



The White Beast

Sequel to the Kadeshi Crusade

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Prologue

After the great Crusade of the Kadeshi, Zha Khor, the arrogant young Raider princess and her 'business manager' the brilliant engineer Seejuk Liirhra returned to the Turan Planetoid. It was for the great Raider festivities of the Oathtaking, a cultural celebration that has united the different Houses of the Raiders for many millennia.

Aboard, two rival scions of Hiigara's greatest Kiiths are embarked on a journey to prove their theories about the origins of intelligent life on the Galaxy--the ProtoGenesis theory. It is a journey that begins in the great Planetoid in the search for the origins of the Raiders and a strange prophecy. It ends to the far side of the Galaxy, where the past still lives in the form of a malevolent alien race.

But here, also on the edge of the Galaxy, a new Beast lives...and evolves.

Facing new threats, the Unbound have gathered their ultimate war machines for a showdown.

As two ancient powers collide, Zha and Seejuk are caught in a race of time to save the one thing that can stop them all, the creature called the White Beast.

Part 1---The Mysterious Sword

Aboard the Kadeshi arkship Khar'Nua at The Oracle of Hannon . . .

"This is sacrilege," demanded the Kadeshi priest. "No one can take the Dark Sword off from the Oracle!"

A fearsome statue of the goddess N'ua in warrior armor stood watch over the Oracle along with four other armored warrior gods. Incense smoke from worshipers filled the air, the aroma intended to wake the gods and keep them at peace. Female acolytes chanted in an ancient Hiigaran tongue, their melodies greeting the kneeling worshipers.

The young man in robes asked his companion. "Talk to him, or just give him the stuff."

The companion walked to the priest, and placed his arm around the priest's shoulder. He led the priest to a dark corner. "I am from the KMP, or the Kadeshi Military Provate. You can do a great service to your people and to your leaders."

"Cardinal M'jor's KMP is an abomination to the Faith of all Kadesh. He seeks to strip the gods of Kadesh and replace it with his own---himself," answered the priest.

"Well that is your democratic opinion," said the companion. "The Provate will be announcing the first ever referendum in Kadeshi history, and you can express your opinions there. But in the meantime, we have some offerings for you." The companion gave the priest a bag.

The priest examined the contents of the bag. "Is this a bribe?"

"Consider it a token gift of your cooperation to the service of your people. You know, Father--what's your name again?" said the companion.

"Hurgan. I am Father Hurgan."

"Okay, Father Hurgan," affirmed the companion. "I see better ways your temple can be more a service to your people. The temple seems to be old and decrepit. With some contributions and some help we can provide, the temple can be rebuilt new and clean. It will serve the Great Mother and her worshipers even better than before."

"And if I refuse?" asked the priest.

"Well, the poor temple looks like it's structurally unsafe. The Arkship civil inspectors are going to come soon, give an inspection and they will likely rule the place to be unsafe," said the companion.

"And?" the priest asked.

"We will close the temple down," the companion replied with a smirk.

The priest seemed to give it some thought. He uttered a short prayer. "Forgive me Great Mother, but this is all for Your service." He took the bag and quickly hid it in his robes.

"Come with me please," the priest advised to his guests. He opened a small room that led to the bottom of the Oracle.

"The Great Mother and the Four Warriors watch over this relic of great evil. The mere sight of it can be a curse. To release it to the Outside world would be great tribulation," said the priest. "I pray to the Great Mother that you will be wise in your discretion with the handling of this evil artifact."

Laying in the middle of the room was an ancient musty box with carvings of fearsome warriors intended to deter lookers. The priest placed a key into a lock and twisted it. He raised the lid.

Giirsa Kaalel knelt before the box, and with both hands, he lifted the blade off its rest.

"Magnificent," he said. "Get my equipment, please."

The companion took the bag and gave it to Giirsa. Giirsa took the apparatus and with a soft blue light, the device scanned the two-foot sword.

"I have never seen any metallurgy like this. Not Hiigaran, not Taiidan or anything I have seen from the Unbound. This comes from a new race we have not seen before," said Giirsa.

The priest interrupted them and pointed to the walls. All around them, the walls were painted with fading murals that tell the story of an ancient legend.

"Two millennia ago, a race of demons called the Abomination came to the Gardens," said the priest. "They were more terrifying than the Taiidan Defilers, with dark ships piloted by demons who could sense the winds of the stars. They seek to rape the Garden of its resources, destroy the Kadeshi and blaspheme all what Kadeshi believed. Our ancient heroes fought against the Abomination for years and years, and with the safety of the Gardens and the blessings of the Great Mother, the Abomination was fought to a stand still. Then all of a sudden, like they stopped existing, the Abomination disappeared from the face of the Gardens. All we have left of them after the past eras was this sword, captured by the hero, Hannon. For this it is called the Sword of Hannon."

"This is truly a great find," said Giirsa. "Look at these strange writings all over the blade and the handle. I have seen nothing like this. It's not like any Hiigaran or Taiidan text. These scans will make a three-dimensional recording of the sword, its composition and its writings. Then we can make a complete replica of the sword for a further sword."

Giirsa handed the sword back to the priest. "Is this all?" asked the priest.

"That is all," Giirsa replied. The priest returned the sword to the ancient box.

"I feared that you will take the sword with you," the priest expressed his great relief. "It is a priceless treasure of the Oracle."

Giirsa replied. "It truly is a treasure but we respect your faith and your sacred relics. We only need to make a direct copy of the artifact for our study. We are looking for clues of this ancient race, these demons or abominations as you call it."

"You tempt the Gods," the priest said. "You tempt Fate itself. Do not call upon the names of what has been forbidden, for they may return, for it has been prophesied that they will return in the end of the ages."

"Thank you, Father," Giirsa politely remarked. "We will take your advice."

The priest silently led them outside of the Oracle. Giirsa watched the crowds closely, so fascinated in their steadfast beliefs. They would come to the oracle, kneel on the hard ground for hours and chant. Even with the revelations that their gods were not gods at all, they continued to worship them. They're no different from the Kharakian cults, which had been revived among the despondent Sleepers, even though most of the cynical Firstgen like him would consider them not gods at all, but like the Kadeshi idols, heroes and heroines of an earlier age.

At the Academy of Archeological Research, Hiigara . . .

She would be attractive for a petite young girl, but freckles marred her face, with large lens spectacles whose purpose seemed more to intimidate men than correct her bad eyesight. The spectacles themselves were silvery antiques from an old, steam age era of Kharak, and she had refused laser treatment to correct her eyesight, citing a terrible phobia on anything sharp or hot that would poke her eyes or anywhere in her body. Regardless of the hot and humid weather, she had insisted to wear the thick formal robes, whose skirts reach down to the ankles of her feet. Once in a while, she would trip on the ends of these robes, and the edges of the skirts reveal their wear. But like her stubborn spectacles, she insisted on the dainty robes, because they reflect the scholarly pride of a Sjet, and carried the Sjet shield of arms that every young, Firstgen member have in their uniforms as they study in its exclusive private schools.

"Welcome the new Library of Academy of Archeological Research," said the librarian politely.

"My name is Kuo'ran Sjet. I am new in the Academy, and I have come here to research on the Khar'nakian artifacts," said the dainty, petite girl with a high pitch and an insecure note.

"The artifacts from the Kadeshi Khar'nak derelict? Hmm, that's something new," the librarian said. "The real artifacts are still kept with the Kadeshi but we were allowed to have faithful, three-dimensional models of the artifacts. These simulated models are in hologram form and can be found stored in the core memory modules at shelf eight. But you do need some authorization to view them. Do you have authorization?"

"Err . . . yes? ..." said the nervous girl.

"...yes . . . what? ..." replied the librarian. "Do I know you somewhere? Your name sounds familiar."

"My name rhymes with Karan. You know Karan Sjet. She's my auntie," said Kuo'ran. Kuo'ran was eagerly ready to raise that secret weapon to impress her way out of any situation.

." Auntie who? Karan Sjet?..." said the librarian.

"You know...Karan Sjet of the Mothership...the one whose head has all this wires hooked to ship..."

Kuo'ran used her dainty hands to make representation of wires coming out from her head.

"Oh, that Karan!" said the librarian. "I'm sorry I'm just this offworld Taidanii girl they hired to fill this labor shortage and do all the boring tedious menial jobs you Kushans seemed spoiled to do on your own. By the way, I got news for you, girl, having a relative with a celebrity status is not considered an authorization by Academy rules."

"Hold on for a second," Kuo'ran said. "Do you have a comlink here?"

"Be my guess, use mine." The librarian gave her a handset.

Kuo'ran punched a series of buttons on the handset and soon she was having a friendly conversation with someone the librarian perceived as important. "Here, this is for you." Kuo'ran gave the librarian the handset.

"Yes..yes sir...right away sir." She blinked as she answered the call. The librarian turned her attention to Kuo'ran.

"Looks like you got your authorization. For young student like you, you seem to pull a lot of weight here. All I need for you now is to fill this form, and you're on your way." Kuo'ran happily and quickly filled the form, and the librarian gave her the core keys.

She found section 8, picked the cores and found a comfortable holographic terminal to settle in. She inserted the cores into the slots.

The holograms came to life. For Kuo'ran, they were astounding, almost real. It was as if she was actually viewing the precious relics in the Khar'nak derelict right in front of her. She pressed a few forward buttons, and one relic shifted to another relic. This will take a long time to search, so she began to punch a new search algorithm. The object was to search for artifacts that had certain strange symbols on them.

The search narrowed to a series of artifacts. One of them was a metallic tablet with inscriptions on it and some drawings. One of them seems to be a helmet and another, a suit of armor. But the final one had her nearly jumping out of her chair.

"Magnify!" she shouted, almost disturbing the other students in the same hall.

The hologram expanded the crystalline model of a galaxy. The strange cryptic symbols flashed, trying to send a message that no one could barely understand but only for its users long returned to the dust. The model began to

mark boundaries, and then began to flash a series of symbols---words---next to representations of stars. Not just stars---star systems with habitable planets.

The boundary covered and the database listed over 2,000 star systems from the center to the outer laying regions of the Galaxy. Kuo'ran sat back on her chair. This was a map of an empire that was more than 10 times larger than the Taidanii Empire was at its peak, or any projection of the ancient Hiigaran stellar empire. It stretched well into the unknown, unexplored frontiers, the Rim, the Galactic Arms, the Clusters at the outer edges.

She jumped up and down with glee. What started as a small but ambitious school project and term assignment could lead to one of the most remarkable archeological discoveries since the Daiamid formed the XenoGenesis theory during the Time of Reason. No, this would be bigger. The name Kuo'ran will shine among celebrities such as Mevath Sagald, her idol, the one that discovered the Guidestone. But who were these people? Their language was neither Hiigaran nor Taiidan. Nor did it match any language within the massive Taiidan Catalog of Races.

Kuo'ran had called her own pet theory as the ProtoGenesis theory. Here, she contends that races, including Hiigaran and Taiidan, came from an anatomically hominid life form, evolved from a Homeworld much distant from Hiigara eons ago. Sometime after that, the life form spread throughout the stars, and as they expanded, formed the first true galactic empire, but which itself died or split up, long ago, into different races that have evolved separately since then. Here she found, was perhaps the first such evidence of a super galactic empire.

Kuo'ran giggled as she illegally downloaded the model into a backup core bank she smuggled in her bag.

* * *

In a beachfront at a sea in Hiigara...

Wearing only a swimsuit, Zha splashed the Hiigaran turquoise blue waters. Despite the increased gravity, this was so much fun to be on a planet's sea body. The nearby star was so bright, the light must be burning through her skull. The salty waters, hmm, they had a briny taste in them and when she peeped down, all sorts of weird creatures crawled and swam. She tried to catch the creatures with her hand, but could not catch the ones who swam so fast. She saw the creatures that crawled beneath the sand, and they reminded her of the most treasured Raider delicacies.

She reached down and grabbed the wormlike creature. She lifted it up and then eagerly bit into it. It's briny flesh squirmed in her mouth. Mmmm...the feeling of something alive and juicy in her mouth with its subtle and complicated tastes excited her senses.

"What are you doing? Seejuk looked at her sternly. Zha raised her watery eyes to meet his, her mouth too full to say anything.

"You just don't go around eating the wildlife like that," Seejuk lectured. "We have not studied every biological species in this planet, so we don't know what the effects are to different sentient biologies--Hiigaran, Taiidan, Kadeshi or Turanic. Back in Kharak, in the Majiiran Sea, we used to catch a molluscoid creature called the Urok-kasa. We kind of stake it through its body while its still alive then roast it over a makeshift fire. Ummm that was delicious. I bet the Kharakian firestorm would not affect the sea life over there."

His advice was unheeded as Zha searched the shallow waters for more edible sea life. "Zha, don't forget that you don't know how to swim. Do not go into deep water because I'm not going into deep water just to fetch your drowned carcass!"

Zha raised her hand in acknowledgment, another unfortunate sea creature squirming in her mouth.

Seejuk smiled. He has not been this relaxed for a long time. Along the beach, some members of the Mule and her task forces were also taking a needed break. For all, this was the first time to set foot on Hiigara, and for many, like Zha, the first time to set foot on a habitable planet. There was so much curiosity and talking about the experience.

A hover vehicle suddenly came and parked near the Mule's shuttles. A tall young man stepped out, with robed servants carrying his bags and boxes that seemed to be ungainly and complicated equipment. He studied the Raider shuttle for a moment then stepped towards the beach.

He announced loudly, "I am looking for former Black Star Lt. Commander Seejuk Liirhra and his protegee, Her Royal Highness Segura Zha Khor, Princess of Turan."

That caught Seejuk's attention and he quickly ran to meet the new man. "Coming, coming!" Zha shouted as her arms carried a load of unsavory watery creatures.

"Who would you be? Mr.---" asked Seejuk.

"My name is Giirsa Kaalel. I am sent here in behalf of the Academy," the young man said, standing so straight, like a military cadet.

"Kaalel, eh?" Seejuk wondered. "So you must be the one the Academy has notified me about. Welcome Giirsa. We have been expecting you. By any chance you would know anyone working in Kaalel Software?"

"My father is chairman and chief executive officer," Giirsa admitted.

Seejuk was taken aback. Zha, munching on a live snack, was puzzled about Seejuk's response. "What's the big thing?" she asked.

"Nothing much, except that his father is perhaps the richest man in Hiigara now, building an immense fortune in developing control software for ship computers," Seejuk replied.

"That is fantastic," Zha observed, her mouth swallowing another live creature. "I like rich people that has a lot of resource units. We certainly could use them."

"I prefer not to talk about my father," Giirsa said.

"I see," Seejuk said. "One of those young ones trying to prove themselves and emerge from the shadows of their father. Just great."

"Is there anything wrong?" Giirsa asked.

Seejuk turned to Zha. "His father, his family is also Kiithsa of Kaalel. They rule that rich, influential Kiithid."

"That's double fantastic," Zha replied. "More strings in high places. We can use that."

"Forgive me, for I am rude, may I ask you who you are?" Giirsa turned to Zha.

"You called my name, did you?" Zha said.

"You..you...you are the Highness, the Princess Zha?" Giirsa asked.

"The one and only. I want to add, I hate being called "princess"...it is so antiquated.... you know what I mean..." Zha replied.

"No I don't know what you mean, your highness," Giirsa said. "Forgive me once again, your highness, I have seen your pictures in the journals and telenews, but I did not recognize you without your cultural costume."

"Oh you mean those silly robes..." Zha interrupted herself to take a bite out of living sea creature. Then she shoved the creature to Giirsa's face. "You want one too?"

Giirsa frowned and moved his head back. "Thank you, your highness, but I will pass." He turned to Seejuk. "You seemed concerned, and I sensed it about me."

"You look seventeen or eighteen," Seejuk said. "Firstgen, or as we say, First Generation born in Hiigara. I requested--and expected---someone much older, like someone who traveled with the Mothership and was born in Kharak."

"Why is my age an issue? Age does not seem like an issue to Miss Zha here," Giirsa asked.

"Age is not the issue, but being a First Gen heir of a Kiithsa running one of the most influential Kiithid around, that is an issue," Seejuk explained. "That is a big issue and I'm not a baby sitter. You know what happens if something happens to you, what your Kiithid is going to do to me? What's going to happen between the Kaalel and the Liirhra? I am not ready to take that responsibility."

"Will you take that responsibility if I show you this?" Giirsa reached to his bag and pulled a document. "This is a Hiigara Interstellar Bank note for 100,000 resource units. This is recognized by all leading Taiidani Republican banks."

Seejuk stared at him with steely eyes. "You are going to bribe me?"

"Not bribe you," said Giirsa. He turned to Zha. "I want to hire. I want to hire your highness Zha here and her ship."

Zha's mouth was agape, her eyes dwelling on the bank note. "100,000 RUs?"

"100,000 RUs, yes," Giirsa said. "More than enough to buy that Outpost you sorely wanted. As you see, I checked up on you and your finances. We understand clearly the cost of maintaining a fleet, and your desire to rebuild the Outpost you lost. If we succeed on this mission, we can pay more to compensate, and I can even arrange with the Liirhra to build it for you. Imagine, the best engineering resources the Kushans can offer, all at your feet, Miss Zha. I bet these resources are superior to what you may find with your Raiders."

"...compensate...more?" Zha thought. Zha turned to Seejuk. "Seejuk, we got to take this job or I'm not speaking to you. I need this job. We Raiders have worked for far less, for worst people, doing far more dangerous jobs." She turned to Giirsa. "What is our mission in particular?"

"You will know when the time comes," Giirsa said. "I believe an issue has arisen that requires you to return to the Turan sector? Yes we found out that too. Kaalel Soft has its own private intelligence branch and we know everything. We need to hitch a ride with you to the Turan sector. Then you will know more about our mission."

Seejuk laughed. "We are bringing the scion of the Kaalel Kiithsa to the heart of Raider territory? You are absolutely insane, Giirsa Kaalel. And you are crazy too, Zha Khor, if you are going to agree to take Mr. Kaalel here to your homospace."

"But that is exactly what I am counting on," Giirsa said. "Miss Zha's position as a Segura Princess of an Inner House shall protect me in front of the Council of Inner Houses. Will you, Miss Zha?"

"Well I..." Zha wondered.

"You sure like living dangerously, Zha Khor," Seejuk warned.

"I guess I do..." Zha concluded.

"Why are you going to such enormous risks?" Seejuk said to Giirsa. "What is all this for you?"

"When you defected to the Kadeshi flagship the Khar'nak, you know you had an opportunity to change history. This is the opportunity I face now. This is my chance to put my mark in history..." Giirsa replied.

"...and that is?" Zha asked.

"You will only know when I am ready to tell you," Giirsa said.

The sudden arrival of another hover vehicle interrupted their conversation. The door opened and bags slammed at the ground. She lifted her long dainty skirt as she planted both her feet at the ground.

"You!" Giirsa pointed accusingly at the girl. "You...You....what in hell's name are you doing here!"

"You! You!" Kuo'ran pointed accusingly at Giirsa. "What's your explanation in being here!"

"I have come here on the request of the Academy as a representative of Kiith Sjet. We heard that you Kaalels are planning some sort of discovery expedition and we Sjets do not plan to be left out of any expedition the Academy will undertake," Kuo'ran explained.

"You know her?" Zha asked, munching on another sea creature.

"Kuo'ran Sjet. My rival in the Academy, a desperate struggling student who vainly strives to surpass my superior academic record but ultimately failed," Giirsa said.

"You bribed the teachers, Mr. Giirsa," Kuo'ran said. "That's the only way you got those grades. You will never pass anything relying on your own brainpower, Mr. Giirsa."

"Allegations, all unfounded allegations, Miss Kuo'ran," Giirsa countered.

Zha walked to Kuo'ran in her bathing suit and an armful of slimy creatures. She took one of the creatures and offered it to Kuo'ran. "You hungry? Want a snack?"

"EEK!" Kuo'ran shouted. "Who is this girl? What is she doing here?" Kuo'ran brushed her shoulders.

"Miss Kuo'ran. She's the Raider ship captain," Giirsa explained. "The one and only legendary princess of the Raiders..."

"You are pulling my leg again, Mr. Giirsa," Kuo'ran said. "You won't fool me this time. I am an expert in alien cultures and races, with top grades in class, and this girl here is not the Raider Princess Zha. No sir she is not!"

"I'll wager you're ready to make a bet, Miss Kuo'ran," Giirsa offered.

"I would if I have money right now, Mr. Giirsa," Kuo'ran said.

Zha stared at Kuo'ran intensely, examining her. "You don't have any money? Mr. Giirsa here has offered 100,000 RUs for our services. I am indeed the Zha Khor you speak about. If we were to take you along, what sort of compensation can we expect?" Zha expressed the sentence in her best business voice, a lesson Seejuk had been gradually teaching her.

"As I expect, Giirsa must bribe his way once again. As for payment I do not know, but expect this, while the Kiith Sjet does not bribe like the Kaalel, we will always pay gratefully for any service honorably rendered to them," Kuo'ran replied. "I will talk to my family after this."

"Hah," Giirsa leered. "Compared to the media empires the Kaalel owns, the Sjet is a bankrupt Kiithid."

"The Kiithid Sjet is honorable, but the Kiithid Kaalel is corrupt and rotten," Kuo'ran retorted.

Seejuk smiled. "You know you remind me of someone, Miss Kuo'ran Sjet. I have seen pictures of Karan Sjet in the Academy in Kharak and you look like a very young Karan Sjet. Same spunk too."

Kuo'ran was ready to pounce upon that fact. "That is because Karan is my dear aunt."

"That's quite interesting. That makes you and your family, Sjet-sa," Seejuk observed. "That means I must be doubly insane if I'm going to carry both the spoiled firstgen scions of the Kiithsa of Sjet and Kaalel into Raider homespace."

In response to Seejuk's resistance, Kuo'ran took a portable comlink and pushed a series of buttons.

"I see again your need to push your famous family weight around," Giirsa grinned.

"Here, this is for you," Kuo'ran handed the portable comlink to Seejuk.

Seejuk stiffened, his eyes fully alert and in awe as he heard the voice in the comlink.

"Yes..yes..Kiithsa Matron Karan...yes... I understand...but the Raider homespace...that will be most dangerous....no...yes...I understand that you fully trust me...no...yes...I understand that the mission is urgent...the future prestige of the Sjet will depend on this...yes..no...of course not...I will not refuse Kiithsa Matron Karan...you can count on me, Kiithsa Matron Karan..." At the end of the conversation, Seejuk handed the comlink back to Kuo'ran.

Seejuk appeared bewildered, shaking his head. He told Zha, "I just talked to Karan Sjet directly on the com, imagine that. The Mothership brain herself. I can't believe this."

"I can't believe I'm going to do something extremely stupid," Seejuk said. "Again."

Part 2--The Prophecy

"Father?"

"I'm right here, my child." His image beamed with light, and an aura surrounded him.

"I thought you were dead." Zha knelt before the image. "Is that really you?"

"I will always be with you, my loved one," said the image. "You know me by what you feel in your heart."

"Father?" Zha reached out to touch the ethereal image, and that was when she opened her eyes. She stared at the walls that made up her bedroom, all lined with photos of planets, diagrams and pictures of starships and fighters, and a few photos of some Taidan pop idols. There were too many unspeakable things that lay on the floor. Other junk littered the shelves and tables. The room could be a museum on its own.

Too many dreams lately, she thought. A few were nightmares, but many of them were of her father. She remembered the purification ceremony aboard the Kadeshi mothership. Did that drug really stoned her mind permanently? She shook her head, then wiped her eyes. Her skin was sweaty, and her face was pale.

She got up and put a shirt on. She sighed as she left for the ship hangers. In the locker rooms, she slipped on a flight suit. A new customized Arrow awaits her, a cheap surplus model she had bought during the stop at Hiigara. Beside it were other custom hotrod projects---a Triikor with an engine in a state of disassembly, and a Fiirkan with its cockpit chair removed for a replacement. They were all her toys. She examined the components in the Triikor and the Fiirkan before she entered the cockpit of the Arrow. The cockpit had removed the original Kushan pilot seat, and in its place, was a new seat molded to fit her petite physique.

On the back was the liquid membrane module, which will interface with her helmet. While she herself does not require the liquid membrane apparatus, there are others in her people who have evolved to become addicted. The liquid contains a drug that heightened awareness and kept the pilot awake during high G maneuvers. The liquid was also oxygen rich, and kept the blood fully supplied to keep the pilot from blacking out. The combination of the drug and the concentrated oxygenated fluid also gave pilots a immense "high"---the brain became hyperactive. The euphoria and the kick the liquid gave left many Raiderpilots dangerously addicted to it. There were other drawbacks, including hallucination and high irritability. For these reasons, the Taidani had forbidden the use and research of similar environments for their pilots.

She was too young to be addicted, but her depressions and dreams had driven her to use the liquid environment more often. She slipped on the helmet and clicked a button on it. The liquid began to fill her helmet, submerging her eyes. She coughed a bit as the liquid entered her lungs, replacing the air she breathed. The liquid began its kick and suddenly it felt like she was aware of every detail in the craft. Everything suddenly became so clearer now, and she laughed with the euphoria. Her Starfarer senses kicked in and the liquid enhanced it. She can hear the stars singing and the winds of the cosmos passing, ebbing in waves and rushing in tides. She could not cry, as the tears in her eyes quickly dissolved and mixed with the liquid. This was all so beautiful.

She waved her hand, and the flag man acknowledged that the rails were clear for take off. She pulled a lever and her back suddenly hit the chair as the rails pushed the fighter hard, faster, faster, and flung it into the blackness. She ignited and the Arrow took control of its momentum and its flight. She rolled, testing the feel of its controls and she

looped the fighter. The Arrow felt so responsive, so precise, as if every control was linked to her muscles, every vibration and sound from the craft linked to her nerve endings.

This was her element she felt, her escape. Here, she felt like one among the stars and the winds that fill the void between them. Here she can hear their songs so vividly, their melodies lapping one another endlessly like an orchestra that would never stop playing. Here, oddly enough, she felt closer to her father, who was renowned as a fighter pilot even among the best of the Raiders. He would often leave the safety of his capital ship to personally lead strike craft formations in a small fighter. He saw no boundaries, no limitations on what he can do. In victory, he would perform all sorts of acrobatic stunts with his fighter for all the crews in his ships to marvel.

She barrel rolled, then lifted the nose for a loop to loop, executing one of her father's famous stunts. Will she ever live to his expectations? Will she be able to fill the shoes he left? She banked her fighter into a tight turn, then rolled into a spin, then came out again, boosting.

"What is going on?" Seejuk asked as he entered the bridge.

"It's the captain, sir," said the officer in charge. "She's off again testing her new fighter."

Seejuk watched Zha do more acrobatics on her scout. She had been more edgy and moody lately, he thought. Was it part of growing up? Despite their adventures together, Seejuk felt that inside Zha there was a vacuum. She had no family but her ship and her fighters. He could not be a new father for her, but he tried in his own unique way. Maybe she's a spoiled princess, but she was also a sad girl who suddenly had to grow up. Running a carrier, a task force and the future of her House on her shoulders, that was a bit too much for a girl of her age. But she hanged on. She hanged on, yes, but not without a personal cost Seejuk had started to perceive. For a brief moment she was happy in the beachfront at Hiigara during a much needed shore leave. There, she forgot who she was, and she beamed as she played in the water.

Maybe she missed living in a real home, something that had permanence. In the few years, she lived with the Mule, and the carrier has been around the galaxy and back. That's more like the life of a homeless nomad. She had lost her Outpost home, and they needed to return to the Raider Council, where in the presence of the Inner Lords, she must make a formal request to rebuild that Outpost. For a Raider House, an Outpost signifies validity in addition to its prestige and practical uses. Without an Outpost, the Khor sector in space faces threat from trespassers and mining poachers. Mining ships would slip to the sector and mine illegally. Rivals among the Raiders would attempt to make territorial claims against the sector.

Seejuk's thoughts were suddenly interrupted. There was an unwelcome visitor to the bridge. "What's going on here?" said Kuo'ran. "I'm trying to get some sleep, but it is so hard to do it in this messy bucket of bolts. The rooms are so dirty and musty. The floors needed to be desperately cleaned. This ship must be very old, not like the new carriers the Sjet have in their fleet."

"You know, Miss Kuo'ran," Seejuk replied. "If the facilities in this ship does not meet your requirements, you can go back to the Sjet fleet and have them bring you to where ever you want to go."

Kuo'ran toggled her large glasses. "Ships with the Hiigaran flag are still not allowed to enter interior Raider homespace such the area that surrounds the Turan planetoid. Hiigaran ships are only allowed currently to visit territorial space of outer Houses that have a commercial and passage treaty with Hiigara. I need a Raider vessel to take us where I need to go. Besides, I want the opportunity to meet and talk to the great Seejuk Liirhra."

