up the T-Mat vessels, while others paused, waiting for something.

"We no longer hear Outside," broadcast the T-Mat. *"This battle has become irrelevant."*

"Hold all fire!" Dolann ordered. "They are leaving!"

Around each T-Mat ship, a blue light, the initial light of hyperspace jumps appeared-

-But no hyperspace windows followed. The T-Mat fleet sat motionless, trying to leave, trying to jump, and failing.

“T-Mat hyperjump failed!” reported a stunned officer on the bridge.

It’s like they simply didn’t have enough energy to jump. They are still trying to-“

“Sajuuk, no..... How much has the energy output of the T-Mat fleet increased?” Dolann Kaalel asked with impatience.

“Twenty percent.....thirty.....forty.....*fifty*.....” reported the officer. “Kharak’s name, they are *doubling* the energy they are putting into the jump.”

Kaalel watched the viewscreen with growing impatience. Then, he began to become afraid. *What if Tasiin was wrong and hyperspace is utterly destroyed with Outside?*

“*Triple* energy.....”

Tasiin said it would require only 2.5 times the energy to jump.....

“*Quadruple!* Their ships are still increasing the energy put into the jump.....”

He was wrong-

Suddenly, hyperspace windows finally opened before the T-Mat vessels, engulfing the Unbound ships. The familiar blue glow was a relief to Dolann. Perhaps something could be worked out to upgrade hyperdrive..... he pondered. The viewscreen shifted images.

“The T-Mat are leaving,” reported a tactical officer.

“They required 4.31 times the normal energy to jump,” another reported.

But what Dolann Kaalel paid attention to was the image on the viewscreen.

The *Beastslayer*, intact.

“*Outside is gone,*” the Bentusi said with awe and joy. “*We are freed of it. Tasiin has succeeded!*”

The bridge as well as the com channels filled with cheers.

Datlai rose from her seat. Her body cried out in pain with a splitting headache, joint aches, and a burning sensation, but Datlai paid no attention. Her mind wandered around, having been aimless since they left Outside and Tasiin had receded from Datlai.

Finally, she moved towards the captain’s chair. Tasiin still sat there, his Bound body still breathing rhythmically. The *Beastslayer* had since reverted to automatic controls, though, despite his still

being linked to the ship.

Datlai, feeling empty, touched his face. She could feel.....something from Tasiin, but nothing more.

Datlai leaned against Tasiin and began to cry.

“Tasiin,” she said.

Then she let herself shed tears for them both.

Chapter 21: Epiphanies

Personal Log 17.78 AHL

The only meaningful victory is a victory of the soul.

Tasiin.....so many will think of him as the one who stopped Outside forever. But, Tasiin will always be haunted by what happened out there. Yet, somehow.....I think he may have been victorious after all.

Tasiin did not kill Outside, although I suspect he will always think he did.

When I was.....linked to Tasiin, I.....felt Outside. I saw and heard Outside as a distant, infinitely powerful, spiteful.....entity.....a hate-filled voice that filed..... I cannot describe it, and a fitting description still eludes me. But Tasiin understood it? Sympathized with it? He somehow managed to reach out to Outside, convincing it that what it was doing was wrong. And Outside, weakened by fighting, tired of being attacked and attacking, simply could not cope and.....gave up, collapsing in despair.

As did Tasiin.

He never wanted to be beyond Unbound, kill Outside, or be the salvation of the Universe. He just wanted to.....even I do not know. Tasiin did not want to grow any further. So, he was surrendering to what he thought would be the end of his torment. I still am troubled by what he was doing.

I don't want it, he repeated, sobbing, holding on to me tightly. He wanted someone to end all of his pain. The whole experience was harrowing, perhaps more than Outside itself, because Tasiin was turning on himself. Yet, I felt like he was.....releasing himself from something. I.....I cannot even think about it without starting to.....

When we came back, I cried. For everything that happened, to both of us. I don't know how long I was holding on to Tasiin, crying, and when my tears ran out, simply leaning on him. It seemed like hours.

Finally, groups arrived on the Beastslayer. When they found us, we were both.....asleep. Or so they told me. I was not sure what was happening when they.....wakened me, like I was in a dream. One of the others, a Mana'an, was considerate enough to give me my book of musings, the kind all Limandatt, even Tasiin, carry around with them, always. They led me down the corridors, and although I had vague feelings of uneasiness, I truly was not out of the.....sleep.....I had drifted off to. I was in a daze. When I reached the sickbay, the others tried to ask questions, but I was silent, not really hearing them.

Slowly, after they had been gone, I began to recover, awakening from whatever held me. As I did, I began writing things.....musings and memories which I do not really understand now or seem to have no real significance.....just writing. In the past few minutes, I think I have regained myself. I am told that the events that happened Outside put much stress on me, and what I was experiencing

were ways of coping, defense mechanisms in my mind, causing me to detach. If only they knew what I went through.....I wonder how Tasiin is faring if this is how I am reacting.

Tasiin.....I keep thinking about him. Strange, two months ago, I had all but forgotten him, thinking that we would never see each other again..... Now I feel as if we always are together, as if the years of separation were simply a.....brief absence, a short time to think.

But, then again, we are in love. Deeply. The precious few moments we were linked, I saw that; I saw that he still held on to me, thought of me as his friend, even through all that had happened to him and all that he had become.

The doctors say Tasiin's condition is stable. He is still unconscious, but has recovered enough to be considered within a very deep sleep. Everyone else is waiting for him to awaken, but I know he will awaken whenever he is ready.

I pray to Sajuuk that he will find peace at last.

*Datlai Limandatt
Beastslayer Crew Member*

Datlai Limandatt entered the *Beastslayer's* war room, as she was told, and found Dolann Kaalel, Shanal Alo, Thenar Soban, and Pukna Somtaaw, each with varying degrees of injury from the battle, waiting for her. She paused for a moment.

"Please come in," Shanal Alo said.

"Take a seat," added Dolann Kaalel.

She hesitated, and then sat in one of the chairs across from the project leaders. Datlai did not say anything.

"You went Outside with Tasiin Limandatt'sa," Dolann Kaalel stated.

Datlai solemnly nodded.

"We received your report on what happened. But there are a few things we would still like to ask you," Kaalel said. "You mentioned a Dream?"

She looked at the project leaders. ".....I suppose you wouldn't understand.....Were any of you a Sleeper on the Mothership?"

"I was," Pukna Somtaaw answered.

"Did you have a Dream when you were a Sleeper?"

"Yes..... It was long and vivid. I am not sure any of it made much sense, but it still was interesting."

Datlai continued, "It is a powerful dream that will always be remembered. Those in our kiith all wrote down theirs - except for Tasiin. He did not feel enlightened or calmed or entertained or motivated by his Dream - it tormented him."

"We had heard that Tasiin had had strange dreams, but....." Kaalel started. "That was something we wanted to clear up.....we read your description of his Dream and how he reacted to it. It says also that Outside was not actually killed by Tasiin."

"Yes," replied Datlai. "It was like Outside.....gave up. It didn't want to fight anymore, it couldn't hurt Tasiin, and so it could do nothing." She did not tell the project leaders how Outside saw that all would eventually be like Tasiin, or how it had given Tasiin a tiny piece of itself.

"What, then, happened to Tasiin?"

Datlai did not answer at first. She simply looked at the four sadly, with grief. Datlai closed her eyes and bowed her head down.

"We are doing everything we can for him. But anything you can tell us may be of help. We are trying to understand what happened," Shanal Alo reassured. "*Anything.*"

Datlai did not look up. "He had his Dream again, as Outside was falling. He had closed the door, but the voices were still crying out at him, like he still had not done enough. Tasiin simply wouldn't do anymore.....he simply refused to be tormented any further. He.....let Outside pull most of him, the beyond Unbound parts of his mind, with it into.....death. He is still not ready to return to us. When he wants to, he will."

"Thank you."