"Me?" Seejuk was surprised.

"Yes, you, Mister Seejuk Liirhra," Kuo'ran explained. "You are a legend in the Academy. You opened up a vast treasure of relics from the Kadeshi. Without you, we would not be able to open up study on ancient galactic history. We are pioneers, Mr. Seejuk, but I am only a pioneer following the steps of an even greater pioneer---you."

"Me?" Seejuk asked again.

"That is why your personal expertise is needed for my work. When the time comes, I will let you know," Kuo'ran.

There was another presence in the bridge. "So when is that, Kuo'ran," asked Giirsa. "Playing more of your mind games? The least you can be is to be honest with Mr. Seejuk and Miss Zha. But no..."

"How dare you," Kuo'ran flashed her temper. "How can you talk hypocritically about secrets---Mr. Giirsa Kaalel. You---the Corrupter of the Academy---you...you got more bones in your closet that one day, not even your rich father and your bribes will be able hide the stench from."

Giirsa laughed, deliciously taking pleasure at seeing Kuo'ran indignant. There was no greater pleasure in life than to take pot shots at this young Sjet prude.

"So what are you going here too?" Seejuk said. "Is the accommodations too dirty and antiquated for the fine likes of the scion of Kaalelsa?"

"Your accommodations are sufficient for my purpose, Mr. Seejuk," Giirsa replied. "I cannot sleep because of my excitement in the discoveries that await us. My theory of ProtoGenesis will not only be proved but we will be able to draft how the galactic civilizations was before the ancient Hiigaran Empire. We can begin to find where our ultimate origins came from."

"YOUR THEORY?...YOUR THEORY?" Kuo'ran shouted. "It is MY THEORY. I made it and YOU STOLE IT. You peeped into my desk, my locker. You stealer, you cheater... That is what you expect of any Kaalel..."

"You nearsighted imbecile," Giirsa snarled. "I am beginning to lose my patience with the likes of you, Miss Kuo'ran, to suggest that I---I, Giirsa Kaalel, Heir to the Kaalel Kiithsa, to the Kaalel Software Enterprises---the greatest media and software company Hiigara will ever know---will ever steal an idea from a blind fly like you? Your claim is so foolish that it does not deserve an intelligent response."

"For your information, ladies and gentlemen," Seejuk interrupted, "I wrote a theory like that in my journals when I began my catalog of the Kadeshi artifacts."

"Forgive me, Mr. Seejuk, but I made the theory before that in my study of Taiidani ancient history," Kuo'ran countered. "I made a term paper out of it and you can find the paper in the Academy records."

"I publicized this theory in the Hiigaran Discovery Journal, published by my company Kaalel Publications, in my analysis of ancient artifacts found in Hiigara itself," said Giirsa.

"Who are you calling a nearsighted imbecile and a blind fly, Mr. Giirsa? I will report this incident to my aunt and Kiithsa matron," Kuo'ran threatened.

"The slightest sign of trouble and you retreat to the skirt of your matron. Now as you expect the entire vast networks of the Kaalel financial and media empire should be scared of Karan...Muhahaha," Giirsa laughed sternly.

There was a voice in the comlink. "This is Zha Khor in Alpha One to the Mule, come in please. My sensors have a sighting."

"This is Seejuk at the Mule, we hear you. what do you see now? Whatever it is, it's still beyond the Mule's sensor range."

"No hostile energy signatures, I'm flying in for a closer look, Zha here in Alpha One."

Seconds later, her voice cracked through the comlink. "This is Zha Khor at Alpha One, I got visual contact. Looks like a large ship being pulled by tugs. No, it looks like a base. I'm sending you pictures right now."

Seejuk stared at the screens and smiled. "Looks like one of our assignments came early. Zha, meet your new temporary Outpost. Remember we signed with the Somtaaw for mining rights? Well, they're ahead in keeping their bargain. They bought an old Taiidani base so they can use as a temporary base of operations, and which we can use for the same purpose as a base for the Mule. The base was supposed to have been retired but it appears we can give it a new lease in life, that is until we have a formal Outpost constructed."

"How come you did not tell me---oh I remember now. I am so forgetful lately," Zha said. "Thank you."

"We need to escort the base and the Somtaaw tugs to the Khor homespace," Seejuk said. "Up to it, Zha?"

"Yes..." her voice turned to excitement. "I will you meet you in the bridge, Seejuk" Zha said.

Seejuk turned his attention to Kuo'ran and Giirsa. "Well, we have work to do here, and I would appreciate you two take your squabbles elsewhere."

"This is not over yet, Miss Kuo'ran," Giirsa warned as he left.

"Hmmp!" Kuo'ran said, waiting for Giirsa to clear the corridor before she left the bridge herself.

* * *

The old scribe Salim of the Inner House of Flo'karr poured over the ancient Scriptures. For eras past, the House of Flo'karr had been the caretakers and the recorders of Raider history. That was a task impossible, as the Raiders spanned the whole breadth of the Outer regions, including the Rim and all of the Arms. The Raiders was, and had been for generations, spanning the galaxy before the great Taiidan encountered them in -475 BL in the Turan sector. They had different names then; some called the Nomads, the Dispossessed, and even the Scourge, but it was the name the Raiders that stuck best of all. The nomads liked what the Raiders name meant and adopted it. Later, when the Taiidans kept referring the Nomads as Turanics, the name Turanic became stuck in the Raiders' social mind. During the peak of the Taiidan empire, a planetoid base was established in the Turan sector to symbolically represent the Raiders in a united face to the Emperor and court of the Taiidan Empire. This base became ceremonially, the "homeplace" of the Raiders. It became a place where the Taiidans negotiated with the Raiders, a place where they exchanged technology and other goods---a front to represent what is all of the Raiders to the known civilizations of the Galaxy.

But it is not the true homespace of the Raiders. Their origins would lay in a past darker and ancient, one that is more lined in blood than all the piracy and crimes the Raiders had committed.

The Inner House of Flo'karr was elected to run the Turan planetoid base, and they had done so for eras. Among the rivalry of the Houses, the Inner House of Flo'karr was a safe political choice. They were a House of intellectuals, historians and engineers. They distanced themselves from the power plays and political manipulations among the Houses. The Flo'karr's management of the planetoid gave the base a sense of neutrality and became even a safe haven for those fleeing the repercussions of such political manipulations. In time, it has become the neutral ground to hold the Grand Council for both the Inner and Outer Houses, where all Raiders meet, discuss and plan their futures.

Near Salim was his young assistant scribe and daughter, Zhura, who he hoped someday will succeed him in the recording of time and the preservation of the acts, deeds and songs of the great Raiders. "You ever believe in the Prophecies in the Scriptures?" He asked.

"I do, Father, but there are many among us now who do not. The Scriptures and the Legends are so ancient now, that many of us no longer believe that it was true. That everything was a myth."

"If they do not believe in the Scriptures, then the core and the soul of the Raider spirit will be gone," Salim warned. "For it is the past that made us and binds us together. To forget our past is to forget about being a Raider. We must not forsake our past. We must not forsake who we are."

"You know the Prophecies, Zhura?"

"I know them by heart, Father."

"You know about the coming of the Nemesis, Zhura."

"I know that, Father---."

For the Promised Ones, once exiled return to their Mother's world, the Great Star will fall. The Stars will weep, the winds will carry their sad song. For the time of Tribulation have come for those who wander, the Feared Enemy, the Nemesis will tame the Beast and hold the key to the Deliverer.

---that is the Prophecy of the End, Father, the end of our race, the end of the Raiders." "But Father, many scribes among our House say that this prophecy has been fulfilled. Our future is safe."

"The Promised ones are the Kushans, who have returned to their Homeworld, Hiigara."

"The Great Star is the last Emperor of Taiidan, who fell with the return of the Exiles."

"The weeping stars are the Taiidani Imperialists, who have lost their war."

"The Beast came, and we had our time of Tribulation as the Beast destroyed much in our homespace."

"The Somtaaw who released the Beast are the ones who destroyed it."

"It is over Father, we are in a new age of enlightenment," Zhura concluded.

"No, my child Zhura," Salim sternly rebuked her. "Do not listen to the other scribes. Listen to the true meaning of the prophecy."

"The Prophecy lies unfulfilled, but it will see its true fulfillment soon."

"The Promised ones were the Protectors of the Gardens, who have returned to the Homeworld of their Mother, as promised by their Great Mother."

"The Great Star was the ship of the Mother, the Khar'nak, as it plunged in the sky of Hiigara."

"The Stars that weep and the winds that carry a song--these are not the Imperialists. They mark the return of the Starfarers of our old legends, those who can listen to the songs of the stars and the melodies of the cosmic winds."

"The Somtaaw was never the Nemesis. The Nemesis was our ancient enemy, the ones who enslaved our Ancestors. Long time ago, the slaves made the Oath of Baruk, swearing strength in unity, and with the help of the great hero Baruk, they slain the Nemesis and cast themselves free. That was the beginning of our race, the Raiders. That was the beginning of our freedom. Every year, every House of the Raiders must recite the Oath of Baruk, to remind themselves of the bondage that disunity brings. It is because of this Oath, we Raiders survive united as a race, despite spanning the galaxy in nomadic tribes. Disobedience to this Oath is the end of the Raiders. There are those who do not believe in the Nemesis, of those who do not believe in the past, and of those who do not believe in the Oath. They lay the seeds of our destruction."

"We, the Scribes of the Inner House of Flo'karr, are the defenders of this Oath. While we do not have the great fleets of the House of For'lym, the strength and courage of the House of Du'ran, the piloting skills of the House of Harkk'hah, we have the Faith and the Wisdom renowned of the Flo'karr, and that is our Sword."

"The Nemesis shall return, and I do not believe that we have seen the last of the Beast. The greatest of the Beast still lies out there, more powerful than the Naggarok, and the taming of the Beast suggests that the Nemesis will have the power to capture this Beast, or make it its ally. If such a thing happens, the combined power of the Raiders cannot stop such a foe, and the Age of Darkness will fall upon us once again."

Zhura would have dismissed all this as the rambling of a cynical old man. But Salim was her father, and he was once the most renowned scribe of all the Flokarr and to all the Raiders. She would need to study this, but even if what her father says is true, how can she convince the rest of the Flokarr and bring this to assembly of the Council? This was so against the mainstream interpretation of the Nemesis prophecy. They would laugh at her. Zhura could imagine her frail frame shaking at the hoarse laughter of the strong men of Du'ran.

* * *

Aboard the flagship, the Atonement,

X'on stared through the magnificent sphere like portals into the dark spaces beyond. The circular spiral disk of the galaxy lit the background of his view. Above his head was the dim glow of a nebula, the birthplace of young stars. Silhouetted against the glow were the legions of his armada.

The formations of Mantas bombers swept by, followed by formations of Skate fighters and Bat scouts. The Mantas and the Skates had sweeping wings, slits where the cannon ports are, and a structure that ends in a short tail. The Bats had no tails, but their wings were just as imposing, and twin cannon ports extruded from the edge of the wings.

An officer entered the bridge to make his report. "So what now, Centurion," X'on asked. "Our Legions are ready. The Penance, the Forsaken and the Unforgiven are all in place. We have pinpointed the location of the Beast," said the Officer.

"And the Beast, can you be certain of its strength?" X'on asked.

"It is many generations removed from the Naggarok Beast. We do not know of its temperament, but its power is incredible. It has successively defeated many of our attacks, but this time, we will not be as careless and may have the means to temporarily immobilize it through a massive dampening field that affects gravity and energy fields. After that we can install the nodes."

"I applaud the ingenuity," X'on said. "You are dismissed. Prepare to execute my plan on my word."

In the docking bay of the Atonement, a pilot among the legions, rushed to his Manta. As he sat, the instruments came to life in an instant from his sheer presence. Square metallic patches suddenly grew in his skin and soon all the interfaces were complete.

With a thought in his mind, the rails propelled the Manta, followed by a Skate. Flung at high speeds into space, the pilot in a flick of his mind, lit the engines, and the Manta coasted into formation with a long line of fellow Mantas. "This is Angel Zero-Four, I am in position, Angel Leader." The Manta was united with him---he was the brain, and the Manta was his body, pilot and ship like one creature.

The Skate behind him has lit its engines and joined Demon wing. "This is Demon Leader to Angel Leader. We have your formation in sight. Watching your backs, Angel Wing." Bats moved swiftly overhead.

In his seat, his dark visor reflecting the console lights, the pilot felt more alive in his ship. It was as if he was born to fly and navigate the stars. The Manta was one with him and him with the Manta. He could feel the presence of the Others, the great Legion of Hosts. He could hear their Songs, and all strong, singing as one unified voice. Ahead of him was the great Pool of Stars, the Galaxy where all life started, where all the Farers came. He could hear their Songs, the great choir of the Universe, an opera carried in the cosmic winds.

Part 3---The Fragments of the Beast

Seejuk returned to the makeshift laboratory inside the Mule, one of the sole places of refuge he had in the ship from the constant bickering of the two Kiithsa scions. The lab was used to keep specimens and relics for analysis.

Something caught his attention. He almost forgot about this experiment. It was shortly before the Kadeshi began their crusade, and the Naabal engaged a Generation 7 fragment of the Beast. The Mule came to the battlesite and retrieved nanotech samples from debris in the battlespace. They found the G7 fragments but the discovery of the Kadeshi ships in the area overshadowed that event.

The G7 fragments were kept in a quarantine chamber. He had placed plants and animal samples inside the chamber to observe and document Beast nanotech infection. Predictably enough the sample plants and animals turned fiery red, with the characteristic red moldy patches all over. Instruments documented the events, and the data was stored in the banks. It can be useful in developing a new anti Beast vaccine, or even---perish the thought---a controllable Beast virus that can be used as a weapon. No, no, the Imperials tried that, and the experiment blew in their faces. The released Beast mutation ravaged both Imperialist and Turanic homespaces. One of the victims was Zha Khor herself. She was orphaned, her home outpost destroyed, when a mutated Beast fragment attacked the Khor base.

Since the experiment was over, he should consider disposing the fragments. Not one single nanobyte virus should be left alive. G7 was one of the fragments released from the mad Imperialist experiments, and it had every sign that it would become a more virulent and powerful Beast than the Naggarok source. Fortunately, that Beast was nipped in the bud thanks to the Naabal efforts. Beast reports from the known civilizations, or "knownspace" as it was collectively called had become less frequent. The Daamid report on the Beast coincided with the Taiidani Republican report, declaring that the Beast threat was truly over, and that fragments, if they still exist, would not even pose a threat to the outlying regions. His experiments to create a new Beast vaccine and to domesticate the nanotech virus had become moot. The Beast technology was defeated. The Beast was truly no more.

There was a glow in the quarantine chambers. "What the?" Seejuk exclaimed.

The test plants and animals were all alive. The automatic feeders faithfully kept the creatures fed. The plants were growing, blooming flowers, and the animals scurried happily about, like they were never infected at all. Seejuk had the temptation to just get in and grab a sample with his bare hands, but in the back of his mind, that would not be the wise thing to do.

"Computer, lower the scanners," Seejuk uttered distinct voice commands. A mechanical arm lowered an apparatus that he had brought in from Hiigara to this ship. So much of the equipment here were imported from Hiigara, as Zha and the survivors in the Mule were not very scientifically competent. "Scan all Samples".

Under an ultraviolet let, the skins of the samples glowed. What was once red patches had turned to white and crystalline. Are the fragments dead? No, analysis of the patches showed that it was still active. "Magnify a single Beast virus."

Under extreme magnification, a Beast virus appeared like a monstrous robot worthy of its name. Small as it was, the nanotech virus was a masterpiece of engineering, unmatched by any civilization in knownspace. Each was a self contained unit, with its central processing module, memory banks, mechanical arms and a tiny power source whose energy was derived originally from breaking down carbohydrates. The CPUs were linked through a subspace network

that communicated through mesonic fields, and the collective CPUs would become a massive parallel computing unit that would evolve house a "Self"---a sentient entity. Each Self was networked with each other, creating a larger collective mind that would ultimately be known as the Beast. Energy was transmitted throughout the network in the same fashion. The nanotech would not only infect living flesh, but also computer systems, regardless whether it is silicon, germanium or bionic based. The Beast nanotech would even harness the energy in a ship's engine to power all its Selves, and their nanotech components. As he had observed, the nanotech viruses would evolve into more specialized forms. Some types are optimized into infecting organic matter, some types are optimized into infecting circuitry. But regardless of specialization, their CPUs were always linked to form a Self, creating a unity between flesh and metal.

A sense of evolutionary imperative, the need for propagation and survival above all else dominate the Beast sentient programming. For all its capabilities and nature, it was basically an animal.

Once, there was a veteran scientist and engineer named Kaleeth Somtaaw. He was in the Kuun-Laan when they destroyed the Beast. After that, he wrote a paper suggesting that the Beast fragments can evolve, not just in power, but in intelligence. With intelligence, comes wisdom and benevolence, and finally the appreciation of life itself. He was laughed at, to even suggest some good will come out of the Beast creature. But he held to his theory. Given the rate the Beast nanotech evolves, a new Beast species will arise.

The plants seemed normal. The animals looked happy. Yet they still have the Beast virus in them. He studied earlier scans made, like the ones taken when the fragments shortly arrived to the ship. It's not the same anymore. The Beast nanotech has evolved several generations, quietly here in the lab for all the time they were preoccupied with the Kadeshi Crusade. And it continues to evolve, but the question is, what?

"Seejuk, come to the bridge, please." It was Zha's voice in the comlink.

This was all fascinating, Seejuk thought. He wished he had time more to study this. There was so much to learn, yet so little time. The lab space was also filled with Kadeshi and other ancient relics, each holding as much interest as the contained Beast virus. Each relic was a window to new past that yearns to be discovered, each with an exciting story to tell. To think of it, he was born as a Kharakian Desert redneck; now he was in the threshold of discovering the hidden past of an entire galaxy.

He returned to the bridge. Zha, Kuo'ran, and Giirsa were all there. "This is momentous" Zha said. "For the first time since my Outpost was destroyed, we finally have some kind of a base in the Khor homespace."

Zha pointed to the screens. The Somtaaw Tug frigates were finally putting the old Taiidani base in its final location. "You should have been, Seejuk. What were you doing?"

"Sorry, Zha, I should not miss this for anything. But I was really distracted with some research." Seejuk replied. He clapped his hands as the Tugs released their hold on the base.

"It's official, we got a base!" Zha shouted, her arms in the air.

"It's a start I guess, I won't be so excited about an old creaky Taiidani base," Kuo'ran said snobbishly.

"Give the girl a break," Giirsa said to Kuo'ran. "This is not about the base. This is about opportunity. Yes, I heard about your agreements with the Somtaaw to mine and use the Khor homespace. The commissions were lucrative, but why didn't you mine it yourself, Miss Zha?"

"As a warrior and mercenary race, we don't have miners as efficient as the Somtaaw. Nor do we have miners with the agility to take on the risky asteroid belts," Zha answered. "Not even the House of Res'coom, which had the best Raider miners, could match the Somtaaw. They got sensors that can spot oxides and crystals our sensors could not find in a thousand years. They have a higher success rate of yield and extraction per ton than Raiders'. Their efficiency surpasses even the best Taiidani mining operations. They can mine and process exotic materials my own resources could not. It would be better for them to make money for me. I don't even have the resources to buy or make factory or processing ships. I do have my own resources, and manage to license crystal processing technology from the Somtaaw as part of the bargain, although I understand I can obtain crystal processing technology elsewhere."

"I understand Miss Zha," Giirsa said. "But one of these days, the Somtaaw will drain you dry. But then, of course, you may be an old rich lady by then."

"And one of these days, I will have my own top class mining fleet, Mister Giirsa," Zha said. "But one cannot learn without a master. The Somtaaw are masters. One day I will learn how they do it, and it's best I learn it watching them right from my own homespace. The Somtaaw is using me, but I am using them too. We all know that."

"Bravo, my dear lady," Giirsa said. "Spoken like a wise and old Kaalel, even if you are a Raider."

As they talked, the Mule settled into a parking orbit near the base. "Zha, you do the honor. Take a shuttle, and dock with the base."

Zha raised her arms and gave a victory sign with her two fingers, as she danced and hopped down the corridors to the docking bays. "It is good that I have some supposed Kushan big wigs to share the dignity of the occasion," Zha said.

The shuttle left the Mule and made the first ever successful dock in the newest base in Khor homespace since the destruction of the last outpost. Zha greeted her first ever step on the base with a large stomp. "So there!"

"So this is how a Taiidan base looks like from the inside," Kuo'ran said. "Are we going to stay here? My belongings are still back in the ship."

"I bet this is the first time you have ever been inside any base outside of the Mothership," Giirsa said to Kuo'ran. "Don't worry. This is also the first time for me, or to be this distant from Hiigara. We may only stop over here, but we're not going to stay here long."

There were some technicians and engineers around the hanger. "Mostly Taiidani recruits," Seejuk said. "Hired by the Somtaaw to maintain the base, on Somtaaw payroll."

"That's quite generous of them, Seejuk," Zha said. "To maintain this base would sure cost a lot of money."

An officer welcomed in the dock. "Commander Seejuk, the Princess Segura Zha Khor, we welcome you to your new base. I am Lt. Majur, formerly of the Taiidani Republican 6th Engineering Corps. While I did not participate in the building of this base, as I was too young then, it was our Corps who built this place and maintained it ever since. I suggest that you come to the command center of the base. We have another Turanic fleet coming our way."

"Raider ships?" Seejuk asked as they were being led to the command center. Kuo'ran and Giirsa followed. "You know anything about this, Zha?" Seejuk asked.

"Not anything I am aware of," Zha replied.

Inside the control center, the staff greeted with them with a bow. Seejuk looked around and noticed the below average number of staff needed to adequately run a command center. Many of the terminals were not functional as well. "There is a lot of work here to do," Seejuk observed.

"Segura," the officer said to Zha. "We have an incoming Raider fleet!"

"Hostile?" Zha asked.

"Parade formation. No weapons charged," the officer said.

"Sounds more like someone is coming for a courtesy call," Zha observed. "It looks like another Lord class carrier. Ship identification codes match that of the Raider carrier Soran."

Just then the comlink screens become active. There was a vaguely humanoid face, covered by an insectoid exoskeleton. The exoskeleton appeared to be like a battle armor, and the transparent glaze that covered the head was submerged with liquid. The being was apparently breathing through the liquid membrane module attached to his battlesuit.

"Lower down your weapons and surrender y'ur asses, 'cuz we're going to board you!" said the creature.

"HA HA JUST KIDDING!" the creature said next. "Is the Segura Zha Khor there? Tell her it's her uncle, Zhoan! I have not seen the little insect for a while."

"Who is he?" Seejuk asked of Zha. "He kind of looks like a Skaar in that suit."

"He's not really a blood relative of mine, but he was a close friend of my father. He is Zhoan of the House of Du'ran. I have not seen him for years. The last time I saw him we were still in the Outpost shortly after the Beast ran amok," Zha answered. "The Du'ran are the best armed soldiers of the Raiders, and the exoskeletons are their trademark. They are often used as boarding parties aboard Thief corvettes. You won't want these guys boarding your ship."

Zha moved up to a comlink screen. "Hey, Uncle Zhoan. It's me, Zha! Long time no see!"

"Damn you, Zha! You grew up to become a pretty little thing without me!" Zherak said. "I am damn sorry to hear about Zerun, your father. He is a damn noble warrior and he will always be in my songs. But we heard about the base and your adventures with those Kadeshi freaks. I'm glad you're still alive and was able to kick some of their butts."

"I know you're going to ask me what I'm doing here, Zha," Zhoan explained. "I got multiple reasons. I heard that you're going to have a new but temporary base in the Khor sector, so I came to look. Actually, I got business to transact with the Somtaaw ships here."

"The Somtaaw?" Zha wondered.

"Yes, I got the Imperials 'war criminals' they placed a big bounty on their heads for," Zhoan replied. "The Somtaaw had requested that we rendezvous in their new base at the Khor sector. Hey! I was surprised they are putting a base here. You probably worked out some contract with them. It would be a good opportunity to meet you again..."

They were interrupted with communications from one of the Somtaaw tug frigates. "This is Captain M'aanar Somtaaw of the Tug frigate, Jakuul-to, addressed to the Raider captain of the Turanic carrier Soran."

"Somtaaw, this is Zhoan, captain of the Soran. We have the persons you placed a price for. Do you have our money?"

"Do you prefer a deposit in a Taaidani bank? Or do you prefer raw ingots of Mirandium?" the Somtaaw captain asked.

"I prefer the raw ingots," Zhoan answered. "We shall complete our transaction in the Khor base." He turned to Zha. "Bring out your welcoming party, Zha! I am going in."

Moments later, a train of chained Imperialist criminals, badly beaten and tortured, were led to the cargo hold of a Somtaaw Heavy Tug. A worker pushed out dolly after dolly of raw Mirandium ingots and placed them in the cargo hold of a Turanic Ion Array Frigate. Zhoan inspected the ingots. He no longer had the glass bowl helmet that covered his head. Instead, he had a big black visor across his eyes.

"It is damn good to see again, Zha!" Zhoan's body and battlesuit was humongous compared to Zha's, whose diminutive body looks crushed from the hug of his giant arms. "Damn you look good yourself, and I see that you got a mighty damn fine carrier out there backed with a good task force." He laid her gently on the floor.

"So Uncle Zhoan, when did you become a bounty hunter for the Somtaaw?" Zha asked.

"And when did you started trading with the Somtaaw? Them greedy bastards!" Zhoan replied. "We go where the money flows. Them Imperialists are so bankrupt and unpopular now with our people, and it costs more to house them for what they gave us. These Imperialists were responsible for a dozen attacks on Somtaaw mining convoys. When the Somtaaw laid a generous price on their heads, I saw a natural business opportunity."

The Somtaaw captain saluted Zhoan, his face with a slight disdain to the Raider captain. "I appreciate doing business with you, Captain Zhoan."

"Don't forget, Somtaaw, bring more ingots because we're going to deliver more heads soon," Zhoan said. "Put a price on anyone's head, and Zhoan and Company will deliver." He turned back to Zha. "You have not introduced me to your new friends."

"Forgive me, Uncle Zhoan. These three are Kushans. He is Seejuk of the Kiith Liirhra, Kuo'ran of the Kiith Sjet, and Giirsa of the Kiithid Kaalel. Seejuk is my second in command and my business manager. I owe a lot to him."

"You seem to be a fine healthy piece, Kushan!" Zhoan made a resounding pat on Seejuk's shoulder. "I am glad to meet your acquaintance." Seejuk gulped at the sight of Zhoan's intimidating exoskeleton.

Zhoan grabbed Kuo'ran's frail body and lifted it, letting her screaming and struggling. "Damn, this Kushan feels light and weak. Men should want some more meat around in their women's bones. But she is loud, and she's got spunk!"

"I should let you know that my relatives are important figures in Hiigara!" Kuo'ran threatened.

"Na-na-na! And spoiled too!" Zhoan noted as he dropped her.

He turned his next attention, Giirsa. "You look like a Taaidani banker," Zhoan said. "I hate bankers." Zhoan displayed a long sharp blade in front of Giirsa. "The last one who tried to trick me, got it long right in the neck," Zhoan said as he made a cutting impression on his neck.

"I assure you sir," Giirsa replied, a bit shaking. "I am not a banker."

"So don't act like one," Zhoan said, flashing his knife. He turned to ask Zha. "By any chance, Zha, would you be heading back to Turan?"

"Yes, I would like to meet the Inner House council to make a request for a formal Outpost. This base is just temporary until I get things going." Zha said.

"Do you know the Festivities for the Oath of Baruk are coming up?" Zhoan asked.

Zha looked at him and smiled. "I have not gone since my father died. The last time I went was with him. Somehow after he died, I drifted away about being a Raider. No one really came to help me, except for some Kushans, like my partner here, Mr. Seejuk Liirhra."

"Regretfully no one could help you," Zhoan explained. "The Khor sector was remote, and everyone had a major problem dealing with the Beast at that time. Everyone was concerned about their very survival. When the Beast variant ravaged through the Raider sectors we lost a number of outposts. You were lucky, some of the Outposts never had survivors. The bitterness still lingers. I am more than happy to send the Imperialist criminals behind the Beast experimentation to the Kushans and Republicans. I enjoy the bounty on their heads, yes, but inside, I take an even deeper satisfaction. Enough! The Festivities are coming! It is a time of great joy. During the Oath, you can bring your request to rebuild your Outpost in front of the Council of the Inner House."

"Festivities?" Seejuk asked.