"We will do anything we can for Tasiin," Dolann said. "If you have any requests for him....."

".....Where is Tasiin?"

"Still on the bridge. We did not want to move him," Dolann replied.

"Let him stay there.....and let Tasiin awaken when he is ready to. He's been through so much. Give Tasiin a chance to rest."

"We'll.....see to that.....Thank you."

Datlai nodded again.

"We will need to inspect the *Beastslayer*, simply a routine. If you wish to come with us, we welcome you. If not.....we understand," said Shanal Alo.

"I will come."

She stood up and followed the *Beastslayer* project leaders. However, she only listened to them distantly, only picking up from their conversation something about the Bentusi granting the Bound races energy sources for their ships' hyperdrives, the rest completely irrelevant to her. Her thoughts were elsewhere, Datlai still trying to grasp the situation.

Outside is gone.

She could not believe it, really. It was only a few weeks before that Outside had seemed unstoppable, such a distant, infinite entity. She remembered when Tasiin first felt Outside's presence. But, Datlai had felt Outside's fall herself.

I don't want it.

Datlai felt tired.

"Is everything all right?" asked Dolann Kaalel. All of the project representatives were facing Datlai in the main *Beastslayer* hallway. He slowly approached her.

"I was.....thinking about everything," she replied. "Ever since we got back from Outside, I've been bothered by the whole experience." I cannot really explain it, just a-

"-You really miss Tasiin, don't you?"

"Yes," Datlai whispered. "Very much."

Dolann rested a hand on her shoulder. She felt a small solace from the gesture. For a few moments, she simply stood in place, taking it in. Then, Datlai approached Kaalel, and held onto him. She did not let go for half a minute, warmed by the closeness of a fellow Hiigaran, if not Tasiin. When her spirits began to climb again, Datlai gradually let go, avoiding eye contact with him. She turned to move down the corridor with the project representatives. Datlai felt Pukna Somtaaw behind her, placing a hand on her back.

".....I was wondering," Datlai finally said. "What will happen to the *Beastslayer*?"

"That has been a subject of debate," replied Shanal Alo with a certain air of carefulness. "Some of the suggestions are.....interesting. In fact, one of those interesting ideas seems to be the most likely to happen."

"What is it?"

Datlai stood on the bridge, looking into the formation of Bentusi Tradeships and escorts. Behind her was Tasiin, still in his deep sleep. Datlai was patient with his condition, though.

"You were the one who suggested that the ship be given to our kiith - and made sure it happened," she finally said.

“Yes,” replied the Bentusi. *“It is our gesture of appreciation to you and what you have done. You have freed us from fear of Outside.”*

“Why do I get the feeling there is something more?” Datlai asked.

“Your ship is wanted by many, both Bound and Unbound. Unfortunately, in order for its full potential to be unlocked, they would need Tasiin to help. We did not want Tasiin, one who was beyond Unbound, to be bound any more to the wishes of others. By granting you the ship, we are granting him and your kiith freedom - freedom to seek out your own destinies among the stars. He will truly be Unbound.”

“Thank you,” Datlai responded, turning back to Tasiin. “What do you know of Tasiin’s condition?”

“He is resting. We do not sense his Unbound and beyond Unbound portions anymore.”

“So he is Bound again.”

“We do not feel the situation is that simple. We feel that he may have retained some parts of his Unbound and beyond Unbound mind, while he may have lost parts of his Bound mind. Or, he may simply be able to once again become what he was, but he simply refuses to grow.”

“If he doesn’t want to do anymore, then perhaps he shouldn’t,” Datlai said.

“We agree. However we do feel traces of what he was in him. When one becomes Unbound, they always carry with them certain elements of being Unbound which nothing can erase. We sense them in Tasiin.”

“Since you returned from Outside, we also sensed it in you.”

Datlai was surprised by what the Bentusi said. However, she somehow knew they were right. “I was linked with Tasiin. I could hear his thoughts. I was being pulled up by him.....Outside said we all had that potential - that we would all, eventually, be like Tasiin.”