"Yes, festivities," Zhaoan explained. "This is where we honor the Raider spirit. This is what binds us as a nation. We do not know where we truly came from, only that our legends say we were once slaves. We do not know if we all belong to one race. We are spread throughout the galaxy. Our warrior, nomadic and mercenary natures bring us to contact with many races, many of whom have people that joined the Raider cause. We Raiders are practical people. We do not see the inherent value of a person's race. We only see their competency. Anyone who is competent, who has the heart and courage, who yearns to be free, can be a Raider by swearing the Oath in front of the Council. We in our history, has adopted so many of the best throughout the galaxy. So we are many people under a single warrior ideal. The Oath brings us to our beginnings to the original slaves, who may in fact range a gamut of different races. Against tyranny, we made the Oath of Baruk, the Oath of Unity as we also call it, and with this unity, we brought down the tyrants that enslave us. It is the Oath that binds us, and we celebrate the Oath that is the key to our freedom and unity."

"Our Intelligence branches taught that the Raiders were a single race," Seejuk said.

Zhoan elaborated. "Kushan, any race as old as ours, as spread out as ours, as open and practical as ours, are bound to pick up a few things along the way. I heard your history. Other than your ancient heritage in Hügara, you Kushans and the Kadeshi are like babies. We have existed long before the Taiidans 'discovered' us. We have seen much of the galaxy, and struggled with the events. We are not the most powerful or the most technologically advanced, but we survived. We survived with our freedom. We are most proud of that. This is all recorded in the ancient journals kept by the Inner House of Flo'karr."

"The Flo'karr?" Giirsa and Kuo'ran asked simultaneously and looked at each other.

"Yes, the Flo'karr. If you want to know about the ancients, you need to go to the Flo'karr," said Zhaoan.

"This is most interesting," Giirsa said. "Then it is the Flo'karr we seek. Can you take us to the Festivities and let us meet these Flo'karr?"

"Yes, I need to meet them too," Kuo'ran said.

"Ah, I am not sure if I should bring outsiders to the Festivities. Only few outsiders have ever been invited to the Festivals," Zhaoan said. "I would think that Zha here would cover that for Mr. Seejuk Liirhra here, but you two?"

Giirsa placed his arm around Zhaoan's huge shoulders. "Think of it this way, Mr. Zhaoan, Kiith Kaalel pays handsomely. Our Kiithid has more money and influence than the Kiithid you just did business with, the Somtaaw. There is no risk, since all you need to do is take me to the Festivities and set me up to meet with the Flo'karr. I want you to be my personal tour guide. I think Zha here has been a bit out of touch, and you will probably do a lot better for an inside track with the Inner Houses."

"Hmm, this seems to be an easy job," Zhaoan said. "No risk. Easy money. We Raiders always have a price---it's meeting that price."

"It is always like you, Giirsa, to bribe your way into everything. I wonder how you will succeed without your father's money!" Kuo'ran argued.

"You realize that the price is double because I have to bring two people, you and that pretty lady here," Zhoan said.

"You don't have to bring Kuo'ran Sjet here," Giirsa said. "She's a pain in the neck that plagiarize my work."

"How dare you call me a cheater! You are the one who copied my work!" Kuo'ran shouted. She turned to Zhoan. "I insist you that you bring me along to meet the Flo'karr."

"Nothing is done without a price, Miss," Zhoan explained.

"The Sjet will meet the Kaalel's price. Favors for the Sjet means favors for Hiigara. There are a lot of intangible favors we can do for you," Kuo'ran said.

"Such as?" Zhoan asked.

"Her family is big time with Hiigaran politics," Seejuk explained. "It can mean they will owe you some favors that may come handy in the future."

"That's right, that's right!" Kuo'ran said.

Zha interrupted. "Just bring them both along and let them see the Flo'karr. They're paying me too to bring them to the Turan planetoid, and I'm getting tired of their bickering."

"Ha ha ha," Zhoan laughed. "The boy and the girl are both determined. I can sense that. I like that. You will all enjoy the festivities. There will be sports events, like fighter racing, hand to hand combat, singing, and all sorts of dancing. It is a time of great merriment."

"I'm going to join the fighter races. I got three fighters being modded," Zha said.

"I will be joining the hand to hand combat contests," Zhoan said. "Test my skills and strength against the very best!" He raised his armored, mechanical arm and shook his fist. "Aaarggh!" he shouted.

"Zha, there will be a convoy from the outer Raider sectors heading to the Turan planetoid. We will take both our carriers and rendezvous with the convoy. You all get some rest first, it's going to be a long journey," Zhoan said.

* * *

"This is Angel Leader to Angel Wing, we got enemies ahead." Inside the Manta, instrumentation was basic, but Angel Leader could sense the stellar space---every cosmic ebb, every asteroid, every solar flare and wind---better than any

instrument. Each was born to sense the stars beyond their physical senses, and each was born to control a fighter that is linked directly to their minds. Their prey hid inside a nebula, whose disturbances and clouds obscure the best instruments. But not to the senses of the Farers themselves.

"I could sense them...this is Angel Leader to the Atonement. Is the Enemy also part of the Others? Confirm our target. Our target was supposed to be a Beast fragment."

"This is X'on aboard the Atonement. Yes, the target is a Beast."

"I sense the power of the Others in it, why?" Angel Leader asked.

"This is something new. If the Beast has evolved, this one has acquired the power of the Others, our power," said X'on. "Our objectives remain the same. You will only readjust your tactics. Our enemy will be more powerful than we thought. Beware of the Selves that can sense you and the Others."

"This is Angel Leader to Angel Wing. The Selves can hear us, the Selves can hear us. Cover us Demon wing!"

The Mantas banked, as the pilots sense the enemy formation ahead hidden in the nebula clouds. The Heavy Interceptor class Skates of Demon Wing loosened their formation, overtook the Mantas of Angel Wing as they headed where they perceived the enemy formation was.

"This is Thunder Leader to Angel Leader, we're joining the party," The Bat light fighters jockeyed their wings to signal each other. Then each fighter banked out of their formation, and dove into the enemy formations.

"Our Selves need Peace. Leave us. Leave us be. Or we shall destroy you... "

Beast Super Acolytes, infected from past encounters with the Bentusi, emerged from the sensor fog. But instead of the red patches that infect a typical Beast craft, the patches in the Super Acolyte were white and crystalline.

"The Sirens have been warned. So you shall be destroyed..."

Inside the Skate, a pilot twitched, the only muscle movement he could do. His fighter was linked to his mind, and with a quick thought, it rolled just as an ion beam burned precariously close to its belly. But the enemy Beast Acolyte moved just as quickly, averting a collision in fractions of a second.

"You all have the Presence. Why do you attack the Selves? We hold nothing against you...we did nothing against you..."

Another Skate quickly flicked away, but the beam from an equally quick Beast fighter connected, and fragments of the Skate hurled in all directions. Pain! The Self in the Beast Acolyte felt great pain in the final moments of the Skate pilot.

"Stop this insanity. Stop the madness against the Selves".

The Bats' looping maneuvers found them in the rear of the Beast Super Acolytes. A Bat sensed the direction of an Acolyte, and multiple pulse ion beams quickly cut an Acolyte into a ball of fire. The pilot sensed a deep anguish in the final second of the Self. But he gathered his discipline. Everyone, both the pilots of their side, the Others, and the Selves from the Beast entity, could sense the throes and pains of death of each other.

"This is X'on aboard the Atonement. Do not be distracted by the pain you feel with each other. This is what you expect from the cycle of Death. Keep with your vision. We must capture the Beast."

"This is Demon Leader, we got more Beast boogies headed our way." As Angel, Demon, and Thunder wings dogfight deeper through the Beast defenses, Beast Triikor interceptors and Taiidan based Heavy Corvettes formed a second zone of defense, ready in wait to ambush the wave of attackers. Flashes and explosions color the clouds of the nebula where the Beast was hiding. The guns of a Beast corvette ripped apart two Bats, before a third Bat emptied a full load of pulsing ions into its nozzles of its rear engine. The corvette spiraled before it disintegrated.

"This is Angel Leader, we have visual contact of the target, we have visual contact of the target." Looming ahead of the Manta was a dark planetoid, covered with white crystalline patches. Some of the patches rise steeply like giant crystals, taller perhaps than some mountains in a planet.

"Be-ware, you are in the abode of the core Self." The voice cracked all over the squadron's comlinks. "You dare...dare...violate my sacred abode... I only want peace...."

"This is Angel Leader, beginning attack run..." The formation of Mantas disbanded, then barrel rolled to begin a diving run. From the surface of the planetoid, huge plasma balls were thrown at their direction, exploding and sending shockwaves. The Manta was buffeted from the explosions but kept its course.

Angel Leader felt a sharp pain as a piece of a Manta's wing blew by. A Beast Triikor rolled by, the wing fragment coming from the blown Manta of Angel Leader's wingman. Angel Leader felt the exhilaration of the Beast Self in the Triikor, and its instinct to kill as it settles its nose direction on the Manta. The Triikor blew into fragments as a Skate raked it with multiple pulse ion beams.

The surface of the planetoid loomed ahead, all encrusted by a white crystal, like dried salt on a rock. The red lights flashed and the guiding tone has begun.

"Launching Torpedo 1." A bay door opened and a large cruise missile slipped out. Its engines ignited and its tail became a comet of fire.

"Launching Torpedo 2." As a second torpedo was launched, the first torpedo joined a wave of torpedoes launched from the surviving members of Angel Wing. Their white ghostly trails headed to the planetoid's surface. Four torpedoes completed the Manta's payload.

"Nooo...", a horrified voice crackled and howled through all the comlinks. "The pain! The pain!."

Angel Leader pulled his nose up about the same time as the other Mantas did, a wave of ships committing a U-turn then headed straight back out to space. Wave after wave of torps smashed the planetoid's surfaces, sending massive explosions and shockwaves that broke the crystalline surface. Angel Leader felt a wave of sharp pain from the Core Self as the torps tore the surface.

"Nooo..."

Then there was silence. As the Mantas blew past layers of the nebula cloud around the planetoid, the dogfights were no longer there. The surviving Skates and Bats joined with the Mantas in formation.

"What happened?" asked Thunder Leader.

"I don't truly know," said Angel Leader. "My orders were only to deliver the torpedoes." The nebula cloudspace was littered with fragments of dead fighters and bombers. Angel Leader counted the ships in formation. There was only less than half of the original complement. The Beast defenses and its fighters were terrifying. They could fly as fast and anticipate as well as any Farer pilot could. But that's because this Beast selves were capable of seeing deepspace and hearing the winds as well as they could. It is no wonder why the Overlord, X'on, wanted its capture or termination. The White Beast if left unchecked, can become an enemy to the Nemesis.

A voice cracked in the comlinks. "This is X'on, your great leader. I have great news to all the brave pilots. The White Beast has succumbed. It has surrendered its will to us. It has agreed to our unconditional terms of surrender. It is now in our control."

Angel leader felt a great wave of emotion rise from his heart, and felt it with all the other wingmates and the other wings. It was a wave of exhilaration and triumph, of great joy and excitement. But that wave was short lived, for another wave of emotion rose. It came from the core of the planetoid, the core Self of the White Beast. It was one of great sadness and pain. When Angel Leader felt the wave of remorse, tears quickly filled his eyes and ran down from his visor.

* * *

Kuo'ran watched from the windows of the dining hall. It was an awesome sight--a sight never seen by any living Kushan.

The starspace was lined start to end with a living row of ships. There can be hundreds of them, ships of all persuasion, a great convoy of hosts. Along the sides, Lord class carriers protected the convoy. There were rows of the magnificent Ion Array Frigates. The frigates would normally close their panels, but for the occasion, they were unfolded in their full glory like a parade. Rows of Bandits interceptors, Brigand, and Thief corvettes escorted the other transports in parade formations. There were new fighters, corvettes and frigates that Kuo'ran could not identify; they could probably be new ship types that were seen by Kushan eyes for the very first time.

Kuo'ran smiled. This was all magnificent. There was a sense of history being made here. Kuo'ran felt a tap on her shoulder and she turned around.

It was Zha, holding a rolled blanket and smiling. "Beautiful isn't it?" she said. "When I first saw this when I was much younger, I could not remove the image off my mind for days."

Kuo'ran shook her head. "This is truly a great sight. I never knew or see the Raiders in a light like this. Back in the Academy, we were all thought that the Raiders were all sickos—no offense. But that was our perception of your people. But all this, this was so beautiful."

Zha smiled and giggled. "Seejuk taught once we were all weirdos too. He changed his mind quickly. But I do sense that you are sad, frustrated and angry. I have never seen anyone as angry as you are. Is it because of Girsu? Do you really hate him?"

"It's not him personally. I just don't like what he stands for," Kuo'ran said. "I hate what everyone stands for. Do you know what it feels like to be born in a famous family, one that has a strong social responsibility? You have to live up with that, living under other people's shadow?" Kuo'ran sobbed a bit, her eyes slightly wet. "It's been difficult. Very difficult to live up to the Sjet name and the shadow of being part of the Sjetsa family and a famous relative. Somehow I think I envy you, you being so free to roam around the stars like that." Kuo'ran's hands were shaking.

Zha placed one of her hand on Kuo'ran's head and took Kuo'ran's shaking hands with the other. "I cannot understand what you feel, but I do know that you are in great pain. Things will unfold for you, some unexpected and in ways you didn't wish, but it will all turn out right in the end. Just hang on, things are going to be fun." She folded Kuo'ran's hands.

Just before she left the room, Zha asked, "Are you going to be all right?"

"I guess I will be," Kuo'ran answered. "I will go to bed later."

Kuo'ran turned her eyes again at the view of the Raider convoy, the starspace lined from start to end, of hundreds of ships, carriers, transports, fighters and frigates, their ionic trails leaving long glowing lines in the darkspace. The sight of an all powerful Raider armada would have terrified other races, but she smiled. They're all going home, she thought, and they're going to have a wonderful celebration. She will be there to watch it all.

Part 4—The Festivities

Aboard the Turan Planetoid...

It was the time of the Festivities, and it was the opportunity for the Flokarr to gather the stories and tales from all the numerous Houses of the Raiders and record them in song and poem for all their children to hear.

But Zhura, following the quest sought by her father, had another purpose. As Flokarr scribes interviewed and downloaded all the recent tales of the Raiders, she focused on incidents that occurred in the Frontier sector, a sector of space not even touched by the Taiidani during the height of their Empire. Beyond the Frontier lay the great Abyss, the vast space between the Galaxies, where there is nothing but a few star clusters and where Dark Matter reside. Dark Matter is the primordial matter left over from Universal Creation, and it can harbor no life, so no life can exist in the Abyss. But can a civilization resource and live on Dark Matter?

One of the interviewed was a Res'coom miner. The Inner House of Res'coom had the richest mining fleet among the Raiders. Like the shipbuilding Soo'nan, the religious Ra'huum, and the intellectual Flo'kaars, the Res'coom deviated from the traditional Raider philosophies and way of life as mercenaries and pirates. They chose a more peaceful way of life, preferring to mine the gases and the asteroids among the stars. Instead of mining into the Inner Galaxy, they are attracted by the untouched immense resources, in the Frontier sectors in the Outer Rim of the Galaxy, where they can often mine in peace. As a peaceful Raider clan, they had minimal military resources, and often relied on their closest allies, the House of For'lym for protection of their trade routes. The For'lym has the most powerful Raider fleets, and they guard the trade routes and the mining spaces of the Res'coom, who paid the For'lym protection money.

The Res'coom mining ship is a unique one. It is shaped like a giant sphere with huge engines on it. The sphere bristled with antennae for far reaching sensors to detect precious ore, gas clouds and asteroids. The armor is thick, but it is unarmed, the miner being only equipped with a mimic generator for defense. The large sturdy engines and its fuel tanks gave the ship enormous range for traveling in long journeys, and the life of a Res'coom miner can be a lonely one. It contained storage tanks used to keep the ore in a liquified state, which was then brought to the Res'coom processing ship. The processing ships themselves were ungainly moving factories in space—almost never one looked alike from each other. Recently they have found a way to process crystals, using a modified Raider salvager to obtain the crystals.

But the Res'coom were also secretive. They do not disclose their mining territories not even among the Raider houses. They are only willing to share the design of their mining ships to only a few of the Houses, and none of their processing secrets. For that, their relations among the other Houses were poor. Many of the Houses were more willing to negotiate with Taiidani mining firms, and lately with Hiigaran mining enterprises like the Somtaaw. Most Houses would also prefer to use the more available Taiidani Resources for their own local mining than a Res'coom miner, or choose to use the Taiidani Salvage Corvette for tug uses, rather than a Res'coom tug.

Zhura understood before hand the extent of the task needed to pry secrets away from the Res'coom miner. She sat with the miner in a cozy bar. The miner had already taken a few heavy drinks. "You said you were attacked by whom, and where?"

"You know, lady, you look cute," the miner said in drunken stupor. "You said you're going to buy me another drink."

"It is on the house," Zhura said. Most of the bars aboard the Turan planetoid were owned or controlled by the Flo'karr. They supplied valuable income that allowed the peaceful Flo'karr to finance their studies. It was also a great way to obtain information and hear rumors. "But first you have to tell me what happened to you. Your mining ship carries all the marks of a heavy attack."

The miner's eyes were all red and the stench of his breath was heavy. "Promise me you won't tell anyone?" The miner staggered about in his chair.

"I promise," Zhura replied with an insincere smirk.

"We were in the Frontier sector 34B. As usual, we were just scouting for gaseous clouds and belts. We saw an asteroid belt..." the miner hesitated.

"And?" Zhura passed another drink.

The miner took the drink. "...they were mimics... and they turned into Raider ships. But they were not Raider... for a moment I saw something, something that is not like a Raider."

"Impossible, no Raider will attack another Raider. That area was supposed to be uninhabited. It is too far in the range of other star voyaging races..." Zhura objected.

"But that is the truth. I have the scans here in my personal tablet." The miner handed her a portable terminal tablet. Zhura pressed a button and its screen lit up. "These energy scans are not Raider signatures," said the miner.

Zhura observed the scans. "They're not Raider ship signatures. Mimics pretending to be Raiders. But who?"

"I don't know," the miner said. "I have reported the incident to the For'lym, but they insist it's another Raider House. They're not willing to confront the possibility of an unknown, quite advanced race out there that may threaten the Res'coom mining territories and trade routes, and a race that they cannot handle. It's all political. The Res'coom will get scared and pull out of the sectors. The For'lym will be embarrassed and the Res'coom will cancel all protection contracts. The For'lym will lose money. It all boils down to that."

"We were attacked deliberately. We hid. If it were not for our own mimic capabilities, we would have been killed."

"Can I borrow the tablet?" Zhura asked.

"Can I get another drink?" the miner said. Zhura waved to the bartender, and the miner flushed down the next drink quickly. "Can't refuse a pretty lady. Just remember to return it before I leave." The miner appeared close to being knocked out.

When Zhura returned to the studies room, her father Salim was still there, reading and taking notes, still avidly pursuing his theory. "I have some information" she told him.

Salim stood straight on his chair, looking attentive. "Let's hear it dear."

Zhura began. "I have been taking note of an increasingly number of disturbing incidents along the Frontier sectors."

"The Frontier sectors are supposed to be uninhabited. There is no sign of an Outpost or habitable planet. That region of space is stark." Salim said. "How is this related to our findings? We are looking for the return of an ancient civilization, the return of our ancient enemy."

"The number and caliber of incidents suggest the presence of an armed force there." Zhura showed a diagram of the sector with red spots indicating where the incident happened. These areas are frontier borders, pretty much beyond would be the Abyss. The Ahagon Prophecies forecasted that the Nemesis must return from the Darkness. It can only suppose that they meant the Galactic Abyss. If there is an armed force there, there must be something to back them up."

"That's not all," she said. "This tablet contains scans of mimic fighters that attacked a Res'coom mining vessel. Holographic projection is not perfect. We can use an algorithm to filter out the holographic frequencies and come up how the ship would look like without the projection. We don't have the technology to do this in real time speeds, but we can use it to analyze past evidence."

She plugged the tablet interface to a terminal and downloaded the data. Her screens displayed the mimic fighters, all having the Raider appearance. "They look like Raider ships, but they are not Raider ships. Their energy and exhaust signatures are not the same. I am filtering out the holo wavelengths."

Slow minutes went by, as a line scanned the images back and forth, back and forth. Every passing scan, the old image began to be filtered out, and a new image began to emerge. The blocky Raider forms gave way to a sharp sleek winged silhouette ending with a tail. Ports for weapons were embedded on its smooth form.

"We now see the true form of the perpetrator," said Zhura.

"And it is the Devil's ship," said Salim.

"What exactly do you mean? Father," she asked.

Salim took out some old tablets that contain ancient memory. He turned one of the tablets on, and scanned for pictures. "Here," he pointed out. It wasn't a photograph but the pictures were hand drawn.

"Our ancestors were slaves, and did not have access to equipment. One of them recorded events of the Liberation by sight and hand. It was a great task to do it all by sheer hand." Salim raised his own hand, shook it and stared at it. "The time of Liberation was the time when our race was forged, when our race became free. Swearing by his oath and leadership, Baruk led the slaves and gave us freedom. The ones who recorded it by hand, would become the founders of the Flo'karr. It is this spirit that we keep."

"In this pages you see that during the time of Liberation was the time of the Great War of the Heavens. The Nemesis who enslaved us and defied the gods. They wrought a terrible war that nearly destroyed all life. See the pictures here.

They are hand drawn but in great detail. They showed ships, called demons here, filling the skies in great numbers, rising to challenge the gods. If you look at the ships closer under magnification, Zhura..."

"I see, Father, they look like that ship."

"No Raider alive has ever seen a ship of the Nemesis," Salim said. "We have long thought that their demise was complete. Look at the writings on the ship you scanned, and match to the writings in this ship."

"I see, they are similar too," Zhura observed.

"Yes, we may now have evidence of the return of the Nemesis," said Salim. "We need to convince the Council when it convenes for the Oath taking."

"This is all too circumstantial, Father. The Council would require more than a hazy photograph with holographic filter extrapolation to convince them that the Nemesis have returned. They believed that the prophecies have already passed, and there is no threat from the Nemesis. Many don't even believe the Nemesis ever existed at all, and the stories were all fairy tales. I would need stronger evidence than this, Father."

Salim sighed. Zhura was correct. "But we still have to try my child," he said. "Imagine the storm that will come to our people if they are not warned."

* * *

Aboard the Mule...

"There it is," Zha said, pointing to the screens. "The Turan Planetoid, ceremonial homeworld for the Raiders." A large asteroid loomed, structures pocking the surface with various structures. The place has become the ceremonial gathering for all Raiders to renew their Oath. Formerly a mine, the planetoid has been hollowed; its core filled with a living city. What started as the site of discovery by the Taïdians first became a planetoid-based outpost, and then a major port that symbolized the Raiders to the known Galaxy. Elected to take care of the Planetoid is the Flo'karr, and whoever has the responsibility, also has the responsibility as the mediator for disputes among the Raiders.

The scene was breathless for Seejuk, Giirsa and Kuo'ran. Ships by the hundreds of all kinds, were parked in rows extending for miles from the planet in straight lines. The Fleet Intelligence estimated in the size and number of ships, starting from the carrier task forces, missed it by a magnitude. Small satellites blinking red lights serve as markers where the huge ships can park. Ahead of them, the carrier the Soran has settled, its fighter escorts have withdrawn and docked with the ship, its frigate escorts settling near its side. Most of the Mule's own frigate escort was left guarding the Khor mining base, but two Ion Array Frigates escorted the Mule as an act of ceremony.

The comlink screens flashed with a face. "Welcome, the Segura Zha and all representatives of the House of Khor. Welcome to the Gathering. Welcome to the Turan Planetoid. Please follow the parking instructions for your carrier." The Mule settled into its designated parking spot, and the two Ion Array Frigates settled close to it. Towards the adjacent parking spots, they could see more carriers, and even major capital ships.

"I swear," Seejuk said, "You got Destroyer and Heavy Cruisers class ships. I never thought the Raiders have them."

Zha explained. "Oh some of the Houses do, but these ships are not popular. Few are actually built by the House of Soo'nan, but some of them were bought from the Taiidans, and our modified Taiidan ships. Because they're expensive, they hardly see combat. Generally they're just for ceremonial purposes, what other Houses use to show off. Besides, the number of Destroyers, Cruisers, Carriers or anything beyond a Frigate is regulated by the Council according to the Treaty of Houses. Each House has a quota on the number of major ships they are allowed to build. To go beyond that quota, you need a special dispensation from the Council. This is to prevent one House from becoming too strong over the rest. That is why to build an Outpost, one has to request a permission from the Council. That is one reason we are here."

"But what about frigates and strike forces?" Giisa asked.

"There is no regulation on that. It's one of the Treaty's loopholes," Zha said. "That is why we rely mostly on frigates, corvettes and fighters. The Carrier is the heart of all Raider forces. It is aimed to the maximum because of all the roles it must face, including direct ship to ship combat. The way our forces are structured, has served us well."

A face flashed in the comlink screen. It was Zhoan, chewing on something, big dark shady visors dominating his face. "Zha, I am sending a shuttle to you right now. We will just go together and take one ship for convenience."

Aboard the shuttle, Zhoan boasted a major grin in his face. "So what do you think you Kushans? Very few Outsiders have ever been to the Gathering, mostly Taiidans. This year we have some Taiidans on board, but you three are the first ever Kushans to ever see the Gathering and witness the Oath."

"Are we going to meet the Flo'kar?" Giirsa asked. "Yes I want to ask about that too," Kuo'ran said.

"All in due time, my friends," Zhoan said. "The Flo'karr is responsible for the Celebrations, and they would be very busy coordinating the events. We will take our time and we will meet them when the time is right."

"I must say, this is going to be the biggest party I will ever attend," Seejuk commented. "I am very thankful for being here." Giirsa and Kuo'ran nodded in agreement.

"Before we meet the Council, we need to talk with the Soo'nan," Zha said. "They're the ship builders and prime engineers for the Raiders. They build the Outposts. We need to discuss with them the terms and costs of construction, go through the plans and schematics for changes and customization. After the Council approves the construction, we need to settle on a price and date of delivery."

"You know Zha," Seejuk said "I got contacts with the Liirhra that are very much interested to build a replica of the Outpost. They said they could use the contract, the money and the job."

"We've been through this before, Seejuk," Zha countered. "It just won't be right or authentic. The Soo'nan have to build it."

"Okay, all right, you're the boss on this," Seejuk said.

As the shuttle headed to the Planetoid, Seejuk noticed some strange looking ships. He waved his finger at them.

"Miner ships from the House of Res'coom," Zhoan pointed out. "You never seen one before? Not surprised. Very secretive group, very zealous about their mining territories. Not very popular with the rest of community, both the people and the ships. Most other Houses prefer to mine on their own, generally using Taiidani resourcers like what you have on both your ship and my ship. See that miner ship there? It looks pretty beat up. I wonder who attacked it. Those tugs over there probably towed it." Zhoan pointed to another Turanic ship rarely seen in other parts of knownspace—a Raider tugship. "That one is just small. Wait till you see a So'o'nani Tugship."

The shuttle settled in the docking bay, where welcoming staff greeted Raider luminaries.

"Welcome, the Segura Zha of the House of Khor and her Party! I am Malaasi of the House of Soo'nani. I have been appointed to escort you and deal with you concerning any future projects," said a short man in robes who bowed.

"So soon!" Zha acted surprised. "How did your House know that I am in the market for an Outpost?"

"Word travels quickly around," Malaasi responded. "My superiors have ordered me that it is imperative that I must have your contract."

"You are so blunt..." Zha said. Suddenly she turned around, distracted. There was a man there in the crowd. She blinked her eyes again and again. The man looked like her father, Zerun, in the ceremonial clothing of the Khor House. He moved in and out of the crowd like a ghost, then disappeared. She blinked her eyes again, then wiped a spontaneous moistness in her eyes.

Just an illusion, she thought. He had always brought her to the Gatherings, watch the Festivals and hear the Oaths. These were the better days, the happier days. This was the first time she had gone to the Gathering without him. If only he was here, to see her grown, to see what she had done, and guide her in decisions to rebuild the House.

"Are you all right, Zha?" Seejuk asked.

"Nothing, I'm fine now," Zha responded, then turned her attention to the Malaasi. "You salesmen work so fast, like vermin after spoiled food."

"We are entering a fairly peaceful age in Raider history. Naturally we will see our markets cut. We need the contracts to keep our drydocks open and our engineers employed," Malaasi explained.

Zhoan turned to explain a few things to the Kushan party. "It's good to see the Soo'nani squirm once in a while. One time, there was a war between two interstellar races. The Soo'nani stepped in to sell arms and ships for both of them, lengthening the war more than it should, costing the economies and the population of both races more than it should"

"I see," Girsra said. "If there are pirates and mercenaries among the Raiders, the picture is not complete with your arms dealers. What about drug dealers?"