“Yes. We have seen the greatest potential in your people. We always suspected you would exceed us.”

Datlai was intrigued. “What do you mean?”

“Your ancestors were close to becoming Unbound before the Exile. It was believed among the older races that given a few centuries, they would have become fully Unbound. Then, your people would have grown even further. However, the Exile destroyed all of your progress. Yet some of that glimmer remains.”

“So, in a few millennia, we may yet become Unbound?”

“Yes. We believe that Tasiin, somehow, managed to reach a stage most of you will not reach for millions of years. However, Hiigarans will eventually become as powerful as Tasiin.....if they are

not stopped by something.”

“Such as?”

“The Universe is filled with many dangers. The T-Mat are not pleased with your people. The Taiidan Imperials who exiled you now wish to destroy you. Fragments of the Devourer still roam the Galaxy. Elsewhere in the Universe, Outside may have placed other pieces of itself, other Devourers, who would not be killed with Outside. Our common ancestors may still destroy galaxies to this very day. Most importantly, your society is fractured, and may turn on itself.”

“The kiith system.”

“It may very well collapse. You might yet war amongst yourselves.”

“But wouldn’t giving our kiith the ship affect the balance of the system?” asked Datlai. “I thought you did not like to interfere with our matters.”

“We have always had a certain control over your ship, except where Tasiin did not allow us to have it, which we respected. However, we.....incapacitated some of your weapon systems when you returned from Outside. Trans-hyperdrive was never worked out. Your ship is not a warship. It affects balance only by giving the smaller kiithid hope - hope that they may seek their own destinies in the stars.”

“But I imagine there are conditions in being given the *Beastslayer*.”

“Yes. You may not engage in war unless your survival is at risk. If you develop trans-hyperdrive, you must give it to the Galactic Council. Finally, if you ever wish to leave your ship, you must give your ship to the Galactic Council. Otherwise, you may do what you wish with the ship. Some of us will always be nearby if you need assistance.”

“Thank you. Not just for the *Beastslayer* but for being here when we needed you most.”

“It was what we could do for those who defeated Outside. We are the ones in gratitude.”

The Bentusi ships began to turn.

“Will we ever see you again like this?” Datlai asked.

“If you ever need assistance, call for us and we will be there. We watch over you.” The Bentusi ships were now starting to move away from the *Beastslayer*. *“All that moves in the Void is easily heard. We will listen for you. Farewell.”*

“Goodbye.”

Bright yellow light appeared before the Bentusi vessels as they jumped to hyperspace. The hyperspace window slid along the Unbound ships, then closed.

When they were gone, Datlai looked at the stars on the viewscreen for minutes.

“Datlai.”

She turned around.

“Tasiin.”

Tasiin slowly opened his eyes, looking at her.

Datlai approached him cautiously, unable to believe that he was awake. “Tasiin,” she repeated, convincing herself that what she saw was true. “I am afraid that you missed the Bentusi.”

“No. I.....awoke during your.....conversation. I heard much of what you said and I managed to catch a glimpse of them departing,” replied Tasiin. “I still am surprised the Bentusi talk to you.”

Datlai smiled, and began to feel tears of joy come. Instead of letting them flow, she held them back.

“I was dreaming.....” Tasiin told her. “About you, Outside, the Bentusi, the *Naggarok* launchers, Hiigara, Kharak.....everything. But it wasn’t one of the Dreams, it was just.....I do not know. It was still long and vivid, but it was.....”

“.....Like everyone else’s Dream as a Sleeper,” Datlai finished for him.

“I do not know what that would be like.....but, perhaps.” Tasiin began to stand up. Datlai could tell he was in pain, his body that had not moved in many days protesting the sudden activity. Tasiin, shaking, still forced himself up. Datlai grabbed him, holding him up in her arms.

“You never had any dream like that other than the Dream?”

“A few, though not as long,” Tasiin replied. “There is one in particular that I.....” He began to try to move, but his knees started to buckle. Datlai steadied him in her hands. He began to move towards the captain chair. He bent down, and with Datlai’s help, he retrieved from a compartment near the chair his book, the one Limandatt wrote their musings in.