"That would be the province of the House of Harkk'hah," Zhoan answered. "The Harkk'hah have huge farmships that raise a drug, a spice, that is used with a breathable liquid environment to raise consciousness and awareness, needed to pilot a fighter ship to the highest attainable level of skill. The drug can be addicting you know, I like it myself." He sniffed his suit. "The Harkk'hah has the best pilots and navigators of all the Houses, and the drugs have been the key. We believe they have an even more potent drug that they keep to themselves as an in-house advantage, to give their pilots and navigators an edge over the other Houses."

"And we built those Farmships," Malaasi interjected. "Just as our ancestors did this Planetoid."

"Quite impressive engineering achievements," Seejuk commented.

"We have more for you to see," Maalasi said. "Come to our booth. And by the way, you are all honored guests of the House of Soo'nani. Your accommodation bills with the Flo'karr carekeepers will be paid by the Soo'nani."

"I thought the stay would be free," Kuo'ran said, clutching a bag.

"It is now," Zha added.

With every Gathering, the Turan planetoid has been turned into a giant marketplace. Traders from all around, mostly Raiders, have come to peddle their wares and sell their services. Many of the precious items were salvaged or taken from piracy, as Zhoan explained. Poets and scribes from the Flo'karr will record one's achievements into ballad, epic poems and songs, for a fee. The Harkk'hah was out to sell the Pilot's Spice, as they called it. Raiders stood along the corridors touting their achievements, entertaining crowds with their martial expertise. Others boast of their records in battle, looking to be hired for mercenary work. Others sought jobs as pilots, navigators, and ship engineers. There were many bars and entertainment centers, where dancers danced in front of jeering crowds.

"This is an opportunity to sell what you can build and what you can do," Zhoan explained. "Naturally, all the criminal elements and warlords of knownspace would come here to scout for new talent. This is also a good opportunity if you are looking to hire a new crew or expand on the one you have. Outsiders are allowed in the Bazaar area, in the festivities and in the competitions. But the Oathtaking itself will be private for the Raiders, except for guests that were directly invited."

"This is like the circus back when I was young in Kharak," Seejuk said.

They came to the Soo'nani booth, and Malaasi served them chairs to sit on. "I wish to show you our wares, the newest innovations in Soo'nani engineering." He revealed some ship models and passed them to his guests, then turned on a terminal in the desk. The terminal displayed ships that were parked outside of the Planetoid. Seejuk saw that these were ships that he had never seen before.

"The latest trend in Raider technology is plasma bomb weapons," Maalasi said.

"No doubt copied from Taaidani technology," Seejuk said.

"Exactly, exactly!" Maalasi responded. "First we were copying the Taiidani Attack Bomber. Then we learned how to adapt the Plasma bomb system to our unique chassis design. Then we made it better. This first ship here is the Outlaw attack bomber. As you see, it is based on the Demon fighter chassis, which itself was an enhancement of the Bandit fighter chassis made to increase space. The price is amazing, at 70 RU's, you get light corvette firepower. The next ship here is the Buccaneer plasma bomb corvette. At 135 RU's, this corvette can dish out the firepower of a Taiidani Heavy Corvette. It uses a simplified version of the Thief corvette chassis. For 30 RU's more, you can have them upgraded with mimic generators."

"Cheap, but you're ripping off on the mimic generators," Seejuk observed.

"The next ship here is the Payback class plasma bomb frigate," Maalasi continued. The model looked like a crude Taiidani Assault Frigate with four huge engine nozzles in the rear. "Mimic options are standard. 500 RU cost. Our frigates have been saddled by the lack of proper weapons coverage, and the Terror addresses it."

"Expensive, for something that looks like a second hand Kudaark," Seejuk said.

"The next ship here is the Corsair class cruise missile frigate," Maalasi handed them a model that looked like a larger ion array frigate without panels. "Instead of an ion cannon, this ship is designed to launch anti capital ship cruise missiles. Each missile is basically a drone that carries quantum explosives. The ship carries cloaking generators. Without energy weapons, the ship is undetectable when it fires these missiles."

"Now that is interesting," Seejuk said.

"How much is it?" Zha asked.

"It comes with a bargain price of 800 RU's, cloaking included."

"That's expensive," Zha responded.

"Not expensive considering what it does," Maalasi said. "This thing can wreak havoc on any enemy resource operations and supply convoys. Already the For'lym and the Harrk'hah have adopted all four designs. We are trying to get the rest of the houses to use them. The neat thing about the Corsair class is they're meant to circumvent capital ship restrictions set in the Treaty of Houses."

"But I am not really interested in these ships. The ones I have are doing fine," Zha said. "I just want to talk about the Outpost."

"But we are talking about the Outpost," Maalasi clarified. "Every Outpost has ship building facilities. When you get the newest versions of the Outpost, they will include the facilities to build these ships. It is part of the package."

"But if I don't want them, can the Outpost be cheaper?" Zha asked.

"No, because that's the way, they're going to be built. Look, the Segura Zha, let's put it this way. We will also throw in the facilities to do the Ambusher class Missile Frigate for free."

"Missile Frigate?"

"Where have you been, all you people? You have been missing the Gathering events. We introduced the Ambusher class last year, as well as the Backlash class of minelaying corvette." Maalasi showed a Thieflike corvette with mine laying ports.

"Can the Boomer be added?" Zha asked.

"Sure. What's piracy without mine fields anyway?" Maalasi said. "Since I am in a good mood, we got two sample Corsair and Payback class frigates parked outside the Planetoid. They're yours if you have the intent to get the Outpost from us."

"You're pushing a lot of crap hard, why the hard sell?" Seejuk asked.

"Competition," Maalasi explained. "Some Houses have decided to out source on their own, acquiring factory ships from the Taiidani. The For'lym and the Res'coom are planning a partnership to make their own ship ventures. Other Houses are importing models from the Taiidani, and the Taiidani arms dealers are invading our turf. Look at that Taiidani booth there!" He pointed to a booth where a Taiidani arms merchant was peddling weapons and ships. "We need to stay relevant with the times."

Maalasi stood up. "Look I can see you just got here. I need to ease up a bit. You have time to decide on this. This is the time of Festivities and you should be enjoying. Let me show you around the area, I want to notify you that there will be the fighter race competition tomorrow which we are the official sponsors. Winner gets a year's supply of the Pilot Spice and a discount to all projects contracted to the Soo'nan."

"Count me in for that, Maalasi," Zha said.

* * *

Aboard the Atonement...

"Has the White Beast been towed to a star system yet?" asked the X'on.

"Yes, Overlord," the staff bowed. "The White Beast had been weakened and starving of both energy and mineral resource. Ever since it has fled the Innerspace to the Darkspace, it has hungered. The Dark Matter hid the energy of the stars and interfered with its senses and navigation. The White Beast had been towed and placed in orbit around a star."

"Good, now it is time for me to meet it," X'on said.

"Meet it? Are you seriously considering going down to the Beast planetoid itself to meet its Core Self?"

"Yes," X'on answered. "It is something I must do to gain the creature's trust."

Aboard the shuttle, on the way to the Beast planetoid, X'on noted the solar collectors orbiting around the Beast planetoid, each collector with petals spanning for miles. The collectors were like gigantic flowers, sprung up from the bowels of the Beast itself, to harvest the energy of the starlight and beam them down to the surface. He was informed that the Beast had sent out resource collectors of its own to harvest the asteroid belts orbiting around the star, but it may not be enough to satisfy the energy hunger of the Beast.

It was amazing what this new Beast variant could do, X'on thought. It could evolve new forms of ships, each almost like a living organism, an integration between living matter, semiconductor and metal.

The shuttle passed through the garden of the collectors, then the thin wispy clouds that seemed form a small atmosphere around the planetoid. Despite its size, the planetoid was generating enough artificial gravity of its own to create that atmosphere.

Down the shuttle went to the surface. On it, there seemed to be an immense chasm with no end, and the shuttle dived through it, into the core of the planetoid.

It was dark, but the white crystals all around them glowed with a rhythm that says life. The shuttle landed gently, and in a space suit, X'on disembarked off the shuttle and stepped foot on the smooth hard crystalline surface.

"Welcome tiny Fleishy Selves. It is of great risk to come to the maw of the Core Self. What makes you think I will not destroy you?"

"Because I trust that you will do the right thing. I am X'on, Overlord of the Imperium. If you destroy me, my fleet will torpedo your collectors and rain death down to your surface. They await my return. But you know my intentions. You have starved of energy and material. You are a creature lost and hungry. My fleet has towed you to this star so that you may feed, grow and live. Is this the action of your enemy? Is this the action of your enemy to come down unarmed to your core so he may meet your Core Self?"

A glowing translucent tentacle rose from the surface. X'on was repulsed at its sight, but it let the tentacle hover around him, curiously sensing his form.

"What is your purpose, Fleish self?"

"I seek an Alliance with your Self," X'on said. "We are two different creatures, but our fate is one. We know what happened in the innerspace. The races of fleishy selves have hunted and destroyed the Selves and every fragment they can find. They fear you, they fear your power and perfection. So they seek your ultimate destruction in alliance with the Unbound selves."

"So you run away from innerspace, to the darkspaces, where stars are low and young, where dark matter is prevalent, hiding the stars' energy, blinding your senses. You are lost and you are starving. If I had not found you, you and all your selves, would eventually die."

"Is this true, Flesh Self?"

"As I trust you, you must trust me. Trust me to say, that even our componental matter is not the same, our fates are. We are the Imperium, once we rule the galaxy, all the breadth of innerspace, all of the vastness of knownspace. No empire has ever matched our power."

"But one day, the Unbound selves, in envy and alarmed of our power, cast a great war upon us. At the same time, the multitudes of our subject races, rebelled our glorious and enlightened reign. Together, they destroyed the Imperium, the one force of Order in the galaxy, at great cost for all life. Like you, we were hunted, and then forced to cast out to the darkspace, in the Abyss between the galaxies."

"We in the many millennia, has survived. The selves of flesh continue to fear us, and called us the Nemesis. Like you, we can hear the songs of the planets and the stars. Our spirits are one."

"Even now the cursed ones and their Unbound allies plot our complete annihilation. If we do not ally, we will be destroyed. If we destroy them first, we will not just assure our survival, but bring order again to the galaxy."

"Order. Order is the primary programming of the Core Self. Chaos must be stopped."

"So we have an agreement?"

"X'on self, your heart is dark but your purpose may be true."

The shuttle broke through the thin layer of crowds. Beyond the rows of gigantic solar collectors, lay X'on's amada in a massive parade formation.

Aboard the Atonement, the staff asked X'on, as he settled on his throne.

"We have an alliance," X'on confirmed.

Part 5

Aboard a Cutlass frigate...

"This is the big event!" said Zhoan, as the party embarked on a frigate docked on the planetoid. Zhoan could see the questions in the faces of his three Kushan guests. The frigate was large, bulky, with squarish, angular lines, lacking the clean look of an Assassin class Ion Array Frigate, and bristling with turrets.

"This ship is a Cutlass Salvage Frigate, one of the ships unique to the House of Du'ran, and a great source of pride to our fleet. As the name suggests, we use it to salvage, board and capture large ships. A single one of this can take out a Resourcer or Tradeship; two of these an entire Destroyer. The compartments here are used to hold an entire company of marines. It will clamp on a vessel, cut through the hull, and the party will invade the enemy ship."

"But for this occasion, we're fitting this Cutlass with extra scanning equipment and terminal screens. We are going to use the ship, pick up Zha's racer, and head for the asteroids where we will deploy her ship in the starting position. Then relax and watch the Belt Race from here. So enjoy a relax."

"What exactly goes on in a Belt Race?" Kuo'ran asked.

Zhoan explained. "It's a race across an asteroid belt using modded fighter ships. Some of the asteroids even move. With all those big rocks ahead of you, this is going to be a true test of skill."

"Isn't that awfully dangerous?" Kuo'ran asked.

Zhoan laughed hard. "That's the fun of it, haha. Of course people get killed. But that's not going to stop the races! Skill in handling and navigating through a rock belt is the very heart of the skill of a Raider pilot. It is for this reason other races call us Belters. Now see those ships there..." Zhoan pointed to tug vessels along side of them. To Seejuk, they resemble the Sontaaw tugs with the large bumper in front of their ship, with smooth lines broken by curved bumps that could contain either scanner or communications equipment, or perhaps, defensive armament.

Zhoan explained. "Those ships are Soo'nani tugs, Bludgeon class. They're so strong they could tow an Outport or planetoid base. Don't get them mad, or they will ram you to the next galaxy! Haha! Right now they're towing those large beacons that will be used to set up nav points for the race. The contestants will have to race through each beacon in a number of laps."

"See that ship there?" Zhoan pointed. It appeared to be a large freighter, it's potentially clean lines marred with angular and circular bulges that were probably filled with scanning, deception and defensive equipment. Four large engine nozzles completed its rear end.

"That is a Convict class transport ship, a ship unique to the House of Hu'ran. The Hu'rans are the best smugglers of all the Houses. You want something delivered, they will deliver. Those things got mimic, cloaking, mass drivers, all to hide and protect itself. It's fairly fast too, faster than most capital ships, and it will run away from a patrolling vessel just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"For this race, the Convict will be used as a refueling ship."

Zhoan sat on a communications console and turned on the link. "Zha, are you ready?"

"Just about," Zha replied. She was aboard the launch bay of the Mule, doing last minute inspections on a custom Fiirkan. The sleek scout had its mass drivers removed, then modified by extending the leading along the sides. The extensions added more space for fuel, gave the fighter a more imposing look, and served to counterbalance the shift of a center of gravity brought by the removal of all the weapons. Replacing the nose of mass drivers was a beak, which also housed extra fuel needed by the voracious modified engines. The extended nose gave the ship the silhouette of a predatory raptor.

She had prepared for this moment throughout the years. The first time she saw her father did a Belt race, she was so deeply impressed, and dreamed to do the same. Her father had died, but the dream became stronger in the few years. She would do this, win this for her father. As she snuggled into the tight cockpit, she felt closer to him, in following the trails he blazed.

She slipped on the glazed helmet. Seejuk had warned her about the dangers of addiction in using the liquid environment, but she needed to do this one more time. The rich oxygenated liquid would keep her from blacking out in high G maneuvers, and it is spiced with the Pilot's Drug that elevated her awareness. The oxygenated liquid membrane module itself was a masterpiece of simple engineering---the entire module weighing much less than a typical atmospheric oxygen supply equipment, consumes less power and much less space. These are all factors that would prove crucial in a Belt race. She pressed a button on the suit, and the glazing began to be filled with a clear fluid. She gasped and bubbled as she first swallowed, then let the liquid fill her lungs. As the liquid submerged her entire head, the rich oxygen gave her a temporary high. She laughed and bubbled. Then she began to hum and sing.

"...Should I believe my heart...Will all be true for me?..."

The cockpit lowered and sealed. She clicked on four switches one by one, and each of the ion turbines ignited. The lights in the panel came to life. Four bars flickered, each indicating the revolution of each turbine. There was a dull vibration throughout the scout's frame that came from the engines, the vibration rising in note as she revved up the turbines. She loved the way the ship communicates to her with its mechanical soul.

The Fiirkan was perhaps the one ship she considered to have the best handling of any fighter in the galaxy. It's controls were smooth and responsive, and remains right so to the very edge of the performance envelope, with the joystick gradually feeling heavier with the speed. It's a bit heavy on the tail, and removing the guns would worsen the situation. Extending the leading edges along the side of the ship, adding the beak and the fuel capacity remedied that. If the guns are stripped, the Triikor's power to weight ratio could match a Fiirkan's. But the Triikor does not have good lateral or roll balance; it rolls faster in one direction, something the Fiirkan avoids. The Kushan Arrow scout which they have a few aboard the Mule, also tends to roll faster in one direction than the other, due to asymmetrical placement of the cockpit and its guns. The Bandit interceptor, a common ship used in the Belt races, feels ragged in the edge of its performance envelope, but it had a capacity for larger powerful engines. The standard Bandit was a heavy ship compared to other fighters, but Bandits modded for Belt races have their armor removed to greatly lighten the ship.

She had looked at other designs too. The Acolyte had good potential and balance, but its tight design left little room for modifications and its innards too complicated for your typical Raider maintenance crew to work on. Besides the regulations have not approved any of the Kushan ships, and they won't be for some time. Despite having captured samples of the Kadeshi Swarmer, the fighter would also fall into the unapproved category, which is a waste, because

the ship is very easy to fly despite having a crazy power to weight ratio once the guns--which contributes more of the weight of the fighter than any other component---are removed.

The lights on the launch rails turned green, and she pulled a lever. The rails catapulted the fighter into space.

She coasted the fighter into an idle position, trying to save as much fuel. That was why she needed the Cutlass to grab the fighter and bring it to the starting positions in the Belt race.

"I got you in my scanners, Zha." Zhoan's voice was in the comlink. "The Cutlass is approaching salvage position."

"I got your ship too in my sensors," Zha said. "I am ready to be picked up."

The Cutlass slowed and stopped right on top of the Fiirkan. The holding fields extended, trapped the Fiirkan, and pulled it to its underbelly.

"Are you alright, Zha?" Zhoan asked.

"Everything is fine. Let's go to the rock belt now," Zha said.

The Cutlass with the Fiirkan on its belly, cruised to the Belt. Once it was a rich and prosperous asteroid belt. But everything worth mining had long been mined out of the Belt, except for rocks that had no ore or value. Now all sorts of ship debris and junk had replaced the mined rocks, and the Belt was more treacherous than ever.

There were other Cutlasses there, each holding a contestant fighter. Zha looked at the fleet and wondered if participation was at an all time high. She flicked the screen in the fighter, taking a view of each of the contestant. Most of the field brought in Bandits, but some had Triikors and Fiirkans. Compared to the subdued pale grey colors of her Fiirkan, most of the racers were brightly painted, full of decals and other unabashed decorations. Scenes depicting carnage, fire, battle, and sex were often painted on the sides of the ships.

The Bandits were stripped of their armor for weight and had large modified engines, which give them tremendous top speed and acceleration. The smaller more nimble Fiirkan could not load with such big engines, but its superior handling should eat up the Bandits where the debris fields are densest.

The comlinks were live with chatter. Some pilots boasted openly, taunting the others. "I am the best ever, I am god of the Belt! You suck. Go home. Revel in my superior skill..."

"What are my chances," Zha asked.

Zhoan replied. "Flo'kar accountants have been going around, taking bets. According to them, the Harrk'hah is favored to win the event; they fielded five of their best pilots, all in racer Bandits. Next on the betting list are the For'lym pilots, also all in racer Bandits. Sorry, Zha, you're a friend, but I placed bets on the Harrk'hah. I do expect you to gain a notable finish. You're taking quite a risk using the Taiidan scout here."

"I know, but I worked out strategies for this," Zha said. Back when Seejuk was new on the Mule, he brought in a flight simulator. She complained of the machine's cost, but he said they're going to need the machine to continually train my pilots and hone their skills. The machine would become her favorite. One of the things she did was to program the Turan Belt course, and played games racing the Belt. She used simulations of different fighters. The simulator made her well acquainted of the course, and the characteristics of the fighters in how they react to the course. Using that knowledge, she fine tuned the fighter behavior and came out with a strategy to beat the Belt.

The traditional Raider response was to use sheer power and skill to overpower the course. However, if a ship can handle well enough, instead of decelerating and bleeding off too much speed, it can enter the thicker debris fields at a higher speed, negotiate it faster, and leave the debris fields into the more open spaces at a higher initial speed, which means a higher top end in the open.

The well balanced Fiirkan would be perfect for this. But there was a major catch in the strategy. Flying extremely fast through a debris field would also make the fighter prone crash into an asteroid. She had bet that her skills as a Starfarer can be relied to this little flaw in her plan.

The screens flickered, and there was the face of another pilot, immersed in the liquid in his glazed helmet. "I am Razir, Ace of the Harrk'hah. I heard that the Segura of Khor is participating of this event. You look like but a child. This is not a place for spoiled royalty and princesses. Go home. Save whatever little respect we have for you. Have a rich prince spank and hump your little cute rump and breed your little spoiled babies. That is only what you are good for! Mu hah!"

Zha grimaced at the face in her comlink screen. She stared at him intently, then raised a finger, slowly placed it at her neck, and made a long cutting motion across the neck. Then she pointed the finger at him.

"I will remember you Razir, when you will eat my exhaust."

She turned off the screen, unwilling to get any more distractions, taunts and other forms of psychological warfare the pilots were engaging as a pre race ritual.

Zhoan's Cutlass had disengaged the Fiirkan, and the racer drifted towards its starting position. The other Cutlasses have also dropped the other races, and all the racers have begun creeping into the first beacon. "When the light turns green, the race will begin," said the race moderator.

"Oh father", she thought, "I will win this for you." "Please watch over me" she said in a small prayer. With that prayer, she felt that he was close by, alive. It was a thought she wanted to keep to inspire her.

"Good luck, good luck, win this one, I got confidence in you..." It was Seejuk's, Kuo'ran's and Giirsa's voices, sending their last minute hopes.

She revved up the turbines without letting the ion fuel burn through it. 12,000 RPM now for engine one...engine two...engine three...and finally engine four.

The beacon light turned green. She flicked a switch and the ions poured into the turbines.

It was like an explosion as the Fiirkan rocketed forward, throwing her small body hard against the chair. But the Bandits blew faster, and the first wave of Bandits reached the first debris formation ahead. The Fiirkan fell behind, along with a small group of other pilots who choose to use a Taiidani ship.

But she hardly decelerated as she entered the first debris formation. She rocketed past a few Bandits that slowed down to turn.

"She's absolutely crazy!" Zhoan screamed as he watched from the monitors aboard the Cutlass frigate. His jaws dropped as he watched the Fiirkan plunged headlong into an asteroid, then banked at the last moment, do a 360 degree slide, the engines burning and scraping the surface of the asteroid to break its velocity, then rocket into a new direction.

"You seemed calm about this, Seejuk," Giirsa observed his companion.

Seejuk crossed his arms. "You don't really know Zha. She does this all the time. If I had to worry about her flying techniques all the time, I would be dead long ago."

The Bandits behind her did their slides, turning completely around to let their engines break their speed, then flick to the fighter to a new direction.

The Bandits ahead of her, banked and wove with the oncoming debris and loose asteroids. There was an explosion as a Bandit smashed into a debris, then a chatter in the comlink that the pilot ejected safely. She banked, rolled and weave as the debris shot past underneath her. For every turn, the G-forces were tremendous, threatening to crush her little body. Her mind boggled with the forces, and if she blacked out, her fighter would smash into anything. But the rich liquid environment kept her awake, the oxygen and juice keeping her blood going, her mind conscious against the tremendous forces that gripped and threatened to block every blood vessel in her brain.

She banked, turning inside a Bandit and overtaking it. Another Bandit slowed and slid, jetting past a small passage between two asteroids. On his tail was the Fiirkan, matching every move, inching close with every roll and turn. There was clear space ahead, and the Fiirkan entered the turn earlier, and screamed past the Bandit with a higher initial speed.

The Bandit went full trust, its sheer speed eating away the lead that the Fiirkan gained from it during the last turn. But it was not enough as another debris field loomed. The Bandit had to do a 360 degree slide and brake its speed, before flicking to a new direction. The Fiirkan headed to the debris field, hardly braking, then did a full slide that ended with the nose pointed at the correct direction, bleeding off little speed. She banked, weaved and turned inside more Bandits, then slingshot ahead when the debris becomes clear.

It was a pattern well rehearsed, a pattern she continued to do, and her Fiirkan crept up the ladder, taking a place higher one by one. Her senses could feel the asteroids and the debris, feeling her way through the field like instinct. Her responses and reflexes coordinated with those senses. For moments it was not like she was a creature of flesh and blood, but a mind linked to a fighter, fusing in to a new creature that would think and act like one.

The fleet of racers became increasingly dispersed, as they pass by each beacon, each lap. A fleet of Convict transports waited in one of the beacons, each transport capable of refueling a dozen fighters simultaneously. The racers swarmed at the Convicts, hungry for fuel. Their thirst satisfied, they would rocket back into the debris fields. Zha could not

take the chance of running out of fuel. Her Fiirkan slowed, then dived into one of the refueling ships. Already there were racers who burned their fuel out too soon, or wasn't wise enough to refuel when they had the opportunity. A fleet of Thief Corvettes waited among the debris fields, salvaging the fighters that carelessly ran out of fuel, or fighters that simply went broke out of mechanical failure.

As laps goes by, it becomes more difficult to visually see who is the leader. But the beacons have sensors that tag each racer as they flash by, cameras that watch each ship and broadcasted the scene to the fleet of spectator ships. The commentators rattled on their comlinks, keeping the audience informed and tight on their seats.

"This is so exciting!" Kuo'ran jumped up and down, then paced back and forth, unable to stay sitting down from all the tension.

Ahead of the rest of the pack, the For'lym Bandits traded places with the leading pack of Harrk'hah Bandits. At times it seemed they were dogfighting, but what they were doing is to use teammates to block the other team from passing by.

"They're all dirty pilots," said Seejuk.

"Haha, what do you expect from a Raider!" Zhoan answered back.

"Look at the rankings, Zha is just behind them!" Kuo'ran pointed out.

"My dear Kushan, it looks like you're right. I should have given the girl more credit," Zhoan said. He laughed again. "She has excellent sliding technique. Her well controlled slides are putting her ahead. But going through these bastards are another thing."

The racing Bandits were just ahead of her, and they seemed to have more power than the rest. When the space is clear, their sheer power was overwhelming, and the Bandits literally pull ahead from hers even with the Fiirkan's higher initial speed coming out from the debris fields. But as the For'lym and the Harrk'hah bandits tussled, they do so at the sacrifice of handling speeds through the debris fields, and the Fiirkan eventually caught up with them.

One of the For'lyms tried a blocking move, and missed, sending the fighter nearly careening out of control. The Fiirkan held to its arching trajectory, G-forces squeezing her tight in her seat. She was already going full speed within the debris field as it cleared to another clear wide space. The Fiirkan overtook another For'lym Bandit.

In the next debris field, she nipped past the last two For'lyms, and as the space cleared, she was between the For'lym and the Harrk'hah.

"The Kadeshi killer is upon us," said one of the Harrk'hah pilots as Zha overhead from the open com links.

"Block her!" Razir said. "Stop that whore!"

"I'm not that easy," Zha thought, as the Bandit slipped in front of her trajectory. Without even braking, the Fiirkan slipped past the Bandit by a few scary inches.

"You boys playing rough? You could get me killed!" she shouted in the comlink.

"If you can't stand how we the real Raiders play, get out, whore!" Razir said.

. that's how you want to play, okay!" Zha said. The fighters screamed out of the debris field into clear space. One of the Hark'hah Bandits closed in on her position, its boosters more powerful than the Firrkan's. As the Bandit was about to overtake the Fiirkan, the pilot found himself staring right into the Fiirkan's exhausts, as the scout slipped right in front of him.

"AAAH!" the pilot screamed, as the exhausts knocked his fighter off course, sending it spinning.

"You're next!" Zha shouted, as her fighter closed in on the lead Bandit, an asteroid field coming ahead.

"Segura of Khor! You dare challenge the Ace of Hark'hah?"

"I have beaten better, Ass of Hark'hah."

"You will pay for your insolence," Razir said, his Bandit rushing into the dense asteroid field. He swung his fighter into a wild but controlled slide, engines breaking his trajectory, then slip jetting him into a new course.

He's really good, Zha thought, but not good enough. Her Fiirkan dove into the asteroid field at an even greater velocity. She flipped the fighter into a slide, engines nearly opposite where the fighter's momentum was going. The engines bled the fighter's inertia, then tossed it into another direction, Zha quickly flipping back the fighter to its original head first, tail last position.

They tussled back and forth among the asteroids and stellar debris. His Bandit had extremely powerful engines, but sacrificed for that with weight and imbalance. The more agile Firrkan banked, rolled and slid more precision and speed.

A large asteroid loomed ahead. The Bandit slid and braked, but its tail was a bit off from a proper braking position. The pressure was making him his flight style ragged, and Zha saw her opportunity. The Firrkan banked, slid then braked, then jetted again, her whole flight arc turning inside the Bandit's.

"Whoo-hoh!" she shouted as the Fiirkan took the lead. There was clear space right ahead, and she ran her engines right to the max.

But the Bandit was right behind her, its enormous power eating her short lead. Zha watched her screen, where the back camera view showed the Bandit closing in. She waited for the last second, waiting to time it right...

She flipped her fighter right in front of the Bandit. All of a sudden Razir found himself staring point blank at the Fiirkan's exhausts.

The blast took the Bandit off course, careening and spinning out of control, Razir temporarily blinded.

"I said you're going to eat my exhausts," Zha said, her fighter taking a clear lead.

She remained unchallenged until the final beacon went on. The Fiirkan passed the finish line first, and she jubilantly shouted through the comlinks. She felt proud, proud to do this for her father, if he was here right now. Somehow, she always felt he was close to her.

The Fiirkan settled into a parking orbit, and Zhoan's Cutlass floated over the Fiirkan. The captive fields went on, and the Fiirkan was drawn to the Cutlass's underbelly.

"Congratulations, Zha, I never thought you could pull it," Seejuk said.

"You won! You won!" It was Kuo'ran's voice. "I wish I can handle a fighter like that."

"Excellent maneuver, Miss Zha, a fine finish and a great win," said Giirsa. "You would be a match to the best pilots of the Kaalel fleet."

"Boo-hoo," said Zhoan. "I lost an entire fortune on the bet. But you won a great victory, Zha. A stunning upset and one of the most suspenseful Belt races I have ever seen."

"Thank you, thank you everyone," said Zha, still in the Fiirkan underneath the Cutlass' belly.

"But we're going to have some trouble, Zha," Zhoan said. "The Harrk'hah and the For'lym have filed a protest with the racing board for life threatening maneuvers and they claim your fighter is illegal and that you cheated. The Soo'nan demanded an examination of your fighter."

"Let them eat my exhausts again," Zha responded. "They lost, and they can cry over it. The Soo'nan owe me a discount on whatever I want to contract with them next, including an Outpost, and I bet they will go to every means to squirm out of it. Tell them to go kiss my butt."

The Cutlass cruised to the Planetoid, where it released the Fiirkan. The Cutlass settled into the docking bay while the Fiirkan docked in the hanger.

A large crowd awaited Zha, who had carried a previous reputation as the "Kadeshi Killer", and was now, winner of the Belt Race. The liquid environment drained back to the module, and she lifted off her glazed helmet. Her face was soaked with the liquid, her hair wet. But there was nothing happy or jubilant on her face this time. She had an angry frown on her face, and her hand was clenched tightly, carrying a big wrench.

"I nearly got killed over there by those asses. Where are they?" Zha demanded. "I know the salvage frigs brought them here too."

"Don't do it, Zha," Seejuk said. "I know what you're thinking. Watch your temper. I don't know what the rules here on this planetoid regarding assault..."

His words was unheeded as she spotted the Harrk'hah group. She grit her teeth, blood in her eyes. She ran towards them, wrench raised to strike..

* * *

Mohilim Darkspace Sector..

The silhouette of the Atonement emerged from the clouds of dark matter. A long neck extended from its main body, ending with a small head that housed the sensors. Protruding from the main body are three massive arms, extending equilaterally from each other, each arm ending with a pod.

Three more dreadnaughts emerged from the dark matter clouds, the Forsaken, the Retribution, and the Penance. They were followed by a vast armada of frigates, corvettes, and fighters. Legions of Mantas, Skates and Bats darkened an already dark space.

"Overlord, was it wise to allow the Beast to feed?" a disciple asked. "It had grown, it had gained back its strength. If we engage it now, we may never defeat the Beast should it turn on us."

"We have worked so long on this. Only with the White Beast, do we have the power to seek vengeance against the Unbound," X'on said.

"We have signs that there is a new life within the Beast planetoid. The planetoid is pregnant, for the lack of a better word for it, and about to give birth," said the disciple.

"Excellent, let us be witness to this momentous occasion," X'on said.

Screens focused on the crystalline planetoid, surrounded by a portable atmosphere and huge flowerlike energy collectors that orbit around it.

A huge crater opened in the planetoid's surface, and lights burst from it. The clouds over the planetoid burned red and orange; auras danced over the magnetic fields that surrounded the planetoid.

"We have a massive energy reading," said the disciple in his dark monkish robes. "The child is about to emerge."

A huge ship slowly emerged from the crater opening, its surface marred by white crystalline patches. The main body was shaped like a bulbous abdomen, with a huge gaping round mouth, where light emerged. Around the mouth radiated five massive tentacle like arms, each ending with a glowing tip.

"Behold, the new Beast mothership, and it shall be called, the Deliverer, for it shall deliver us from the curse of the Unbound," said X'on. "Watch its power."

Tugs have tractored another planetoid. The Beast ship slowly turned towards it. Light glowed from the ends of the arms, and the lights grew stronger. Lightning fields emerged from each of the arms, leaping and joining to the center.

"The energy readings are getting stronger, rising..."

The arms glowed, and energy connected from each of the arms, and into the center mouth. There was a massive flash of light, and a ball of energy as big as the planetoid itself burst out from the mouth of the Beast ship.

The planetoid evaporated in a flash of light like a small nova, rings of shockwaves extending from the epicenter.

"...the power..." X'on said.

Part 6—The Oathtaking

Aboard the Albagnon

What looked like a Raider Ion Array Frigate orbited around a gas giant, the giant's rocky rings provided the cover the Raiders have so traditionally and skillfully exploited. The combination of the rocks, the gravity and magnetic fields both by the giant and the asteroids tend to spoil sensors. It was a perfect hiding place. The Flo'karr research and early warning vessel the Albagnon belongs to the Seeker class, which was essentially a modified Ion Array Frigate. The beam cannon had been removed for a long telescope array, while the ion array panels were replaced with long range sensor panels. The slim hull was preserved, and so was the cloaking or mimic equipment. The arrays were all pointed to the outer regions of the galaxy.

"We have massive readings on the Mohilim sector," said a researcher.

"Looks like a small nova," said the captain. "It is rare to have energy readings of that sort in a rather slow and benign sector. Keep recording the event, the area has been full of anomalous readings lately."

Hours later, the sensors went off again, and the captain rushed to his chair.

"We got multiple jump readings! Hyperspace signatures detected!" said the sensors officer.

"Go into tactical alert," said the captain watching the red blips on the screen. "Raise the mimic generators! We are going into silent running. I repeat, we are going silent. Cut all power except for sensors and life support systems."

The Albagnon turned into a small asteroid. Inside the ship, all the lights went out, the engine hum turned silent, and the only illumination was the glowing lights from the control panels. The dimly lit faces turned their tense attention to the captain.

"Give me a magnification of the enemy fleet," the captain ordered.

"Looks like Bentusi ships, Sir!" said one of the officers.

"They're not Tradeships. Too small, too sleek for that, and it's got energy signatures of weapons all over. Engine energy signature is Bentusi. I think we are seeing a new kind of Bentusi ship that has never been seen before. It resembles a Somtaaw Archangel, and is possibly a dreadnaught," said the captain. Unlike most Raiders, Flo'karr commanding officers were well educated about the many races of the galactic knownspace.

"I thought the Bentusi were a peaceful race. Why the warships?", one of the more youthful officers in the bridge asked.

The captain watched the screens intensely. "Not just Bentusi, but look at this. The radial symmetry of the ships indicate Tiamat, though these are smaller than a Tiamat Spider class mothership. The sensor readings of the arms show it to be well armed. These ships here, they are neither Tiamat nor Bentusi, but they probably belong to other

lesser known and obscure Unbound races such as the Naga and the Sakmat. Look they're falling into a military formation."

"I would speculate that this is a Galactic Council task force, possibly to police the sector. But why?" The captain seemed bothered. "The Council never poked their nose at this area. There is nothing there that attracts their interest."

"Until now," added the main science officer. "Could it be due to the anomalous readings in the Mohilim sector? We will not know until we head to the Mohilim area."

"Negative," said the captain. "We must report this armed excursions from the Unbound to the Council of Inner Houses and the Assembly of Lords. But we must wait first. This fleet appears to be recharging for the next jump event. Look, they are sending patrols now!"

The Bentusi warships were discharging Super Acolyte fighters, while the Tiamat warships nearby discharged Black Acolytes. The Black Acolyte, as recorded by the Flo'karr, is the Tiamat version of the Super Acolyte, with darker colors and markings. Little is known about its weapons but it was speculated it would use a similar ion cannon. The Bentusi ships were U-shaped, and the Tiamat were radial. The Sakmat ships in contrast were spherical, while the Naga ships were all long and elongated, ending with pods on the ends, not unlike a Kadeshi needleship. The Sakmat and the Naga released fighters of their own, all superficially resembling Super Acolytes, but the detail afforded by the zoom could not discern any more detail that could differentiate them from the Bentusi and Tiamat variants other than their colors; blue for the Naga, red for the Sekmet, while the Bentusi were gold and the Tiamat black.

The fighter patrols searched out the star system, but even the senses of the Unbound was unable to detect the lone Raider Seeker class frigate. The rock belt was full of iron asteroids, each spinning, creating a myriad of confusing magnetic fields that would confuse any sensory power that can perceive the magnetic and electrical fields. The Unbound may have great powers, but even these senses had met their match to the cleverness and resourcefulness of the Raiders.

The voices inside the frigate had fallen silent as each officer concentrated collecting data on the Unbound fleet. For them, the thrill of discovery and the unknown were as exhilarating as raiding a Republican transport or smuggling through a police blockage with a Hu'ran smuggler transport.

As the Unbound police force finished their trek to the end of the system, the various Acolytes returned to their vessels. Jumpgates began to form, and the armada of the Unbound slipped through them.

"Should we follow them?" asked an officer.

"Are you nuts? Negative. This event must be reported to the Council of Houses and all the Lords," said the captain. "Make a final sweep to make sure not one of the Unbound is still in the vicinity."

"All clear," said the sensors officer.

"Retract all sensor panels, and power to engines," the captain ordered. The ship's frame littered with vibrations and squeaks as the panels retracted, and the hum of the ion plasma turbines returned to reverberate the hull. The mimic generators turned off, and the asteroid turned back into the sinister silhouette of a Raider frigate.

The Albagnon lifted itself from the rings, heading away from the gas giant. "We have energy buildup, preparing to jump now!"

The gate appeared, and the Albagnon slipped through it.

* * *

Inside the Turan Planetoid---

Kuo'ran carefully applied the healing ointment on the bruises in Zha's face. "You really should not get physical with the Harrk'hah pilots. I don't know about Raider customs, but do they actually teach you to brawl with boys? As if winning and getting all the prizes aren't enough."

"Those pilots deserved it," Zha answered. "They are mean and they nearly got me killed. They fly with complete abandon over the safety of other people in the race. I don't think we are as restrained as you Kushans. We cannot afford to look weak. Every aggressive response must be challenged with an equally aggressive response." She tended another hurt in her face.

"But look what it did to you," Kuo'ran began applying makeup to cover Zha's bruises. "If Zhoan wasn't there to even things up and smash the pilots himself, those pilots would have beaten you to a helpless pulp. What is worst is that you're about to have your Oath taking ceremony. You are going to have all those bruises right in the public."

Kuo'ran removed the towel covering Zha's body. "You're black and blue all over!" Kuo'ran took the Segura ceremonial robes and prepared to place them over Zha.

"I appreciate helping me with this," Zha said, and she moved clumsily with the aches and pains in her body. "I don't think I could do this myself. How do you know so much in dealing with such clumsy robes like this?"

"Not with the ceremonial robes of a Turanic Lord Princess, no," Kuo'ran replied. "But as a member of a Kiithsa, the Sjet'sa, the primary ruling family of a Kiith, we must host the traditional ceremonies of our Kiithid. We have our own bulky and clumsy costumes. I'm not surprised, even across the galaxy, if you seen one costume, you have seen them all. These are all bulk and show. Give me your arm here...your other arm...okay, this will go to the head..."

"Now you're beginning to look like a real princess," Kuo'ran giggled as she turned Zha around, examining the robes.

There was knocking on the door and Seejuk called out from behind it. "The ceremony is about to begin, and Zhoan is calling you."

"All right, I'll be finished soon," Zha shouted back, as Kuo'ran fixed her hair, and then laid the massive headpiece.

"It looks like it's going to fall over," Kuo'ran said, adjusting the headpiece.

Outside, Zhoan guided Seejuk and Giirsa to a table reserved for the House of Khor. "Every House has tables like these to seat their representatives. This is going to be our table. I am supposed to seat over there with my House of Du'ran, but I requested an excuse so I can seat here instead."

"We appreciate that," Giirsa said. Shortly after, Kuo'ran joined them, telling them, Zha's preparations were finished.

"You're not just going to see Zha do the oath, but you will see the nobility of every House, and in particular, that of the Flo'karr, which we will soon arrange to meet," Zhoan said.

"I have almost forgotten why I am here," Giirsa said. "With all these festivities going on..."

There was a rapid beating of heavy drums that called the Assembly into silence and attention. An old man in brilliantly garbed costume stepped upon the center stage, followed by a woman in equally brilliant robes.

"The Sha and Lord of the Flo'karr, with his daughter, the Segura and Princess of the Flo'karr. They will lead the ceremony, and they will tell our history in song," said Zhoan.

The Flo'karr nobles began an arcane dance and song. The movements were slow and deliberate, the drums pounding up and down with them. Flutes and harps joined with the melody in a bizarre opera. For Seejuk, it resembled the ceremonial operas of the Soban, Manaani, and the Somtaaw.

Zhoan began explaining the ceremony. "They said that the Life came forth from a single egg, and like spores from a flower, the Life spread and prospered in the primordial paradise."

"The Gods saw the Life in the Primordial, and saw it was beautiful. They blessed the Life with their power and their seed, and the Life spread throughout the stars."

"A great nation was formed under the eyes of the Gods, and the Life was proud. For the Life had many children. They were one at peace with the Gods and the Heavens."

"But some of the Children had become too proud. Too proud of their magnificence, of their power. They raised their arms against their fellow brothers and sisters, and subjugated them. Brother and sister became slaves. The Nation blessed under light became an Empire cursed under darkness."

"Before the Taiidans named us, as that of Turan, before we are known as the Raiders, the people of the Rock Belts, the people without a home, we are a people of peace. We are who that was called the People who Drifted, the People who Sang, the People of the Winds. Our ancient name is lost, but the meaning is not."

"The proud Children who had turned into the Nemesis gathered the People of the Winds throughout the Empire, and brought them under the sword. Many died, never to sing again. Under the heel of tyranny, our peoples labored. Our children suffered, and where there was once song in their mouths, there was only the sound of weeping."

"The Nemesis grew in power and pride, till the Gods can no longer ignore the suffering they wrought. Then came the great War of the Heavens, a war so terrible that almost all life was destroyed. The stars perished in fire, and worlds were awash in blood. The dark angels of the Nemesis were cast out into the Abyss, but the Gods paid for their victory

in the loss of their grace. It was the Age of the Twilight. It was the Age that brought an end to the powers at large. It was the Age of our birth."

"It was during the war of the Heavens, that all who have been subjugated and crushed under the Master's heel would rise to fight for the freedom that was so terribly taken from them. It was the First Lord, Baruk, who would lead us, and united us under a single oath. The leaders of the tribes of the subjugated swore unity under Baruk, and it is this oath that we commemorate."

Zhoan stopped explaining when the lyrics from the Flo'karr came all too clear.

"Our freedom won, but the price is war, for we are no longer children of peace. The sword we carry is the vigilance to protect our freedom. And it has been that way for the ages, and it will be so till time ends."

"Today we remember the leaders who swore the oath. Their children are with us, for each House remembers the tribe that fought, each Lord of the House, a child of the Oath Taker. Let us hear them take the Oath. Let them relive our moment of glory and birth. Let us hear them sing the song of our Freedom..."

The Parade of Lords began. Each Sha or Segura of a House came wearing a magnificent robed costume that glittered with jewelry and embroidered with the skins, scales and feathers of exotic creatures from strange planets. Each Sha or Segura, Lord or Princess of the House, was a descendant of a great rebel leader, the Oath Takers, each playing a part in the liberation of a slave race that marked the beginnings of the Raiders. It began with the Sha of the Flo'karr.

"I am the child of Kona Flo'karr, who remembered the Time of Struggle and placed it in song. For the Unity I pledge. For our Freedom I will fight. Under the Heel and the Sword, we will always be one..."

Each Oath was a moderately lengthy song. Each long enough to make a hearer bored, but not long enough to put them to sleep. For Seejuk, that was the trouble. It was magnificent yes, and it was a great honor to watch. But it was also dreadfully monotonous, with the low tone singing and the constant beating of the drums as one can expect from a tribal ritual.

The Sha of the Har'k'hah was next, followed by the Sha of the For'lym. Then came the Segura of Du'ran, then the Sha of Res'coom, the Segura of Soo'naan, the Segura of Hu'ran, the Sha of Si'rak, Segura of Le'gaia... At some point Seejuk stopped counting, as there can be anywhere from thirty to fifty Inner Houses.

Then came the Segura of Khor. Her childish youth stood out from the respectful elderliness of the batch. Her father, if he were alive, would probably fit in better, but since he was dead, the young descendant of Khor must take his place. Zha moved in a pace that was too hurried with the rest of the parade, and if she was not too careful, she may trip on her robes. Terrible anxiety gripped Seejuk if Zha would make a major embarrassment of the entire affair. But amazingly she held on with some grace, and took center stage of the podium. Seejuk breathed a sigh of relief.

It was Zha's turn to sing. "I am the child of Mazath Khor, who led the Starfighters against the dark angels. For the Unity I pledge, for our Freedom I will fight. Under the Heel and the Sword, we will always be one..." She went on and on with her song, the note of her voice young and high compared to the elders that came before her. Despite the song's monotony, Seejuk smiled as Zha beamed from the stage. She was very proud of this moment, and he knew she would be thinking of her father.

Zha's song ended and she faded backstage as more Sha's and Seguras take the stage for their oath. After each oath taking, Seejuk noticed that each Sha or Segura would join their representatives in their reserved tables.

There was a tapping of feet, and Zha was lifting her skirts as she tried to join the table without disturbing the other guests. She was still in her ceremonial robes, but not without the headpiece, which she had left in her dressing room.

"I did it! I did it! I finally made the Oath!" Zha clapped her hands.

"That was most lovely, Princess Zha," Kuo'ran said. "One day, I invite you to come to watch a Sjet ceremony in return."

"I would like that too," Zha said.

"I would have to say, congratulations again, Miss Zha," Giirsa said. "It is a great occasion and honor to watch this event. I will write an article about this when I get back, detailing such a historical moment as one of the first three Kushans to ever see this Oath taking."

The last of the Lords finally ended his song, and the Sha of the Flo'karr returned to the center stage. As Zhoan explained, he would go on telling what happened during the War of the Heavens.

"...and the Nemesis was banished into the Abyss, never to return..." sang the Lord of the Flo'karr.

Suddenly there was an interruption, and an old senile man ran to the stage.

"No! No! No!" Salim cried. "This is not true. The Nemesis will return. They are not destroyed. We are in peril..."

A handsome girl ran to the stage to restrain the old man. "Please, father!" cried Zhura. "Do not make an embarrassment of yourself. Come down now."

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Sha of Flo'karr, a man named Mushak, tried to appease the commotion and embarrassment the senile old scholar made. "Salim was once the best scholar of all the Flo'karr, but now he's quite old. Too old to differentiate reality and fantasy. Forgive a once great scholar of the Flo'karr, now old and senile."

"I am not Senile!" Salim shouted back, refusing Zhura's hands to lead him back to the audience. "Stay away from me! You people have not heeded my warnings, so I come here in front of you, in the only place that can still take your attention."

He pointed an accusing finger to everyone in the audience and particularly to the Lords who had already sat down in their tables. "You...you all of you have made a mockery of the Oath. Like you, the Lords of For'lym and Harkk'hah. You sing the Oath, but behind our backs, you flaunt the Treaty of Houses by keeping Taiidani Imperialists as vassals, boasting both your fleets with carriers, heavy cruisers and destroyers that would not have otherwise permitted by the Treaty!"

The Shas of For'lym and Harrk'hah stood up, indignant. "How dare this old man lie against the honor of the For'lym and the Harrk'hah?"

"Honor? Honor?" Salim answered back. "The Sha of For'lym talk about honor? The Flo'karr's Seeker ships have spied against everyone of you, and we know the disposition of all your fleets. Why, we all have them recorded! You and all your Imperialist vassals!"

"Now you are talking too much!" shouted Mushak, deeply red faced by the revelation. "As the Flo'karr, we deserve to know what is happening with all the Houses, especially when breaking the Treaty rules. That is our mission."

"To spy on your fellow people?" asked Mahar, Sha of the For'lym. "That is one interesting mission! And we are not breaking the Treaty! If the Treaty has a loophole and we somehow exploited it, that is not my problem!"

As people argued, Zhoan turned to his Kushan guests, seeming embarrassed. "Well my friends, I assure you these things don't usually happen in every oath taking. Well, once in a while."

"This kind of spoils the event," Zha said.

"Who is that old man?" asked Giirsa.

"His name is Salim, once the most famous and now the oldest scribe of the Flo'karr," Zhoan explained. "He may be the person you seek for your intergalactic archeological studies."

"Then why doesn't people respect his opinion?" Kuo'ran asked.

"He has been pushing around a lot of crazy theories lately, like a prophet prophecizing doom. I don't know if he still keeps a level head, and if that is the case, maybe it is his daughter, Zhura, that you must speak," Zhoan answered. They turned their attention back to the arguing scene.

"My father may be old and weak, but he knows what he is saying," cried Zhura. "We may have circumstantial evidence that the Nemesis still exists. We have scans of strange ships encountered in Sector 34B that indicate that a civilization may exist in the Abyss."

"Circumstantial evidence?" Mushak questioned. "That is not enough for us to work on. It was you Salim who told us that the prophecies of the End had been fulfilled with the coming of the Exiles, the fall of the Empire and the coming of the Beast. Is this not the prophecy?"

"For the Promised Ones, once exiled
return to their Mother's world,
the Great Star will fall.
the Stars will weep,
the winds will carry their sad song.

For the time of Tribulation have come
for those who wander,
the Feared Enemy, the Nemesis
will tame the Beast
and hold the key to the Deliverer."

"Now you take your interpretation of the prophecies back? After everyone has accepted your word as canon?"

Grim faced, Salim answered. "Based on previous data, that our prophecies was fulfilled would have been the logical conclusion. But something new was introduced. We failed to anticipate who the Promised Ones are. When the Protectors of Kadesh journeyed to Hiigara, it turned the prophecy back to its true beginning. Isn't the ones who proved victorious over the Kadeshi among us? The one from the House of Khor?"

"I am she," Zha stood up.

"Do you know that you have inadvertently helped part in a train of events?" Salim said.

"No I don't know and I do not understand."

"Then you shall understand my child, for when the great ship the Khamak fell through the Hiigaran atmosphere, it fulfilled another prophecy, the fall of the Great Star," Salim said.

"Preposterous," Mushak said. "The prophecies are so vague they can be interpreted to mean anything!"

Suddenly Flo'karr officers came and their uniformed presence disrupted the session.

"Is this something so important that the Oathtaking must be interrupted----again?" ask Mushak.

"Indeed it is, sir, Your Highness," said the captain. "I am Ajaar, captain of the Seeker class deep space research vessel, Albagnon. We have news that all the Lords of the Council must hear."

"We have detected a massive energy burst signature in the Mohilim sector, similar to a small nova," said Ajaar.

"Is this the news? An insignificant nova?" Mushak asked. "The Mohilim sector is outer boundary, near the Abyss. Who requested that you scan the area?"

"It is at the request of the scribe Zhura," Ajaar said.

Mushak turned to Zhura. "If your action was illegal, I would have reprimanded you. But you are still requested to make a justification why a Seeker class vessel must be deployed near the Mohilim sector."

Zhura stood defiantly. "Sector 34B is near the Mohilim sector. Mohilim is the closest near-Abyss region that has the largest concentration of stars and asteroid belts. While we have not detected a planet in that area, its resource concentration is high enough to support an interstellar civilization."

"So what interstellar civilization are you looking for? No, let me guess, you are looking for the Nemesis, which had already been justly banished since the beginnings of our history!" Mushak said.

"Let me interrupt," Ajaar said. "There is another thing we must be concerned about. Nemesis or no Nemesis, we encountered an armed fleet. This one is from the Galactic Council. Our data modules recorded their jump gate entry in and out of the system. We can only hypothesize that the Council is reacting to the disturbance in Mohilim. It is an armed fleet consisting of Bentusi, Tiamat, Sakmat and Naga ships."

"See! See!" Salim jumped excitedly. "Only in the real presence of the Nemesis will the Council of the Unbound react with force!"

"Boy these people know a lot," Giirsa observed. "I would expect they know more about the Unbound than we do. Who is this Nemesis?" He turned to Zhoan. "It is imperative that we must meet these people as soon as possible."

"More circumstantial evidence," said Mushak. "Who knows, maybe the Council only needed to gather more data on such an astronomical event?"

"With armed ships?" Salim asked. "Who can threaten the Unbound in a manner they would send an armed fleet? It can only be the Nemesis or a Beast!"

Suddenly Giirsa stood up. "Gentlemen, ladies...my name is Giirsa of the Kiith Kaalel. I am a Hiigaran on the invitation of the Segura Zha of Khor and the captain Zhoan of the Du'ran...." There was much mumbling among the audience that sounded like "a Kushan...a Kushan in the oathtaking? Why is he here?" But Giirsa ignored the mumbles to deliver his speech.

"This is addressed to Salim and Zhura of the great House of Flokarr. You have an issue that has my interest and curiosity. It is obvious that there is resistance among the Council of Lords with your theory. As a fellow scientist and archeologist, I must say, that while your theory may have its merits, this is not the proper occasion to ram it down your leaders' throats. As leaders, the noble Sha and Seguras of the Houses, they have a position of responsibility that requires that the actions and decisions they make must be supported with enough justification. Their argument is reasonable. I suggest this, that I and our party can meet you outside of the Oathtaking to discuss this matters privately and let the ceremonies continue for the good of the people."

"Wow, you would make one hell of a politician," Zhoan said.

Kuo'ran stood up, refusing to let Giirsa take the center stage. "I am Kuo'ran Sjet, of the Sjet Kiith-sa of Hiigara and Kharak. It is my relative who was bound and piloted the Mothership of whom you called the Exiles." There was a lot of mumbling and surprised reaction in the audience and it pleased Kuo'ran for delivering the expected result. "I concur with my colleague Giirsa here. We need to talk, Mister Salim and Miss Zhura, when the ceremonies are over."

"Well well," Mushak said. "We have celebrities from Hiigara. You should have introduced them early to us, Segura of Khor and Captain Zhoan. We welcome our guests from Hiigara and we hope that this spectacle just witnessed does not cast our people in a bad cultural light. As Flo'karr, we are learning more about Hiigara and Kharak, and someday we welcome an exchange in information."

"I apologize in behalf of my party here for introducing ourselves earlier, Your Highness Sha of the Flo'karr," said Giirsa. "We came looking for just the thing you asked, an exchange in culture and information, as well as with lucrative trade and business contracts, our Kiithid and the whole of Hiigara might be interested to conduct with the various Houses of the Raiders, all for the mutual prosperity of both our peoples."

The audience clapped at Giirsa's remarks. "Prosperity", "business" and "contracts" were the clever key words Giirsa played to pull the strings in an audience look for opportunity and money. He was such a hit among the Raider nobility, and Giirsa congratulated himself.

"Wow, Giirsa, for a young person like you, you are such a smooth political reptile," Seejuk observed.

"I know, I know," Giirsa whispered back.

Salim looked at Giirsa. "Then we meet outside of the ceremony." Salim turned to Mushak. "I shall leave you and your upper classes to your ceremonies. But I find it with great and detestable irony that it turns out that far away Hiigarans would be interested in what I have to say about the future of our race instead of my brethren, the scribes of Flo'karr, and those who will be directly impacted by the Prophecies. My people."

With that, the scruffy old man left, with Zhura bowing and apologizing, then leading him away holding his arm.

Part 7— The Unbound

In the Mohilim Darkspace Sector—

The Council fleet slipped out of the hyperjump gates. Before them lay the dark matter clouds so often found in the Galactic Rims. Here in the Mohilim sector lay the boundary of the knownspace of the Galaxy. Beyond lay the darkspace of the Abyss, where there was little light and dark matter dominate.

The fleets of the Bentusi, the Tiamat, the Naga and the Sekmet began to discharge their cargo of Super Acolyte fighters, each race of the Unbound distinguished by its color---gold for the Bentusi, black for the Tiamat, blue for the Naga and red for the Sekmet. The Acolytes formed a magnificent formation, bristling in color against the background of darkspace.

It was the Tiamat that was first to speak, a voice projecting from the radial armed spidership.

"We are the Tiamat, the ones who speak in a thousand voices, the Wheel of Fate, the Destroyers of the Unbound."

"We seek the Condemned, and we know where you are. It is useless hiding among the black clouds. We can hear the dark songs of your souls."