Instead of opening it, Tasiin retrieved a paper stuck between the pages and handed it to Datlai.

“I.....feel like sharing it. It was written by a one Vyyk Sjet, a former frigate captain turned writer. He called it a ‘one-minute novel.’ It.....I do not know what to say. Read it and you will understand.”

Datlai read the story - a parable about a man hanging off a cliff. He was intent on saving himself, rejecting the assistance offered to him by those around him. When he finally decided to accept their help, they all had left, and he truly had to climb back up by himself. Datlai could not help but smile a little. She gave the story to Tasiin. “Interesting,” Datlai managed to say.

“The dream I had that night.....I was the one hanging off the cliff and I was crying out for you. And you were sitting on the edge, crying because I had rejected your offer to help,” Tasiin explained.

Datlai hugged Tasiin, holding him Tasiin. “But you’ve changed, Tasiin. Before, you were trying to

turn your back on everything, only you couldn't. You were not like Outside, ever. Now, although you may still try to avoid the crowd, you do pay attention to those who care about you."

Tasiin suddenly tightened up, shaking. "Why did I have to kill Outside? Why.....I never intended harm it, just let it be.....Why did I have to go through so much? I never wanted to make these decisions....." He started sobbing uncontrollably. "*Why?*"

Datlai was surprised by the sudden outburst, not understanding what had caused it at first. Then, Datlai realized simply mentioned Outside had done this to him. She looked into his eyes, at his face, seeing that Tasiin was haunted by what had happened, far more than she was. She held on to Tasiin, letting his tears flow onto her.

"I suppose you don't understand why I am so upset about Outside's destruction," Tasiin said, nearly unintelligibly from the emotions.

Datlai thought about that. She had only heard Outside as a powerful, malevolent voice. But Datlai knew Tasiin somehow empathized with Outside. "No.....I don't," she finally replied. "There are some things about you I don't understand. Then again, I don't think Outside understood everything about you. Somehow, I don't think even *you* understand yourself. But that shouldn't stop you from living. And for me.....with love, what matters is not so much that you understand as that you want to understand.....which I do."

Tasiin looked into her eyes. "You really do love me."

"Yes. I always did and I always will."

".....And you've been through so much for me."

"I went Outside with you."

".....And you would follow me anywhere?" Tasiin asked.

Datlai was not quite sure what Tasiin was thinking about. She looked at him, contemplating, analyzing him. Suddenly, she understood.

".....Tasiin," she began. ".....Is this your way of asking me to.....marry you?"

Tasiin seemed a bit surprised with Datlai's question. But within his eyes, Datlai saw hope and innocence, something she did not see often. At last, he admitted, "Yes."

"Of course I will," Datlai replied. And with that, Datlai kissed Tasiin gently, and smiled. "When do you want to.....?"

"Soon, perhaps," Tasiin answered. "What should we do until then?"

"The Council is holding a celebration at Hiigara, in honor of the Beastslayer project."

"I am not sure I'm in the mood for that kind of celebration. I just awoke from the death of Outside."

I do not really wish to be celebrating over its grave.”

“But, it isn’t just that.....I hear they will have the ships lined up to the Mothership, just like they did with the *Kuun-Lan*.....except not just Hiigaran ships, but ships from.....everyone,” Datlai pointed out. “It will take a few days to get there. There will be enough time to rest and reflect and to tell the others of our.....engagement. Then, we can get the others of our kiith, and.....do whatever we want among the stars.”

“I suppose I have nowhere else in mind,” Tasiin admitted.

“I know, my kiith-sa.”

“You truly find my being kiith-sa amusing.”

“Yes, kiith-sa.”

“I suppose we should set course for Hiigara, then.”

“Consider it done, my kiith-sa, Tasiin.”

Datlai smiled at Tasiin. *This is what being with others mean. Not the voices, but the humor and joy and sadness and pain you feel with those close to you, she thought. How far you have come, Tasiin.*