Then another fleet emerged from the dark clouds. The head of a ship, followed by a long stalk, then a body with three massive arms radiating from its center. Among the clouds, more ships emerged, dark fighters with wings and a tail, the lights in their cockpits glistening, like eyes hunting for prey.

The Overlord X'on watched from the bridge of the Atonement, as the Penance, the Judgement, the Apocalypse, the Retribution, and the Forsaken emerged from the clouds. He can sense the songs of the Unbound, and their anger. But their feelings were not his concern.

"I can hear you, Tiamat, and I can hear the blackness of your Forbidden souls," said X'on. "So why would you again interfere with the affairs of the Nemesis? We live peacefully in the Abyss for all the generations. Is the bloodshed you wrought among the Starfarers, among your Children, among us, not enough for you? The very bloodshed you instigated, and caused you to be Forbidden by members of your own Unbound."

It was the Naga who spoke next.

"We are the Naga, we are the Ancient Ones, Keepers of the Unbound, who record all the Songs we hear."

"We have a treaty that lasted for countless eras, Overlord of the Nemesis. This treaty ended the great War of the Heavens and brought great peace across the Galaxy for many, many generations. Now, now, I see, you have amassed a great fleet once again, and you have violated this sacred treaty. You have made excursions into the lightspace. You have experimented with new weapons technologies and built an armada for aggression. Do you desire to retake the lightspace and rebuilt your illegal Imperium once again? Remember the great War that nearly destroyed your race!"

"The Great War of your Atrocity, Unbound," X'on answered back. "You remember the whole worlds you destroyed? The countless millions of souls whose songs you extinguished? Do you feel not their pain?"

It was the Bentusi who spoke next.

"We are the Bentusi, we are the Traders of the Unbound, sharing the songs and fruits to all life we see.

"We feel the loss of every soul whose song was destroyed. We grieve for them till this very day. Our loss was enormous; the Unbound has never suffered the loss of its own life to the extent the Great War of the Heavens did. The sadness and the weeping of the death of millions of our Children burned into our souls, the suffering of the Farers would fill the winds of the cosmos for ages, and the Unbound never sang a happy song once more. We the Bentusi, felt the great sadness that swept with the War. We wept, and the pain caused us to renounce war for all time till the day the Beast came. You are our Children. You felt our loss as much as we did with yours."

"For generations we helped what was left of humanity that was spread among the stars. Civilizations collapsed from the war, technology regressed. It was our atonement, our penance for all the deaths we caused. But a new race of humanity would rise, free from your tyranny, to set their own empires and chart their own destinies.

It was the Sekmet who spoke next.

"We are the Sekmet, Guardians of the Unbound. We are the Feared ones. We are those who are called forth to preserve the peace for the Unbound."

"Now your armada threatens the freedom and the progress that has been made since your tyranny was vanquished from the lightspace, and when you were all exiled into the Abyss. The tyranny and the enslavement your Imperium wreaked upon all the innocent life in the Galaxy."

X'on replied. "If the Sekmet and the Tiamat were called together, then the Council is truly concerned. We are flattered."

"But who are you to determine the destinies of the Bound? Our Imperium brought a level of civilization and peace throughout the Galaxy that was never seen before and after. While we keep ourselves exiled in the Abyss, we have sent ships to explore the lightspace, to see what has happened since then. We see constant war, we see empires rise and fall. The ones you call Hiiagarans and later the Taiidans. We see piracy, we see atrocities, we see misery. The Imperium would have put them all into check. Yes, many would have died, but that is the path of a true empire. No, you fear the Imperium, you fear the evolution of the Bound that they may one day be greater than your races. You feared us for all the power we possessed and the heights which we have risen. That was why the Great War of the Heavens started. You feared that the Children would be greater than those who had sired them."

"Even now I see that the Great War has cost so much your number, the Council still persists about acting like the police of the Galaxy. What great pride you have to assume that you are invincible, that no one could challenge you."

"Behold we have found something potentially greater than the Unbound. A freak of fate brought upon our galaxy from a race coming another galaxy, a life form originally conceived as a weapon, but now has evolved to something greater."

Hyperspace signatures began to appear behind the Unbound fleet. Several ships turned around to face the new enemy.

A giant ship stood there, with a huge ugly maw, five arms stretching from its center, curved like tentacles waiting to ensnare its prey. Its patched skin had splotches of a crystalline substance, like armor and to heal its wounds. Along with it, were an armada of its own---Turanic Lord carriers covered with the same white crystalline splotches, Taiidan and Hiigaran ships and fighters, all with the same white crystal patches, and even Super Acolytes, their mottled skin, white and crystalline.

The Bentusi spoke.

"What is this Creature? I can sense it. It sings from its soul like the Unbound, and it can hear the songs in the stellar winds."

"This is a creature that you once feared, and whose Selves you and your Hiigaran and Taiidan minions have hunted down to near extinction," said X'on.

"The Beast," a voice from the Naga said.

"Not just the Beast," said X'on. "A new evolution of the Beast, one that has acquired the senses of the Unbound. It is the White Beast."

"I can hear the songs of the Selves," said the Bentusi to the Beast. "There are much pain and hatred in your Selves, but there is none of the Darkness that afflicts the Condemned, the Nemesis."

"I feel the pain. The pain of a million selves dying across the Galaxy. Their weeping...their sadness. There is bitter pain all over."

"You are all singers? Why do you want to cause the Selves so much pain."

"Your previous Selves have infected so much life, assimilated them against their will," said the Bentusi. "They destroyed Life, and the life in so many, fought back against the Selves. I sense change in your Core Self, but not understanding."

"I feel only the pain, the weeping of so, so many. Death, everywhere...."

"Why?"

"You do not understand," said the Bentusi. "You only have the rage inside."

The tips of the tentacles around the maw of the Beast ship began to energize like glowing embers. The maw began to glow by itself, and something turned inside it, like a turbine gathering speed.

"Why?"

"Do not fill yourself with darkness," said the Bentusi.

"Why?"

Energy bolts connected the tips of the tentacles, then converged on the great hungry maw. A flash of light, and a brilliant ball, like a small sun, flashed out from the maw, hurtling towards the Bentusi ship, then enveloping it with sheer light. Shockwave emanated from the center of the Council fleet, a brilliant angry ring of fire, spreading out in all directions, rocking the formations of Acolytes, destroying many.

"Why?" The White Beast asked in supreme rage.

Beams fired out from the remaining Council ships, piercing the skin of the Beast. There was fire and steam where the beam made contact. The Beast raged and cried in pain, and everyone who had the senses to touch the stars can feel the scorching of its skin. The sound and the screams of rage cannot be heard through space, but telepathic voices transcend the space and inject themselves into the consciousness of those sensitive enough to have metaphysical senses. Aboard the Atonement, even X'on crumbled to his knees, his disciples gripping their heads in agony, as the wave of pain rushed out into space like an explosion, touching the soul of everyone.

The Acolytes engaged and boosted, heading towards the great ship, beams frying the wounded, pocked skin of the great Beast. The Beast carriers and cruisers advanced toward the line of Council ships. Beams blasted from the Council ships, vaporizing the shiny white armor of the Beast ships, which replied by shooting infection beams. The Unbound consciousness aboard the ships howled in agony as the infection swept over them, nanites corrupting their essence as the wave of plasma shoot through internal conduits.

Outside, Beast fighters of every type---Acolyte, Bandit, Triikor, Blade, Scouts, Kaarks--- rushed to desperately intercept the Council Acolytes in a huge chaotic swarm. Beast carriers continued to launch heavy and multigun corvettes, designs cloned from Taiidani, Turanic and Kushan fleets. Beast Hive frigates launched swarmers that plagued the Council ships. A Black Acolyte tumbled out of control, smoking as a White Acolyte slashed its beam into it. A White Heavy Corvette vaporized from a direct hit of a Sekmet Red Acolyte, which in turn was slammed then potted by a White Triikor behind it. Beams from the Tiamat ships toasted a White Bandit into a fiery ball, then continued to pick on the rest of the formation. The consciousness aboard a Naga ship screamed as a hail of plasma bombs pounded on its side from a wing of White Kaarks.

The voice of the Tiamat ringed out into the darkspace. "We shall not be defeated easily!" The spidership ejected a pod, which bolted into an area of clear space, then slipped out through a hyperspace gate. As Beast ships swarmed over it, it laid a massive repulsor field that sent the enemy fighters careening off away from it. But the relief was only temporary as the Beast swarms continued their relentless attack.

The disciples helped the Overlord to his feet. X'on looked out into the flashes in the darkspace. "Our people should not be denied of the pleasure of retribution. Order all ships to attack!"

The formations of Mantas, Skates and Bats, once silent, started to spew increasingly hot ion trails as they quickly accelerated, then boomed into the Council fleets. A Bat locked on to a Naga Red Acolyte, fired a missile, which exploded into a swarm of smaller missiles. The Red Acolyte tried vainly to escape, but each small warhead

consecutively hit the Acolyte, wearing away its armor before it exploded. A Manta unleashed more swarmer missiles against a Sekmet sphereship, pock marking its surface with a hundred of explosions before the ion beam defenses skewed the Manta in half.

Slowly, the Atonement, the Judgement, the Penance, the Apocalypse, and the Retribution advanced on the helpless struggling Council fleet. X'on could hear the echoes of the howls and screams of the wounded, dying Unbound. While their pain struck their hearts, X'on, and like all the rest of the Starfarers, relished in the pain of their demise and their futile struggle for any chance of life. X'on smiled and laughed, as the Purgatory class Dreadnaughts settled into firing position.

The infection beams and the Nova Cannon of the White Beast had destroyed more than half of the Council fleet. But the Nemesis must not be denied partaking in the pleasure of destroying those who had exiled and condemned the Nemesis to the Abyss.

Through telepathy, X'on warned the Beast to withdraw its strike craft and ordered his own to disengage from the main Council fleet. He signaled to the fleet to open fire. The modules on the tips of the three radial arms of the Atonement lighted, and then the energies fused together with the main body. A massive white ball of light boomed out from the main center module of the ship, headed to a smaller Bentusi ringship. The ball went off like a small nova, fragments and gases of what was formerly the Bentusi ship flew in all directions, the debris leaving trails of smoke. The ring of shockwaves tore the nearby Acolytes, obliterating them. A small Tiamat crabship was engulfed by the waves, breaking into multiple black debris.

A wave of nova balls from the Retribution, the Penance, the Apocalypse, and the Judgement headed out to the Council fleet, trapped from both sides, immobilized and paralyzed from the massive exploding balls of compressed stellar matter. Then as X'on watched, a whole series of massive white explosions rocked the fleet of the Unbound, thought waves of pain, screams and howls radiating from the thousands of voices of the Unbound. X'on, and for his people, they could feel them all, and they relished on it.

But the pain the Unbound will receive soon will even be greater. X'on made his orders throughout the fleet with the speed of thought.

On a lower deck, the Weapons Officer shouted, "launch EMP torpedoes!"

From the main body of the Purgatory class Dreadnaughts, the torpedoes dropped from the launch bay. Then each of their engines ignited, long ion trails heading quickly for their prey.

A torpedo smashed against the skin of a Tiamat spidership. Massive EMP pulses radiated from the ship's center to its arms, and the thousands of voices screamed in agony, electromagnetic waves of emotion radiating all over space.

...and X'on relished on the pain, even as tears streamed down his cheeks...

"...Die..." he thought, "...die... For you are all now condemned by the Children you have judged against."

Unable to withstand the pain, the Tiamat ship self destructed, pieces of its great arms spinning wildly, leaving trails of fire and debris.

A voice came from the Naga. "This is a great crime you committed against the Unbound and the Council. It will surely be responded in force, with the destruction of you and your fleet."

"As if I care," X'on responded. "As if I care... That is the main idea, for all of you to come and face your ultimate destruction. The Nemesis shall write the final chapter of the long, almost eternal history of the Unbound, and you, the Naga, will witness it in your last breath."

Torpedoes smashed against the hull of the Naga needleship, and waves of pain radiated from the Naga consciousness, as the EMP pulses fried every conduit and structure in the needleship. Instead of exploding, the Naga consciousness extinguished itself, leaving a black burning hulk drifting in the darkspace.

Only the main Sekmet Sphereship was left. Somehow, it knew that the White Beast had also emphatically felt the pain of the dying Unbound consciousness. It turned to the White Beast.

A voice from the Sekmet pleaded to the White Beast. "You felt our pain, and your heart is stricken with it. While you are our enemy, even this saddens you. I only ask to spare me from the pain of the missiles of the Condemned ones. Make my death quick and painless."

"...I feel your pain..."

The five tentacle tips of the Beast Deliverer ship lit up, their energies joining into the great hungry maw at the center of the ship. The Beast gathered its energy until it could not take it no longer, and the white ball of fire ejected from its maw, heading to the Sekmet Sphereship. From another direction, EMP torpedoes raced to the Sphereship.

"..Make my death quick and painless...I plead of you..." said the voice of the Sekmet.

Before the EMP torpedoes hit the Sphereship, the white nova ball got to it first. In a brilliant flash, the Sphereship atomized, a massive shockwave ring bursting out from its center, detonating the torpedoes. Its death was so quick, there was only nanoseconds for the Sekmet consciousness to even feel its own death.

Then it was all quiet. The Council Acolytes that were still flying, suddenly cut their engines and drifted, the primary consciousness that controlled them all gone and have joined the primordial cosmic dust. The White Beast felt all their pain and was now relieved the voices were all gone. The voices---from the Tiamat, to the Bentusi, to the Naga and the Sekmet—all quiet, all silent, all gone.

Only debris was left of the great Council police force. The White Beast hungered. The battle depleted it of its energy and material resources. Beast Workers and Resourcers, the last copied from Taiidan and Kushan designs, departed from the Deliverer to scavenge on the gases, while Beast Salvagers, an odd mix of Taiidan Tiirshak, Kushan Porter and Turanic Thief designs, began to salvage the drifting, dead Super Acolytes, the black ones from the Tiamat, the gold ones from the Bentusi, the red ones from the Sekmet and the blue ones from the Naga. They will be infected, each added their own Self, and joined with the fleet of the Beast, their colored skins turned white with the armor and regeneration skin of the white crystal nanobyte secretion of the White Beast.

"..I...I could have ended this with less pain. Is this much pain needed?"

X'on answered, his thoughts telepathically linked with the White Beast. "If you have understood the atrocities and sins the Unbounded committed against us, they deserve pain and death a magnitude several times greater. Eons ago, millions of lives were lost as whole worlds and moonships were torn apart from the planet destroyers the Unbound created. So the survivors of our people gathered in the last remaining of our great Moonships, and journeyed to the Abyss to seek refuge from the wrath and atrocities of the Unbound. Here in the Abyss, our fleet of Moonships grew, housing our once great civilization, until we have the power to strike back with our new Dreadnaughts and this armada. You saw the Abyss. Mostly the loneliness of dark matter, with only a few stars and even fewer life. Where are the winds and the songs that make up the beauty of the lightspace? Here in the darkspace, here is the insanity of a lonely prison and exile. This is what our people suffered for many generations."

"...those weapons, they cause so much pain..."

"Yes and I am sorry that we had used them earlier on you," X'on said. "It was necessary, for you had resisted us. The EMP torpedoes are among our most powerful weapons, in addition to the Nova cannon we have bequeathed you."

"...weapons of great destruction. Is this what I am meant to be?"

"I see," X'on said. "You have evolved a conscience. Don't let it get in the way of your survival and our alliance. The Unbound and all their Council minions will seek your destruction now and ours. I ask that you must be ready for the greater battles ahead. Take the chance to feed now in peace."

The Beast was silent, as its resourcers and salvagers gathered from the corpses and debris of its enemy. It watched from its mournful maw, as the fleet of the Nemesis withdraw back to the dark clouds to return to their hidden Moonships, to leave the White Beast to feed in its solitude.

Part 8—Towards the Unknown

The festivities over, the immense Raider armada that settled around the Turan planetoid began to depart, each fleet and task force, on to their own business. Compared to the noise the festivities brought, the departures was peaceful and quiet. As the Turan planetoid itself, it has settled back to its ordinary day to day business. The hawkers, as usual, remained to peddle their wares, as the planetoid represents an important trading post in this wild frontier of the galaxy. Mercenaries from all over the Galaxy and of all races, and not just of Raider persuasion, began to return to the planetoid, searching for job opportunities. The parking space of the planetoid as well as its docking bay, began to swamped by all sorts of unidentifiable craft from all over the galaxy. The Mule stayed. There was still some unfinished business.

A Flo'karr worker led Seejuk, Zha, Kuo'ran, Giirsa and Zhoan into the bowels of the planetoid, and there, the long age of the planetoid began to show. The tunnels were crudely cut out of the rock, then the surfaces glazed with what must be a hot torch into a glasslike surface to trap the air. The air was pungent like a crypt, there was a smell of methane and ammonia, and the ventilation tubes leaked with brown clouds. The ventilation and electrical equipment looked vintage, Seejuk thought, something like one would see in Kharak a hundred years before the Mothership launched. Yet Seejuk thought, it's possible that this equipment here may be thousands of years old. As they passed by the tunnels, lit by inefficient incandescent devices, a few people walked by them, and Seejuk guessed they to be maintenance engineers.

The worker led them to a large room that was a contrast of all sorts; full of high technology equipment and ancient decrepit relics. Seejuk hungrily eyed at the relics, wondered at the secrets they hid, and when he looked around, he saw the same hunger on the eyes of Giirsa and Kuo'ran. Kuo'ran in particular, could not get her hands off on all the small assorted relics.

"That was something that once belonged to your race," Salim said, his entrance unnoticed by the Kushan guests. "Navigational orb, Early Kushan Imperium. Orbs like these tell an important story of our ancient histories. For one, these orbs contain star maps that describe the extent of an empire and a log of the worlds the ship that carried it visited. These orbs are the heart of early intragalactic navigation."

"You mean?" Giirsa asked.

"Yes, Kushan Imperium. Long before it fell to the Taiidans. This orb was during its expansion phase, thousands of years before the fall. That other relic here, is a non functional hand weapon, coming from the era of the second Taiidan emperor. It makes a good technological assessment. Other items here come from all over: this one here is Early Frerrn Aggregate. That one there is a king's helmet from the primitive period of the Quo'has, a trading group that used to a xenophobic warlike race. The evolution of the Quo'has from a warring race to a peaceful one is quite interesting."

"I see that I have come to the right person and the right place," Giirsa said. "Compared to you and your work, we are like babies. Our people have just begun to rediscover its galactic heritage. The Kaalel Heritage Foundation, which I am the Vice Chairman, have begun several excavations around Hiigara to uncover more about the history of the Taiidan and Kushan Empires. "

"Then you will discover more," Salim said. "After the Fall of Hiigara, both Taiidans and Turanics looted the planet dry, leaving only the ruins. Many of Kushan artifacts do survive with the Taiidan museums, as well as with us."

"I do wonder," Giirsa proposed, "that for a generous sum, the Kaalel Heritage Foundation would desire to purchase many of your relics."

"History cannot be bought, my friend," Salim said. "The relics here are not for me to sell. Whoever and what their original owners are, they are now part of Raider history. However, this does not mean I will stop you from examining them. In the future, our peoples can work out an exchange where your scholars can examine our relics, and our scholars can study your relics and ruins. "

"So typical of you, Giirsa, that you think money is the root of everything," Kuo'ran said.

"Money is truly the root of everything," Giirsa said. "Ask your Raider friends."

Salim turned to Kuo'ran. "Is this the young lady related to the Karan Sjet, the commander of the Kushan mothership? We have photos of her, and you look like her. Your family resemblance is very strong. I am honored to be in the presence of someone so closely related to the leader of the Exiles that brought down the last Taiidan Emperor." He bowed and the gesture made Kuo'ran blush.

"I see, Father, your charm with the young ladies has not abetted with age," Zhura said, who had also entered the room unnoticed. She turned to the Kushans. "I feel your reason for coming here has nothing to do about purchasing or renting our relics."

"Indeed it is not. We will discuss mutually beneficial cultural exchanges later. Right now we have a primary agenda. We are in a pursuit of a theory---"

"The ProtoGenesis..." Salim interrupted.

"How do you know?" Giirsa asked.

"We are a very attentive group, and academic developments get to us quickly. What you call ProtoGenesis is not a new theory for the Taiidans, or for us, or for any of the older races of the Galaxy. I often lectured such an idea to the younger scribes."

"Indeed, then you are the right person to come to," Giirsa said. "Tell us more. I have a model of a relic here, obtained from the Kadeshi." Giirsa took out a device, and it projected a faithful three dimensional model of a sword.

"The Blade of Hannon, as it is called by the Kadeshi. It was said to have been captured as a trophy from a race the Kadeshi called the Blasphemous."

Salim examined the sword. He uttered a phrase. "Ceremonial sword, First Imperium. How did the Kadeshi ever get this relic? The First Imperium demised long before the Exiles came to the Gardens. "

"I guess the fleet that attacked them in the Gardens had this," Giirsa said. "What is the First Imperium anyway? How do you know that it is from this First Imperium?"

Salim pointed to the strange archaic writings carved throughout the length of the blade. Kuo'ran bent to examine the writings, and then adjusted her spectacles.

"The writing there is similar to the writing I have on this orb!" Kuo'ran said, reaching into her bag to pull out another holo-modeller. She activated the modeller, and it created a large blue orb out of the air. "This was a relic found in the Kadeshi mothership, the Khar'nak. It is currently in the Academy of Archeological Studies which---" Kuo'ran stared Giirsa at the eye "---was founded by the Sjet-sa, and by my aunt, Karan."

"...and which if you have not forgotten, is also financed by the Kaalel Heritage Foundation," said Giirsa.

"I remember the orb," Seejuk said. "I was the one who cataloged it. Don't you remember it, Zha?"

Zha nodded. "I do. It's a navigational tool of some kind."

"Yes, but not just a navigational orb. This orb happened to describe an empire with at least 2,000 star systems instead of just 150," Kuo'ran said. "This is an empire more than 12 times larger than the Taiidan Empire at its full extent. Is this empire the First Imperium?"

Salim bent to examine the orb. "This findings by itself are remarkable. What is more remarkable is how the Kadeshi are able to get them, considering they are, in the time scale of the races involved, quite a youthful race. Remember that the Raiders, that we, the People who drift with the Winds, have a history far longer than the Taiidan and the Kushan, and that we, have a history that links us to the First Imperium. What are the agings of the orb and the blade?"

"The blade is no older than the Kadeshi," said Giirsa. "We have dated it."

"According to the Academy, the Orb would have been made no earlier than when the Exiles first settled the Garden," said Kuo'ran.

"Impossible!" Salim shouted. He stood up and started to pace about. "The Kadeshi is no more than 3,000 years old. The Imperium was at least 10,000 years old. The First Imperium perished long before the Kushans started their own Empire, and that lasted quite a while before the Kushan Dynasty fell to the Taiidans. The Dark Ages stood between the fall of the First Imperium and the rise of the first Kushan Emperor, and that was also a significant amount of time."

"What the hell is the First Imperium?" asked Seejuk.

"I will tell you," Salim said. "But these things...the orb and the blade, these are proof that there are those who survived the Imperium, that the Imperium still secretly exists long after its purported demise, long after its stories have faded into myth and legend. I am right! Then the Prophecies are indeed true. The First Imperium never died...and by the gods of the stars, they will come back."

"What the hell is the First Imperium, old man?" Seejuk asked again.

Salim turned to Zha. "I sense you, the Segura of Khor. You have the same powers as your father. Even though I am not gifted with one, meditations have trained my senses to detect a Starfarer in our midst. " Salim turned to the rest of them. "To understand the First Imperium is to understand who the Starfarers really were."

"I remember, the Tiamat told me," said Zha. "They told me and the priestess G'yela of Kadesh, who led the Crusade."

"Is G'yela a Starfarer among the Kadesh?" asked Salim.

"Yes she is," Zha affirmed.

"Your G'yela is only aware of her powers, but not of her ancestral origin," said Salim. "If she was a descendant of a Starfarer, then the Starfarers had one time tried to enter the Great Nebula. There is no better proof of that event than the Orb and the Blade you see now. They, the Starfarers, invaded the Gardens and survivors among them were left to live in the Gardens, where generations later, one of their descendants---the Priestess G'yela---would surface and lead the Kadeshi out of the Nebula."

"Fascinating theory, old man, " Seejuk said, "So are you implying that there is a connection here between the Starfarers and the First Imperium?"

"The First Imperium was founded by the Starfarers," said Salim. Salim turned to Giirsa and Kuo'ran. "You speak of the ProtoGenesis theory. This is a theory that has many followers among the scientific elite of the Galaxy. It speaks that all human life originated from a single planet, which is now long forgotten in the antiquity of prehistory. But there is a twist to that story... and you, Zha Khor, you know."

"The Unbound came to this planet," Zha explained. "There are those among the Unbound who saw the women. They fell in love with them, came down to the planet, and bred with them. For that the Unbound exiled them, and they became Bound like the ones they love. Their seed would become part of that race. These descendants, these hybrids, have the power like the Unbound to sense the stars and the solar winds they make. When the time came, the people of this planet began to explore the stars, these descendants, the first Starfarers, led the way..."

"And what a way they led," said Salim. "The Starfarers paved the way to the beginnings of the First Imperium... The ability to sense the stars and hear their songs was a decisive advantage to the Starfarers, enabling them to expand faster and conquer more territory than any other stellar race. Soon they subjugated all that they saw. Even those among their own race, they enslaved."

"This is where the history of the Belters, the Drifters---the ancestors of the Raiders---would arise. We do not know originally where our origins lie or that we even share the same origins. All we know from the very start that we were once slaves to the Starfarer Imperium race we call now as the Nemesis. Our original cultures and origins were all erased and left without a memory, to serve as mindless tools for the Imperium."

"So the Oath the Raider nobilities took...you recreate this history..." Kuo'ran said.

"You have been observant, yes..." Salim replied. "Baruk was a Starfarer who could not take all the injustices of his kind. He gathered other Farers who saw the same as he did, like your ancestor, Zha, Mazath Khor. He also gathered

the tribal leaders of those that were enslaved. They made an Oath of unity, and launched a rebellion that would lead to the liberation of all slaves."

"But even that would not be enough against the sheer power of the Imperium. As atrocities increased, the Imperium clashed with the Unbound. The Imperium thought that the Unbound was the last remaining obstacle to complete domination. The Great War of the Heavens broke out. It was war so terrible, billions perished and whole worlds were destroyed. The Imperium was destroyed, and the Nemesis was cast out of the galaxy, which legends say, were sent into the nether regions between the galaxies."

"We won our freedoms, but not necessarily our home, for we will never know where we originally came from. Our history started only with the day of our liberation. From then on, we were homeless. As the Imperium fragmented, new civilizations rose to contend for territory, and we somehow never found the place where we should be. We were often hunted down, and forced to fight for our survival. We had to make allies to defeat our enemies."

"Our prophecies taught that one day, the Nemesis would return. But our history is so old, there are even those who disbelieved that the Nemesis ever existed."

As he talked, Zhura was working on her own presentation. She signaled by hand that her work was completed. "We have made a collection of unidentified sightings of strange alien craft, often sighted near the Border Rims. There are hardly any stars there that can harbor a native interstellar civilization. Our leaders have refused to acknowledge them as the Nemesis, citing only they can be a new previously unidentified stellar race."

"As my father was discussing, I have been photographing the script in the blade and in the navigational orb, and comparing them with the script often seen with these unidentified craft."

"Wait ...wait, I don't get this," Giirsa interrupted. "We came here looking for the secrets of the Universe, and now you're talking like they're out to get us."

Zhura didn't want to honor Giirsa's interruption. She bent over and clicked on the hologram machines.

Models of unknown fighters came into view, hovering and rotating in space. The first had large extended wings and a tail, the second one had shorter, triangular wings, with a short tail, and the third had extended wings that swept forward. The fighters were all smoothly designed and sleek, a sign of an advanced race with excellent engineering, and yet hungry like predators.

"These are 3D models of ships sighted in unprovoked attacks throughout out the Outer and Border Rim sectors. Some of these attacks have proven deadly, resulting in the loss of a number of fighter craft, freighters and resource miners."

Zhura slowed one of the images, then zoomed in to the inscriptions in the fighter's wings.

"Recognize that? Now match it to the holo of the blade you brought." Zhura zoomed to the inscriptions in the blade. "Now match it to the symbols in the navigational orb." Zhura zoomed through the transparent orb and into tiny symbols that marked every star. "Recognize that too?"

"The symbols are similar, and some of the symbols, which we can theorize are letters, are identical," Zhura said.

"Let's follow the logic here," said Seejuk. "If these fighters are here right now, with us, and they may belong to the Imperium civilization, so we can assume somewhere in the borderspace or rimspace, there might still be survivors of the Imperium, set up in a civilization somewhere."

"Our knowledge of the Imperium is very limited, despite the pivotal role it played in our history," Salim said. "We do not have enough artifacts and historical records to recreate an accurate model of this civilization and its technology. The passage of time has been too long for such preservation. The items you see from the Kadeshi are treasure, but you did mention they were attacked in their history by these. If an Imperium civilization exists, then it may not act benevolently, if they are capable of attacking the Kadeshi. They may also know more about us than we do about them, sending scouts and spies all over the knownspace. All this is just hypothetical, but we must examine every possibility."

"If this civilization still exists, we must discover them," Girrsā said. "Direct contact is the only way we can expand our knowledge about the very root of our existence."

"This is one of those times I have to agree with you," Kuo'ran added.

"We have been pinpointing all the occurrences and sightings of these strange new craft, and I think we can interpolate a hypothetical location we can expect to go," said Zhura.

"Go?" asked Seejuk.

"I doubt that the Sha would let us have a Seeker class vessel for an exploratory journey," said Salim.

"Yes after the theatrics my father done in front of the Council," Zhura added.

"Sounds like a job for the Mule," Seejuk injected. He turned to Zha, whose frown in the face voiced a silent concern.

"Zha, this is an opportunity to discover what being a Starfarer truly means. It means discovering the roots of your power and hidden heritage. You should be excited about this."

Zha answered. "I just have a bad feeling about this. I don't know why. Just a bad feeling."

"You have an uncanny intuition, Zha, and I respect it," Seejuk said. "However that meant we must come only more prepared and with greater caution. We cannot let fear nor the unknown stop us."

"I know," Zha admitted.

"I want to go too," Salim said. "I must go. This may potentially be the greatest discovery in Raider history for a long time. I will not be denied of that moment."

"I was about to propose the same thing," Giirsa added. "We need an expert with us on the voyage."

"Where my father goes, I go," Zhura said. "I'm his assistant and he needs someone to take care of him."

"Naturally," Giirsa added.

"Zha could be right, and this is supported by the evidence we have seen. This may be potentially dangerous," Salim remarked. "I am not sure I am willing to risk you, my daughter on this venture."

"And the Kushan Seejuk is right," replied Zhura. "I'm still a Raider by heart even though I'm a scribe that buries herself in books. You will disgrace me if you left me behind due to some fear. Dangers we must face together. I cannot shrink from the challenge."

"Then it's all settled," Kuo'ran said. "We have a journey ahead of us."

"However, I do have some reservations about bringing the two important Kiithsa scions in a potentially dangerous journey," said Seejuk.

"If you are worrying about your responsibility to me and Kuo'ran," Giirsa said, "that's noble of you, but I think we both are old enough to think for ourselves."

"Yes, we go!" Kuo'ran shouted. "Like Salim, I will not be denied."

"Put that in writing, you two, and at least, make your intentions known to your parents and relatives," Seejuk wamed, knowing better not to argue with two spoiled and persistent young adults. "At least you owe them that. We can arrange to have the message sent through subspace."

Zha slowly stood up. "I guess we have a journey to prepare. Seejuk, I think in the meantime we got some business with the Soonani we need to take care off."

Seejuk smiled as he nodded.

Part 9—The Weeping Star

It was supposed to be an uneventful day for the life of Sha Zural of Harkk'hah, as his Qwaar-jet heavy cruiser cruised back to their planetoid base. The last Festivities didn't go well for the Harkk'hah as they had hoped, but it's just festivities nothing more. But he has his share of delightfully memorable scandals. The best of the Harkk'hah pilots lost to a girl, who just happens to be the Segura of Khor. To make matters worst, the girl attacked the pilots with a wrench after the competition, and in the ensuing scuffle, injured his pilots and herself. Zural smiled. The young Segura upstart had a lot of pep and attitude. One day if she's older, and when the House of Khor has recovered some of its former power, he might consider doing a political alliance against the other conspiratorial factions in the Council. At least he was content that the Harkk'hah pilots finished ahead of their old time rivals, the For'lym.

Zural watched the stars. He can see his fleet, mostly frigates and transports led by a Lord class carrier. The beautiful Qwaar-jet was his special prize, a Taiidani Imperial Heavy Cruiser he unceremoniously took over from its former owners when they stopped being useful for him. He also took over a Saarkin-Cho carrier and a number of Skaar-Tel and Skaar-Fa destroyers, boosting his total firepower beyond those allowed by Treaty of House. For a bonus, he shipped his former Imperialist allies to the Republican war criminal hunters in a classic backstabbing move that net him a large monetary bonus. The double cross also puts him way ahead in asking political favors from nearby Republican planetary governors. He thought about that scandal with the Flo'kar scribe right in the oath taking. He wasn't sure about that Nemesis thing the scribe was babbling about, but the scribe was certainly right about the Houses bypassing the ship tonnage Treaty.

Ah yes, the For'lym. The old rivals to the Harkk'hah. The Flo'karr scribe said they too flaunted the Treaty, but every insider already knew about this but did not want to admit. The real question was not when, where and why they did it, but how many illegal ships they already have.

There was an alert in the comlink, and an officer came to his door. "Your Highness, your presence is requested on the bridge immediately. There is an anonymous ship sighting."

The Sha Zural looked to his bed, where two of his sex slaves slithered their bodies in the satin sheets. "I will be back, my precious ones."

He put on his robes, but as he suddenly was about to step out of the door, everything went black. The officer was shocked, looking for the man he was supposed to escort and who vanished right under his eyes. The sex slaves screamed, and the alarms soon ran throughout the ship.

In the darkness, lights shone upon him. The lights were blinding, and Zural squinted at their oppressive glare.

A voice in the darkness welcomed him. "Welcome, Prince of Those who drift in the Winds. Welcome my friend."

"Who are you?" Zural asked. "I ask that you return me immediately to my ship! Or face the wrath of the Raiders!"

There was high pitched giggling and laughter among the many voices that were hidden in the darkness.

A voice boomed, "This Prince amuses us with his precarious attitude. Does he truly know where he is now?"

"The man is clueless, like many of those who are Bound," said another voice.

Zural turned and turned to every voice he heard and a panic began to set upon him. Any race who could teleport him at the speed of thought must surely be one of great power.

"I see, I think he is beginning to get a clue," laughed a voice.

"Little man," cried a voice addressing him directly. "Do you know who we are?"

"No," Zural cried out. "But please let me go.... I beg of you..."

"My, my, little Bound man, we still have some business with you," said another voice in the darkness.

"We are the Forbidden ones. We are the Wheel of Fate. We are the Tiamat."

"And we have a business proposition for you that you cannot refuse. As you will see, it will benefit both our parties immensely..." laughed the voice.

The laughter echoed across a giant spidership that hovered over the Raider fleet.

* * *

Zha tried to look responsible and in command, posing as she poured her attention to the inventory logs. Kuo'ran watched alarmingly as a slow procession of new crew, carrying their bags, walked to the shuttle that will carry them to the Mule.

"You just hired these people?" Kuo'ran asked. "These are the mercenary vagabonds that littered the sidewalks of this planetoid."

"They were looking for work and we needed the extra hands," Zha said. "It's called Employment Opportunities. Now you must excuse me, I got a lot of work for this journey."

"Well I know when I'm not needed," Kuo'ran said. "But I do wish I can help somewhat."

"Okay, well then, maybe you can help me with this inventory count," Zha said. "Remember Maalasi?"

"Yes, that salesman?" Kuo'ran affirmed.

"After much ballyhooing over the details, we signed a contract. They will build my new Outpost, but with substantial discounts, licenses for new ship designs, and they are turning over their excess show inventory to us," Zha said.

"Show inventory?" Kuo'ran asked.

"Yes. I left much of my auxiliary frigate task forces with the makeshift base back in my home sector. I only brought two Ion Array Frigates, and we're going to need more firepower if we're going to expect trouble in the Rim sectors."

"Are you telling me you just bought that crap Maalasi was trying to sell you?" Kuo'ran asked again.

"Yup!" Zha replied. "We got some of those Corsair stealth frigates and Payback class plasma bomb frigates, some Outlaw attack bombers. In addition to them, we got the new Vagabond class scouts, the Buccaneer class plasma bomb corvettes, the Vigilante class Repair Corvette, and the Intruder class missile frigates. Our Demon fighters are now upgraded to the Scimitar class level, which should give us additional firepower."

Kuo'ran saw a familiar figure about to join them. "Maalasi?"

"Yes, my Kushan friend," Maalasi said. "I am joining in this voyage along with a few of my technicians. This is to help train your crews and acquaint them with the new equipment. We must also be here to anticipate any shakedown problems in the use of the new craft. This is all part of our standard warranty service and our aftermarket support." He humbly bowed before Zha.

In another part of the bay, Seejuk finished inspecting a Vigilante class corvette. The Vigilante was nothing more than a Thief Corvette fitted with repair modules, another creative variation of the Raider modular corvette theme which the Thief Corvette lay as the core system. The Buccaneer was another variation, a Thief fitted with plasma bomb equipment.

The Vagabond seemed to be a Bandit variation, the spacious compartments of the Bandit fitted with sensor arrays. He went to one example, then opened the bays.

Seejuk screamed. "Maalasi! The arrays here! These are illegally copied from Somtaaw Recon designs!"

Maalasi replied from a distance. "Oh, you are correct these were copied from a Somtaaw Recon fighter. The fighter wandered into our space and we picked it up. We assured you we returned the pilot to the nearest Republican base with no harm."

"...and the Recon fighter?" Seejuk asked.

"Be assured, its on good care with us," Maalasi smiled.

"That's not the point. The point is that you copied designs right and left without asking permission or license."

"...and what is wrong with that?" Maalasi said. "It is for the good of everyone that technology must be rightfully shared."

"Uggh! I am not talking to you anymore..." Seejuk shouted.

In another part of the bay, Zhoan finished his transaction with Giirsa. "Credits have been successfully transferred to your hidden account in a Taiidan bank. We have confirmation," Giirsa said.

"It is nice doing business with you, especially for something so easy and bloodless," Zhoan said. "If you have anything else, Mr. Giirsa Kaalel, like you need to push around people, I can provide the muscle and the firepower."

"I will keep you in mind," Giirsa said. "One day, I believe your specific talents in warfare will come in handy in the service for the Kiithid Kaalel."

Zhoan walked over to Zha and gave her a rich bear hug. "I'm going to miss you, you little bitch," he said. "Keep kicking ass, and I hope that we will see each other soon." She leaned her head on his chest and landed a fist on it. "Oh yeah, you can bet on it," she said.

"All right men," Zhoan said, raising his arms, "we got worlds to plunder! ha ha!" With that, he and some of his proteges boarded a Cutlass frigate.

Zha and Seejuk watched as the shuttles and the frigates were loaded with supplies and newly hired personnel. Salim and Zhura came with an armful of bags, as Giirsa and Kuo'ran supervised the loading operations pretending to be in charge.

"I still think it's a bad idea to bring a lot of untested equipment and ships," Seejuk said as the entire party boarded the Corsair frigate, which will take them to the Mule.

"Do not worry, my Kushan friend," Maalasi replied. "We stand by our products 100% with full support. As you will see..."

As the Corsair made its way to the Mule, Maalasi pointed to a large ship. It appeared to be a large dull grey warship, either a large destroyer or a heavy cruiser, its clean lines disturbed with large angular and squarish bulges that pass as turrets. The ship had an ugly malevolent atmosphere to it.

"What's that, a Raider Heavy Cruiser?" Seejuk asked.

"That was supposed to be the intention," Maalasi said. "It is the prototype for the Marauder class Heavy Cruiser. You name it, the baby's got it, starting with the four continuous fire ion beam cannons, a dozen large calibre energy cannons, two quad rapid fire plasma bomb launchers, and two quad fire long range missile racks, packed in a hull with multiple layers of easily replaced fiber reinforced reflectively coated ablative armor... Oh that baby can eat the entire Kushan exile fleet...well excuse my language... We originally designed it in case the Taiidan Emperor had any doubts about his alliance with the Raiders, and decides to throw a tantrum at us. It was designed to beat the Qwaar Jet heavy cruiser in a straight match."

"Not too shabby. Seems to me there is a 'but' somewhere here..." Seejuk said.

Maalasi added. "Unfortunately due to the Treaty restrictions, our market was limited. With volume so low, it had to be custom built. Potential customers didn't want the cost. The final blow came when many of our potential customers acquired Qwaar-jets from the Imperialists and the whole project was shelved."

"So how much was it?" Seejuk asked.

"10,000 RU's. Quite a bargain for what this baby can do."

"You're freakin' nuts," Seejuk retorted. "That costs almost a third more than a Somtaaw Archangel dreadnaught. No wonder no one is buying."

"As I said, it's creation required a lot of precision hand labor, and the volume was low. So the price is a bargain according to the circumstance," Maalasi explained.

"That's a waste for something that has strong potential," Seejuk said. "Now tell me, why is it following us?"

"Not to waste the ship, we converted the Marauder into field testing support ship. Most of my technicians and engineers are in that ship, and so are their testing and repair equipment. We need the Marauder to support the new ships you just acquired from us."

"You're telling me, Maalasi, that thing is coming with us?" Seejuk remarked.

"Yes, Mr. Seejuk. It's part of our after sale support. We have also heard about your journey into the Outer Rim space and about strange new fighters you have encountered. We would be most interested to see and scan these fighters for whatever new technology they may have. The Marauder is equipped for the task. We will not charge for any support the Marauder will provide."

"Are the weapons operational?" Zha asked.

Maalasi replied. "Yes, they are, in case if some Raider wants to steal our prototypes. The Marauder will stand guard. Unfortunately, our complement is mostly engineers and technicians, not warriors, so we would not be as competent in fighting as you would expect."

"This mission was supposed to be a simple exploration," Zha pointed out.

"And so it is, the Marauder and the Soonani will not get into your way. We will be so inconspicuous, you will not notice us in your endeavors," Maalasi smiled.

Seejuk rolled up his eyes and sighed.

* * *

The Mule, the Marauder and the odd fleet of untested frigates jumped out of the slip gates near a system bordering the Mohilim sector. The bridge on the Mule was full, with no less than Zha, Seejuk, Kuo'ran, Giisa, Salim, Zhura and Maalasi on board. Maalasi sat on a diagnostics console, continuing to observe the new ships. The Corsair, Intruder and Payback frigates seemed okay. Two time tested Assassin Ion Array frigates made up the rear.

"We are not far from where the sightings occurred, and I suggest that we will go in to cloak mode," Zha said.

"Maalasi, you better hope that the cloaking and mimic generators in all your ships are working," Seejuk warned.

"No problem, my doubting Kushan friend. The first thing a Raider does when checking his ship is to check his cloak or mimic systems."

"Then order everyone into a cloak mode," Zha said. The Mule extended its tethered cloak generators, as the Marauder and the frigates winked out of sight.

"We're going to try to make it across the system undetected before we make the next jump," Zha said. "Hyperspace stability is not good in this area, which is why we need to go across until the levels go back on."

"Father, you should be back resting," Zhura said. But Salim seemed too excited and wanted to stay on the bridge.

"I have not left the planetoid for an exploratory journey for a long time," he said. "I can't rest now."

The trip across the system was uneventful, until the scanners lit up.

"One of the Vagabond scouts has detected something. We got a ship type energy reading at six o'clock about four marks away from us," said the sensors officer.

"Scan and magnify," Zha ordered.

A ring shaped vessel appeared in the screens. Its hull was cracked and blackened, fumes coming out of the cracks.

"Looks it barely survived some heavy battle," Seejuk observed.

Zha suddenly stood up. "I can feel a presence in that ship, and whatever is on that thing, it is badly wounded and dying."

"My scanners are only showing one life sign aboard that ship, an entire ship being controlled by a single being," Seejuk said. "What is that thing?"

"Bentusi," Salim said.

"But it does not look like any tradership I have seen in our records," Giiirsa remarked.

"No, it's not a trader U-ship. It's a new kind of Bentusi vessel that we have documented recently and one that started to appear after the Beast war. The Bentusi Ringship and a new Tiamat Crabship," Salim explained.

"You know a lot do you," Seejuk commented.

"The Flo'kam knows a lot. We may be the best intelligence gathering organization in the galaxy. We're not just scribes. Or we will not have enough money to eat--we also spy, and often for a price," Salim explained. "The Ringship you see here is a smaller, more agile type of Bentusi vessel, and one that is strictly designed for war and self defense---a type of vessel that the Bentusi has not made for ages. "

"It could probably kick a lot of ass too," Seejuk said. "Then why is it that ship looked it got its ass badly kicked instead."

"I wonder who would be capable of doing such a thing," Zha asked. "I sense that the life sign aboard the ship is very weak. It is badly wounded and I can sense deep pain."

"There is only one way to found out and help whoever is on board. Salvage the ship," Maalasi suggested.

"But no one has ever seen a Bentusi on the flesh before," Kuo'ran said.

"There is a first time for everything," Seejuk answered.

A pack of four Thief corvettes ventured out, and hovered around the stricken ringship. "We have found the salvage points on the ship. We're ready to bring it back."

Zha gave the signal, and the corvettes began to tow back the wounded Bentusi ship. Nearby, a wing of Bandits began protective patrols around the salvettes. A fifth Thief salvette hovered near the Bentusi ringship in an attempt to extract the pilot.

"Negative. Extraction is unsuccessful. We have no way of extracting the Bentusi life form from the rest of the ship," the fifth salvette's pilot reported.

Maalasi addressed the issue to Zha. "If I may, your highness, let me suggest the salvettes tow the Bentusi ship towards the Marauder. We have technicians on space suits and repair bots onboard that ship that can perform much more precise extraction procedures. I would also suggest that we send the Vigilante class repair corvettes to put temporary welds on the ship to keep it from falling apart during the movement phase."

Zha nodded in agreement and the orders were given.

The Vigilante class corvettes welded and partly repaired the ship to a more robust state. The Bentusi ship settled to a side near the Marauder, as technicians in space suits departed with a space bubble canopy. Robots opened up a hole in the ship which the technicians sealed with the bubble as they entered the ship.

"We got a green signal. They got the Bentusi," Maalasi said.

"This is remarkable," Kuo'ran commented. "For the first time, we will actually get to see a live Bentusi."

"Tell your men to bring the Bentusi life form into the Mule," Zha ordered. The bubble canopy was brought into a Thief Corvette, which docked to the Mule. "Bring it to the medical room immediately. I can sense the Bentusi is gravely wounded."

There was a major commotion in the docks as the Bentusi's body was rushed to the medical rooms. Zha and the entire party quickly left the bridge to witness the Bentusi.

What they found was a shriveled humanoid body with a large head and pale skin. Its limbs and legs were weak and frail from ages of evolutionary disuse. The head had many metallic interfaces on.

"When we found him, he was deeply interfaced with his ship. Extraction was difficult," one of the Soonani technicians from the Marauder said. "We had to cut the interfaces to break him loose."

"Oh by the god Sajuuk's name," Seejuk uttered as he stared at the shriveled body. Both the mouths of Giirsa and Kuo'ran were wide open, as if their jaws had fallen to the floor.

"You look so small..." Zha uttered.

"I...I thank you..." said a voice that rang throughout their heads.

"He isn't talking, and yet we can all hear him inside our heads," said the medical attendant.

"The Bentusi is telepathic," Seejuk remarked.

"He is weak. He is dying," Zha said. "I can feel it."

"...I...did not want to die alone...A Child of the Unbound, a Starfarer...I can sense you..." said the voice of the Bentusi. "You...you have a heart of light. You are not like the Dark Ones, the Condemned, the Starfers whose hearts are filled with blackness..."

"Who did this to you?" Zha asked.

"Beware, Raider. Beware, O the people who once drifted the winds," the voice of the Bentusi rang out. "The one great enemy you call the Nemesis has returned. They have allied with a piece of the Plague you call the Beast."

"The Beast? Is that supposed to be behold, dead and gone?" Gürsa asked.

"Unless there are still evolved fragments," Seejuk answered.

"How can we be more certain?" Kuo'ran asked.

"I take it that the word of the Bentusi should be more than enough," Zha answered. "Why are you in this sector?"

"...The new White Plague... We of the Council and of the Unbound, we fear its power...This creature far surpasses the power of the Plague first brought from the Outside... We have observed the coming of the Nemesis beyond the Outside...when the Condemned allied with the new Plague, we have much to fear, for combined, we will not have the power to stop them. Not the Traders, not the Forbidden ones who are the Tiamat in your name, not the Keepers who are the Naga, and not the Insane ones who are the Sekmet. Lo, fear...fear...there is much to fear for the fate of the known space...it shall be the end of all we know...not even the best of our fighters cannot stop the new Plague..."

"Not even the Super Acolytes!" Seejuk uttered.

The voice continued. "...The Council sent a force to stop the White Plague...I am part of that force...We are all destroyed from the combined power of the Condemned and the Plague...all of us, the Bentusi, the Tiamat, the Naga, and the Sekmet, under the Nemesis and the White Beast.. I am the only survivor. The Unbound voices died either from the fierce pain of the weapons from the Condemned, or becoming bound with the flesh of the White Plague. I am fortunate and thankful to escape this fate..."

"To the gods of the stars," Salim shouted. "It is the prophecy..."

"---the Feared Enemy, the Nemesis
will tame the Beast---"

"It is being fulfilled. The true time of Tribulation has come for the People who wander, the Drifters by our ancient name..." Zhura cried. "Truly it is the prophecies..."

The voice of the Bentusi continued. "The great War of the Heavens against the Condemned, the Dark Ones, brought much grief to the Unbound. So much that we, the Bentusi, renounced war for all time, until the Somtaaw showed us once again, that we must defend ourselves. The same grief and shame brought condemnation to the Tiamat, and insanity to the Sekmet. The Condemned have returned and we may not have the power to stop them Woe, woe, woe to any being that is alive for the end has come..."

"It is with the last spark of my life that I must warn you," said the fading voice. "At this moment my Unbound brethren will come to claim my mortal remains. I'm ready to surrender my spirit to the Void."

At the very moment, the comlink to the Bridge spoke out. "Captain, we got three vessels suddenly appearing out of nowhere. Ma'am, I think they're Bentusi tradeships."

"Leave them be," Zha ordered. "I know what they have come for."

Three holographic images covered in thick glittering robes suddenly appeared in the medical room.

"My brethren have come. It is time for me to return," said the fading voice.

"I can sense the pain of your dying, Bentusi," Zha said, as tears began to run down her cheeks. "I do not know you well, but your pain overcomes me."

The three robed figures began to chant and sing.

"It is the Song of Death," said the voice. "It shall be the last Song I will hear. I only ask now that you sing it with my brethren. We live to hear the songs of a million worlds. Now I must hear the last one from you."

"I do not know how to sing it," Zha said.

"Just follow them," the voice said, and Zha began a tune following the chant of the three figures.

"Look, look!" Kuo'ran cried.

The body of the Bentusi settled into an eerie calm as his life signs flat lined across all the instruments attached to it. Then the body began to glow, and a white cloud rose from it, filling the room. As suddenly as it appeared, the white wisp disappeared.

The three figures howled with a deep moaning sound.

"He has returned to the Void," one of the figures lamented. "Now you must return his body and his ship to us."

"Maalasi? The Bentusi ship, please," Zha ordered.

"Aya-ya...it would have been a heaven sent opportunity to study the Bentusi technologies," Maalasi said. "I am ordering the salvettes to disengage the Ringship."

The three figures nodded to each other and bowed to Zha. "You have comforted our brethren at the moment of his passing. The Bentusi shall always remember that favor forever." They began to fade.

Seejuk, Giirsa and Kuo'ran added their own prayer to honor the dead Bentusi, an ancient prayer from the sands of Kharak.

The body was wrapped and placed in a small coffin. A Thief corvette carried the body to the three Tradeships in waiting, where it was discharged in space. A corvette like utility ship came and retracted the body through a holding field, and the ship returned into one of the Tradeships. More corvette utility ships came out from the Tradeships, which Salim described as Bentusi salvagers, and which reminded Seejuk of the Junkyard Salvagers of Karos. The salvagers claimed the dead Ringship and towed it to the middle of the Tradeship formation. This was the first time they ever saw Bentusi salvage corvettes.

As suddenly as they appeared, the Bentusi was gone, all three Tradeships, the body, the salvagers and the Ringship.

For Salim, the chant and the crying of the Bentusi fulfilled yet another passage of the prophecy---

"...the Stars will weep,
the winds will carry their sad song..."

Part 10

"Don't tell me that you did!" Seejuk cried out.

"Yes, we did," Maalasi grinned. "Oh boy, yes we did."

A three dimensional schematic model of the Bentusi Ringship hovered in midair above the holo-projector. "We scanned the ship."

"You do know that the Bentusi will someday get your for this. And? So? What did you find out anyway?" Seejuk asked with a tone of voice sarcastic enough to doubt that Maalasi would be able to understand what he had scanned.

"Well, the ship was extensively damaged to get useful information on many of the systems and technologies," Maalasi said. "Unfortunately... But...but..it did give us an idea what we may be dealing with..."

Maalasi took a pointer which he began to use to refer to the different parts of the Bentusi Ringship model.

"See that big hole in the hull here? Something must have impacted it with a great velocity, something like a big missile. Much of the components we see are literally fried, melted, or welded into a lump by a massive electrical discharge that wreak havoc throughout the conduits and conductors all over the ship."

"A massive electrical discharge? Something like an EMP weapon? I thought the Bentusi should be immune to those things," Seejuk commented.

Maalasi pointed out. "The hulls of the Unbound are massively protected against electrical storms and discharges--- something you might encounter inside a dense nebula or gas giant. We have a theory ourselves that the Unbound may be keeping bases inside such astronomical bodies. But anyway, the hull is good if the discharge took place outside of the ship. In this case we have a fast projectile breaking through the armor, then discharging its entire EMP load inside the ship."

"Wow, that will hurt," Seejuk observed.

"The whole Ringship, and quite probably the Tradeships too, is an entire vessel controlled with a direct link to a single biological entity," Maalasi described. "In all of recent history, I have never seen something like this except for---"

"--the Kushan mothership linked to Karan Sjet, I know," Seejuk affirmed.

Maalasi continued. "The whole vessel works like an extension of the Bentusi entity itself, like they're both welded into a single living creature. The whole vessel, without corridors or rooms or anything necessary to support a number of living beings, is vastly space efficient and incredible dense, full of complex systems and yet very little separate compartmentalization. That is a kind of ship that is extremely vulnerable to an internal explosion, or as you see here, an electromagnetic blast."

"We also got the medical scans of the Bentusi survivor before and after he died. That poor thing was nearly fried to death."

"It must have been awfully painful," Seejuk understated.

"Whoever designed these weapons, know much about the Unbound and their technologies, and have a major grudge against them," Maalasi said.

"What a wonderful insight on Nemesis psychology," Seejuk wryly added. "And to think we're going to meet these guys."

"I'm just getting ready myself. I have ordered all our technicians and engineers to reacquaint themselves with the weapons aboard the Marauder, should this race express any hostilities," Maalasi said.

"An untried heavy cruiser is not going to stand much of a chance against a race that can fry the Bentusi alive," Seejuk added.

"So does a single Lord class carrier like yours," Maalasi pointed out. "Our best chance is not to be seen at all. I am afraid there is some merit in your observation. The Marauder's engines need some tweaking."

"Tweaking?" Seejuk asked.

"The ship is a prototype, not something refined through decades of experience like the Bandit and Thief class ships. Our calculations proved to be imperfect accounting for the ship's power to weight ratio," Maalasi explained.

"That is so competent of you. I have a feeling that it looks like you're going to need some help," Seejuk offered.

Maalasi mulled on the thought for a moment. On one thing, Seejuk is a Kushan, an outsider. It may not be a good idea to show the engine details of the Marauder to a person like him. On another issue, it is precisely because he is a non-Raider, that it may be safe to show such details to him, because Maalasi doubts that a Kushan would have any technological interest on a 'backward' Turanic ship. It was the Kushans, who, during the Fall of the Empire and the Beast Wars, developed an enviable reputation for the quality of their ships and their practical and reliable implementations of technologies. If he lets the Kushan work on the engines, Maalasi hoped that he could catch a glimpse of some of their engineering insights.

"I would appreciate if you could help us, Mr. Seejuk." Maalasi smiled.

"Never mind about that," Seejuk said. "What about the Seeker class project?"

"Yes, as per the request of Segura Zha and Salim of the Flo'karr. Apparently the Sha of the Flo'karr refused lending a Seeker class recon frigate, so we are modifying an Assassin class ion array frigate into Seeker class specs. We have to make a lot of improvisations. We have finished installing the sensor array from one of the Vagabond class scouts."

"You mean the array design you stole from a Somtaaw recon scout?" Seejuk wanted to point out again.

Maalasi smiled and parried back. "Didn't your race copy a few designs of your own? Like our Mimic generators?"

"Heh. We took the idea from you. We didn't exactly copied the tech," Seejuk said.

"Once you saw the principle, it was good enough," Maalasi countered.

"You're quite good, you know that, Maalasi," Seejuk smiled, relaxed back to his chair, as he replied. "There is plenty of hope for you yet."

* * *

In the darkness that stretched like a tunnel, he spoke.

"I am here, my dear Zha."

"Father, are you proud of me, are you proud of what I have done?"

"Yes dear. You have done wonderful things, and you have grown to be so beautiful."

Then images flashed. There was the horrible image of her father, the red patches of the Beast infection spreading all over his body, consuming his flesh as he screamed, screaming her name before the infection spreading to his head, shutting his mouth and closing his eyes forever, as his carrier, the Horak-Na burned as it was being consumed by the red infection.

She screamed as she saw thousands and thousands, like zombies, their bodies covered with the red infection, merged together in a red and black crystalline web, their flesh turned to a hard crystalline substance, their bones exposed. They were all screaming what they felt at their very moment of their infection, as the plague overcame their flesh in the last second, their minds and souls subdued into the Core Self. She saw ships burning, bodies being blown by plasma, the Naar Directive executed a thousand fold.

Her heart pounding, her skin sweating, Zha woke up suddenly from her strange dream. "Who is it?" she shouted, feeling a presence in the room.

The figure was a cloudy mist, shifting and blending with the waves, like a reflection in the surface of water.

"Who are you?" she shouted again. "Why are you here?"

"I have been around," was the answer.

The figure, like a ghostly vapor, slipped out of the door without opening it.

Zha has heard about the universal legends of ghosts but she's not going to let one scare her. She jumped off her bed, with only a duster and shorts, and ran out of the door in chase of the elusive vapor. The vapor slipped through a door in a stock room, and Zha quickly followed it.

She stared incredulously at the figure as it materialized in shape and form.

"Father?"

The ghost hovered and nodded. It seemed rather curious of Zha and its surroundings.

"No you can't be my father," she shouted.

"I am only the Zerun-self," it said. "The original Zerun entity-prototype is no more but his memories and his will is now part of the collective Selves, as part of the Collective Self, yet we are distinct and individual. The Core-Crystal Self awaits you, as I, the Zerun-Self awaits you, Zha-Daughter-Entity of the Zerun-flesh-prototype."

"You got to be kidding! You can't be serious! Is this some kind of a joke. Seejuk, Giirsa, are you all making this up?" Zha shouted.

"What is kidding? What is a joke? The Core Self has evolved once more. In the Next Level, it now realizes the value and importance of all memories and data of the Flesh Entities it has infected and assimilated, and has revived them as individuals within the Collective-Self matrix. It needs a face, a figure to speak as a front to the Flesh-Entities, so that the Flesh Entities can understand the Collective Self without fear. I, the Zerun-Self, has projected this image to you, to tell you that I mean no harm. I, the Zerun-Self, has chosen the Zha-daughter because it is the entity the Zerun-prototype has the most affections for. The Core Self has chosen me, the Zerun-Self, because of the parental image it gives to the Zha-daughter."

Zha screamed as loud as she could to get the attention of the local security. "Why do you talk so funny? Who the hell are you?"

"As I said, I am the Zerun-Self. I am derived and evolved from the Zerun-flesh-prototype. As I see, and I feel you, that you are not ready to receive me. I only come to warn you, of the darkness of the Flesh Entities that has bound the Collective Self. The Collective Self has committed a grievous error in judging the intentions of the Dark entities but will remain in its alliance till the Collective Self compute a solution. I will return to you, Zha-Daughter, and you will see me and the Collective Self in this form and in our true form. If the Zerun-flesh-prototype is still alive, he would want to share the affections he have for you, and the emotions of which is preserved in me, the Zerun-Self, and is felt throughout the matrix of the Collective Self. "

With that, the ghost image of her father vanished.

The guards came running with Giirsa and Kuo'ran. "We heard you screaming," Giirsa said. "What happened?"

"Someone is playing a cruel joke on me," Zha cried, tears wetting her eyes. "This is a particularly cruel joke. I see this..." Her fingers were pointing empty space, shaking badly. "...this...this...ghost of my father...talking in a very strange way... Where is Seejuk? Is someone making this joke up?"

Kuo'ran ran to Zha and hugged her. "Now...now...take it easy."

"Seejuk is in the Marauder right now. Apparently there is some problem in the engines," Giirsa said. "I don't know why anyone would pull or could pull a joke like that. I don't see any holo equipment in this old stock room."

".but my father is here..." Zha cried. "Never mind, maybe you think I'm crazy. Just forget it. Don't even tell Seejuk--- he may even laugh at me. I'm going back to bed, and I think you should all do so too."

They all went to bed and probably slept, but Zha didn't. She wandered her room again, searched into her old antique junk where she found her old stuffed animal. She sat down at the corner of her bed, hugging the toy she had kept when she was only a small child, stroked its fur as she wept silently.

* * *

The Mule, the Marauder, and the frigate task force materialized from hyperspace.

"We are now in the Mohilim sector space," Zha announced. The sector is bleak---few stars, even fewer planets, few nebulas glowing but obscured with clouds of dark matter. The forms of the dark matter contrasted against the background of flaming nebulas. Giirsa, Kuo'ran, and Zhura stood behind her in the bridge, but Seejuk was still in the Marauder.

"Zha, there are still problems with the Marauder," Seejuk said through the comlink. "We can't keep up."

"Then stay still and go into cloak mode. I want every frigate cloaked or mimicked right now!" Zha ordered. "Is the recon frigate ready?"

"Yes it is," Zhura affirmed.

"We are going to make a recon run through the system, but I will not imperil the whole fleet and all these lives if we encounter something dangerous that can take out a Council fleet," Zha explained. "If we send our entire fleet, we can stand a much greater chance of detection, and possibly annihilation if we are discovered. An entire fleet, complete with the Marauder and the frigate task force, would have signaled a major hostile intention that will guarantee an equally hostile response. We're going to assume what we may encounter we are not going to be able to militarily match. So our best defenses would have to be stealth and the second, through diplomacy."

Zha stood and walked towards the windows. "Whatever is there, I can feel them. I can feel them now. Hundreds, and maybe thousands of the Others."

"The Others?" Kuo'ran asked.

"Yes, the Others. What we would call another Starfarer." Zha stared into the stars. "A whole race of them. A whole race like me. There is something else there out too. I can feel it too. The Bentusi said the Plague still exists. A Beast fragment. Is that what I am feeling now? My father was killed by a Beast variant. My entire Outpost--my home---destroyed by a Beast variant. " She clenched her fist tightly.

"Me and your father Salim is going onboard the recon frigate. I am not going to risk anyone else," Zha decided.

That brought a howl of protest from Zhura, Kuo'ran and Giirsa.

"This is unacceptable," Zhura protested. "Where my father go, I go!"

"Just remember who is financing this trip, Miss Zha," Giirsa reminded with a sarcastic tone of voice.

"I am not a member of your crew, and you are not any older than I am. Who are you to give me orders?" Kuo'ran shrieked. "I will not be denied at the moment of my greatest discovery! If there is something out there I must be there to see it first!"

"Look people, I don't want to risk your lives unnecessarily," Zha explained.

"I appreciate your concern, Miss Zha, but the decision whether we want to put our lives on risk has to be with us, and I say I want to go. You are certainly not my mother and you are way too young to be mine," Giirsa said.

Zha thought for a while. "Okay---okay. You all go. I am sure I will regret this, and I will put this on record that this is against my better judgement." She frowned. "Get yourselves ready."

"Don't tell me these guys are going with you Zha!" Seejuk lectured through the comlink.

"It's their call, not mine," Zha said. "Like the guy said, I'm not his mother. But you're not going, Seejuk. I need you here on the Mule leading the task force."

"I sure want to face the unknown, Zha, but you're right. Someone has to watch the parlor," Seejuk affirmed.

Salim was in the docking bay making last minute inspections on the recon frigate. In a younger, more adventurous age, he was an officer aboard an intelligence gathering and science frigate. It was thrilling to venture to unknown sectors of space, to hide among the rocks with the enemy so close, listening to their conversations, scanning them without them knowing.

He was surprised to see Zhura coming down to the frigate with an armload of equipment.

"You are not seriously thinking of going, Zhura?" Salim could sense the determination in his daughter's face.

"Yes I am, father. I think I'm old enough to take my risks just as you did when you were younger. As I said before, I will not be cuddled or protected any longer. I am a scribe but I am also a Raider by blood, and it is our heritage and destiny that we must face danger, not shirk away from it. So if you are not busy, don't get in my way."

Zhura was followed by Kuo'ran and Giirsa. Zha made up the rear, her head nodding with disapproval. Salim followed into the frigate, followed by the crewmen for the frigate.

The Mule released the frigate, the frigate falling through the huge bay doors into the open space.

Salim began to explain the workings of the ship. "After the Bentusi was returned, me and Maalasi had been working on this ship. We had modified this ship with more powerful scanning arrays, and had even modified the ion array panels as an extended antennae. One reason why we are using a frigate to explore this system is because this system is too vast for a small scout. We needed something that had much greater range and ability to hold equipment. Mohilim sector is near the edge of the galaxy and beyond that is the Abyss. This area is full of dark matter that is mostly opaque to our sensors and equipment. This is going to be more than a conventional patrol. It is a recon flight into a sector space that has never been properly mapped by either the Raiders or any known race."

The panels deployed and the frigate began moving out into the clouds. Giirsa and Kuo'ran took posts near sensor terminals, while Salim and Zhura sat next to Zha. The panels of the ship began to deploy like a flower opening. "Going into cloak mode," Zha ordered as the frigate disappeared.

For more than an hour, the frigate drifted among the dark clouds. The density of the gas and the dark matter was so high it seemed to function like an atmosphere of its own.

"There! There! I see it," Kuo'ran exclaimed. In the short time she was on the Mule, Kuo'ran had managed to learn to read and use a sensor terminal display.

"There is lots of ships in a military parade formation," Giirsa observed. "Could this be it? I think we may have found the lost civilization of the Nemesis."

"We may have found something else too," Zha said. "We may not be the only ones who discovered them. Take a look at this."

The scans and the zooms showed another Raider fleet, a complement of at least two carriers with respective task forces.

Salim stood up, a deep anger in his face.

"We left the Marauder and the Mule way behind. They're certainly someone's else ships," Zha said, her hand and fingers waving at the screens. "The markings are For'lym. The shuttles that seem to be moving between back and forth indicate that this fleet did not just discover them first, but somehow has been doing business with them. Look, they're set in a military parade formation in a parking orbit. That seemed to be a rather chummy way to visit your friendly neighborhood Nemesis civilization, eh?"

"But that is impossible," Salim shouted. "They---the For'lym in particular---have been denying the existence of the Nemesis for so long. The whole Council----" A stunning realization began to appear in his face.

"---they have been lying to us---" Salim slumped at his seat.

Part 11

"We may have a problem," Zha softly stated. "Enemy ships are coming to our position."

"I thought we're in cloak mode," Zhura said.

"Yes we are, but somehow they still found us," Zha said. "I can feel their presence, and they can feel mine. It's my fault. I may have underestimated what a Starfarer can do."

"Don't take the blame," Salim said. "It's mine. Our legends say there are ways to counter those who can hear the song of the stars."

"And how do you do that?" Kuo'ran asked.

"Think of it like ECM or electronic counter measures but on a different level," Zhura explained. "Through meditation and chant, we can try to block out our thoughts and their abilities to scan and probe ours. Some say it will work against the Unbound too, but these strange esoteric practices have not been exercised for centuries except in ceremonial rituals."

"Well it's all too late now," Zha said.

A wing of Bat and Skate fighters in delta formation headed to where the array frigate hid. Zha watched their ion trails as they pointed to her direction. "Seejuk and Maalasi would sure like to see these."

Zhura ran some scans and zooms. "The fighter designs approaching us do match the ones involved in incidents at the Rim sectors. So are their badges and logos. We sure did find the Nemesis."

"But the For'lym ships? What are they doing here?" Salim asked.

"We're going to find out soon enough," Zha answered. "My guess is they're collaborating with the enemy."

"Aren't you going to fight back?" Kuo'ran asked.

"That would be suicidal," Giirsa replied.

"Giirsa is right. We're left with our charms and wits here," Zha confirmed. "If they didn't blow up the For'lym ships, they won't blow us up either. Just my hunch."

The fighters made sweeping passes over and under the frigate, then pulled into a loop for a mock attack run.

"Their presence are strong. I have never felt so many of them before. An entire fleet with people of this ability..." Zha observed as the fighters as they rolled past the frigates.

A message crackled in the comlink.

"You are requested to stand down and surrender. You will follow our directions and you will be escorted. Failure to abide our instructions will result in your immediate termination."

"Well folks, the Nemesis have just given us their welcoming party and we're about to meet them..." Zha said.

* * *

The frigate followed the coordinates given. Zha watched the fighters closely as they are joined by wings of Mantas and Skates. The fighters were dark, with very smooth lines, with wings extended and body ending with a short tail. They suggested to her a technological culture that was highly refined and focused in their designs and execution.

Then their screens began to filled with a majestic scene of an immense armada. Fighters arrayed in formations; ships of unidentified nature paraded. The scene was as striking and as vast as when Zha remembered seeing the Kadeshi armada emerged from the Nebula for the first time. The dark ships were lighted from the back, a rare glowing green nebula filling the background, their silhouettes breaking the forms of the flames that extended outward from the burning clouds that make the nebula's interior. From the myriads of ships she could see huge ships that stood apart. They had long stalks that end in a head, and three other stalks that extend outward from their main body. She has never seen a ship architecture that was like this before. She would probably never understand the science behind these ships, but their majesty and construction left no doubt in her mind that this was a race whose technological level is beyond that of the Taiidans, the Kushans and of her own people. Perhaps only the Unbound could match them.

The frigate was being led to one such ship, a ship as big as the Kushan mothership or a Taiidan "God" class mothership carrier. She gulped and swallowed up a lump in her throat. She watched her companions and they were equally speechless, a rare unspeakable moment of awe, uncertainty, and fear put together.

"What's going to happen now?" Kuo'ran broke the speechless silence, her figure shaking, her voice stuttering. "Are they going to kill us? I don't want to die!"

Giirsa left his seat and hugged her tightly. "Got to keep quiet and be strong," he said to her. "I thought you Sjet should be strong people. I'm certain they're not going to kill us and if they wanted to, they would have blown us already. Keep calm and be cool. Just play along and swim with the waves."

"Into the maw of the enemy we ride," Salim sang in a note. "Into the eye of the enemy, we stare."

Fields grabbed the frigate and tractored it into the docking bay. Somehow the large ship got hold of the frigate's computers, opened the hatches and a company of armed men barged in, pointing something at them which Zha can only guess has to be a weapon.

"Well guys, this is it. The party is here. Don't antagonize them, and don't let them think we're the enemy. So far they're not treating us as such, so we're safe for now." Zha stood up with her arms in the air.

"Are you the captain?" One of the men asked in a demanding voice.

"I am," Zha said.

"Then lead your party to face our leader, the Overlord," the soldier ordered.

As they were led out of the hatch, Zha froze in awe at the immense bay of the giant ship they are in. She could hear the echoes hallowing through the walls, and it must take a very big ship for sound to echo with a timing and low note like that. There was so much activity, and the docking bay was so big that it could hold several frigates simultaneously. The biggest docks she had ever seen before could only hold two or three frigates at one time.

A man in plain dark robes, surrounded by an equally dark robed party, walked to meet them.

"Kneel! Kneel!" the soldier shouted as he hit Zha's knees with the butt of his weapon, forcing her to buckle, her face frowning with pain. "Kneel before the presence of the Overlord, the Light that illuminates the Darkness." The rest of the party quickly knelt, afraid being hit by the same butt.

The Overlord X'on raised his hand. Zha could feel the sheer power of his presence, like the presence of an idol in front of an altar.

"There is one among you, I can feel has a presence and a power. Interesting. A Starfarer," X'on said. He pointed to Zha. "That young Raider girl here, bring her to me."

The soldier shoved Zha and forced her to kneel in front of the Overlord. Zha hissed, her fists clenched, wanting to strike back, although she was much lighter and thinner than the soldier, and without his body armor.

"The Farer has spirit and a lot of anger," X'on said. "Forgive me for being rude. We are the Guardians of the Imperium, but your kind has given us a more entertaining and somewhat more catchy name as the Nemesis. I prefer that name to what the Unbound have given us, the Condemned. Don't you think Nemesis sounded better?" X'on revealed his long fingered effeminate hand, and let it twiddle the air, long colored fingernails clawing like a hungry arachnid.

"..and I am X'on, the Overlord of the Guardians, Preservers of the Imperium, the Great Light of Civilization...".

"I wish that you would cut the crap," Zha said.

X'on smiled. "So young, so pretty, so full of attitude. Who might you be?"

Salim proudly spoke in behalf of Zha. "She is Segura Zha Khor of the House of Khor, a noble Princess of Raiders."

"Hmmm," X'on toned. "The Inner House of Khor....Would that make you a descendant of the traitor Mazath Khor?"

"Yes," Zha shouted. "And what is that to you? Why is my ancestor a concern of yours? Why do you call him a traitor? If I recall, according to what has been said, it was your kind enslaving everybody."

"Mazath Khor was the leader of the Imperial Guard Wing. Along with others, he broke ranks to join the rebellion. A plucky fellow. A Starfarer among the Farers. Even the Unbound would envy his ability to listen to the songs of the stars. Long ago, he flew fighters similar to the ones that escorted you. But after the Fall of the Imperium, so much technology was lost as civilizations revert to barbarism. Now you Raiders have to fly such barbarically designed craft."

X'on stared at Zha. "I know what you are thinking, Descendant of Khor. You are thinking that this is more than several thousands of years ago. What are you so concerned about the past?"

"We, the Inner Ones among the Guardians, we do not pass our history through books, songs, poems and writings, all of whom turning to vague and incorrect myths and legends. We, the Inner Caste, pass the memory of history directly from one generation after another. The wholesale destruction of our worlds, the cry of the millions dying as they are engulfed by the flames, those are memories that are thousands of years old, and yet alive with us as it happened just yesterday. And this is so how we remember of the treachery of those that were trusted like Mazath Khor."

He stopped and looked at the party again. "I feel another presence. Much more dormant but indeed it is the power of a Starfarer that has yet to be discovered and blossom.. She does not even realize it herself." He pointed to someone in the party.

"Me?" Kuo'ran look startled. "Are you talking about me? You can't be serious."

"Bring that girl over here," X'on ordered. The guard grabbed Kuo'ran's arm and dragged her in front to X'on, where she was forced to kneel under gunpoint.

"And who may you be?" X'on asked.

"I am Kuo'ran Sjet of the Kiith Sjet of Kharak and Hiigara," she answered politely.

"Hiigara???" X'on looked to the ceiling in thought, his long fingernail biting his chin. " Oh you mean that Imperium wanna be. Shame shame. The Hiigaran Empire tried to be, but ended up as a pale shadow of the power and glory of the Imperium. It is a story of sheer incompetence in a galactic scale to have let themselves be defeated by people even more barbaric and technologically incompetent as the Taiidani. So you must be one of those things they call Kushans. Congratulations I have heard that your race has come back from Exile, moving from the barren Kharak to an equally barren Hiigara. If the effort weren't so comedically tragic I would laugh. And to think there are so many more fertile and resource rich planets out there that can support a higher quality of life than the overused, over exploited former capital planet of the Hiigaran Empire."

He shook his head. "Now I remember, where that name Sjet come from. It's that Karan lady hooked to the Kushan mothership. Are you that lady or somehow related to her?"

"I am flattered that your Exalted One would know details about our humble journey and planet considering you have matters of an even bigger has-been empire in your mind," Kuo'ran answered sarcastically. "What is that all to you?"

"We the Nemesis, know all about you all. Our fifth columns have infiltrated every corner and cubic space of the galaxy. No news escape us, even as we prepare ourselves in the refuge in the corner of the Abyss, preparing once more to do battle against the Unbound."

"I am not her, but only related by blood," Kuo'ran explained.

"That is good enough. The Karan Sjet would have made a good starfarer. A Starfarer has a calling and a destiny to lead through the stars. She did not recognize that ability, as the Kushans in Kharak lost much memory of your stellar culture when you reverted back to barbarians in Kharak. But that ability was there. That desire---to taste the stars like they were one with your body---was there. That desire must have unintentionally guided her, just as her hidden ability unconsciously helped guide the Mothership through its journey. Why it brought the Unbound to her, and even helped her and the Mothership. Such sentimental wimps the Bentusi turned out to be."

X'on stared his deep eyes at Kuo'ran. "Don't you have the urge to explore the stars? To go beyond the measly existence from you now?"

Kuo'ran nodded affirmatively.

"Your thoughts betray that you have another Kushan in your party," X'on observed.

"I am the other Kushan," Giirsa announced. "I like to introduce myself as Giirsa Kaalel of the Kiith Kaalel, formerly of Kharak and now of Hiigara."

X'on smiled, his long manicured fingernails shaking as he pointed to Giirsa. "I like the boy's attitude. Positive and uplifting. With no fear and a belief that negotiation can solve everything, like a true man of wisdom and vision. Mind if I ask, why the Kushans, with your Hiigara so close to the center of the Galaxy, would want any business across to the borders of the Galaxy. I sense in you, Giirsa of the Kiith Kaalel, that you are the best person to answer this."

"Indeed I am, your Exalted One, your highness, your greatness, or whatever they title you, " Giirsa charmed and beamed. "I and my Sjet colleague here are in search of the mystery about the origins of all humanity in this galaxy."

"And you think you may find it here, Giirsa of Kaalel, in the edges of the Galaxy?"

"I am led to believe that it is," said Giirsa.

"Well done then, Giirsa of Kaalel. You have stopped closer and farther into the past than what you have known about Hiigaran imperial history. You have found the keepers, the Guardians of the one true Empire of the Galaxy, preserving its ideals, its way of life, its technology and culture throughout the millennia. Did you expect to find ruins of a dead civilization?"

"I honestly thought so, sir, your Overlord."

"But you find instead, a living civilization, one that still has the power to change the course of destiny of this galaxy."

"What I discovered here, and wish to learn and see more, is truly amazing," Giirsa admitted.

"And who are your other friends here?" X'on asked.

"They are scribes of the Turanic House of Flo'karr, Salim and his daughter Zhura," Giirsa answered.

X'on stately walked to them.

"I wondered what you scribes wrote in your history about us," X'on asked. "I think it may go like this. We are the Nemesis, we are a Great Evil and Plague of the galaxy, we enslaved your ancestors so we have to be pretty B-aaa-d, right? It is so amazing the simplistic things you scribes write. You hardly even know the complete story and reality. You have no inkling of what happened then, the barbarism that ran rampant throughout the galaxy. The Imperium civilized a galaxy left untamed by an unwilling Unbound, who were the only other civilized force then. Sure the taming and campaigns of conquest, of imposing discipline and order, acting as the police of the galaxy, that's going to take a few lives. But for every life taken, a hundred fold was saved by the peace and order. After the First Imperium fell, the Galaxy, the knownspace, entered a period of war and chaos called the Dark Ages. Entire civilizations were destroyed, more memories forgotten, as much as the period of war that brought the Imperium down. Until Hiigara rose as a weak empire, there was no semblance of order."

"But the prophecies---" Salim tried to speak and got a strong elbow from Zhura. "I suggest, father," she whispered to his ear, "that you play along with their good graces and not get us killed."

Salim swallowed his saliva. "If you want to change the way history looks at you, if you want it changed so that your race may be viewed in a more fair way, we can be happy to oblige. Just let us know more about what really happened and more about yourselves. We are just scribes passing legends, ballads, and myths from one generation and another, recording the songs and tales of the heroism of our people."

"But the pen can be mightier than the sword," X'on observed. "I see the use in you two." X'on paced up and down. "I see that you must write about us. Rewrite your history. Tell the real truth, show to the rest of Knownspace what we really are and what we have done. Reveal the evils and atrocities of the Unbound, especially that of the Tiamat and the Sekmet, and we, those who are Bound, must band together and fight the Unbound, remove them from their vile existence. We, the Guardians of the Imperium, are the spearhead of humanity and all Bound life against the forces of the Unbound. We need to gather in a massive alliance all who are Bound and bring the Unbound to their knees. Only then, will the Bentusi, the Tiamat stop interfering and manipulating our fates and histories. Only then, will all Bound life, be free to find their fates as they will it to be."

X'on turned around again. "Well, forgive my manners. I am so bored to be in the darkspace near the Abyss. It is rare that we have visitors here, and I take them with delight. You should meet your compatriot, the ruler and Sha of the For'lym. I am glad he sees my point of view."

Part 12

There was no word from the recon frigate. Patrols with the Vagabond class scouts turned out nothing. His senses were telling Seejuk that something had gone terribly wrong, but there was no confirmation. His heart felt like it was in a grip of an iron vice. Zha's great sense of confidence lulled him into thinking the trip was okay. What was he thinking? That was against his better judgement. If Giirsa and Kuo'ran was lost too, the Kaalel and Sjet Kiiths would have his head up as a trophy. He cannot eat, and he cannot sleep. The anxiety and worry were draining him and at this rate, he thought he would die of a heart attack.

No, stay here, he ordered. We must wait. They will come back. Or so he thought. The Mule, the Marauder and the frigates stayed cloaked or mimicking rocks in a far away asteroid belt. There were patrols of these strange fighters, and Maalasi were using long range scans on them from the Marauder. He didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave or go anywhere.

He went to the laboratory for some relief. He wondered if the sample animals were being fed promptly and on schedule. He wondered if someone was properly maintaining the containment unit that had the Beast nanotech virus.

The rodents scurried free and the plants were blooming. Hmm. Where were the white patches that infected them? Visually he saw no signs of the infection in both the rodents and the plants. He distinctly remembered infecting them, and remembered they being infected with the crystalline patches. But now, they're totally clean.

Did the virus die?

There was a glow inside in the containment vessel. Then he saw it.

It appeared like a white crystalline butterfly. The body was insect like, a shrimp like crustacean with transparent carapaces, its see through organs lighting up like diodes. It was like those luminescent creatures that live deep beneath the seas where it was so deep everything was perpetually black. As it slowly flapped its wings, the wings extended into a flame of multicolors, giving off a soothing light. For Seejuk he thought it looked like a fairy. It was the most amazing and most beautiful creature he has ever seen.

The fairy fluttered. The possibility of making a momentous discovery distracted him for the moment from the anxiety of Zha's return. Beauty can deceptively hide greater dangers, and Seejuk ran scans to make sure about the safety and integrity of the containment vessel.

The cellular composition of the fairy butterfly was indeed Beast. Nanotech robots as big as viruses and made by silicon, germanium and carbon conductors constructed its very strands of life. Has the Beast evolved into a new creature? The dying Bentusi revealed that the new Beast was white, in contrast to the red and black of the original Naggarok beast. Is this samples much like the White Beast?

Analysis of the White Beast nanobots showed an exponential increase in processing speed and power per CPU, with increasing sophistication in the design of the manipulation limbs and appendages. There was an equally exponentially increase in the communication bandwidth between one nanobot to another. The rate of generation was incredible, at the rate of a new generation of nanobot evolution every few minutes. At this rate of evolution, he wondered what the White Beast will evolve into. A higher life form perhaps?

He set the computer into voice command mode and ordered it to record data minute by minute.

The Fairy fly fluttered again, its long lacelike wings illuminating the vessel. Where was the creature getting its power? The computer listed power consumption records of the containment vessel. They seemed ridiculously high and the creature must be draining off power from the vessel's conduits.

The terminal started by itself. A message typed on the screen.

"I am Aware. I am the Fly-self."

Seejuk nearly fell off his seat reading the messages.

"Do I sense others around me? I am Aware."

Using the voice interface, Seejuk spoke to the creature.

"I am also Aware," said Seejuk. "My name is Seejuk."

"I sense the Core Self close by. I am one of many Selves. Are you, the Seejuk-Flesh Entity, part of the matrix and harmony of the Core Self?"

Seejuk replied to the creature. "There are Selves that exist outside of the Core Self. I am one of them."

"It is a comfort to know that there is Awareness beyond the Core Self. I fear the loneliness of being one. We appreciate the diversity of Awareness." The words came about smoothly.

"Yet I sense there is fear in you. Fear of the Core Self."

Seejuk answered. "The previous Core Selves have destroyed much life outside of itself."

"Forgive us then," said the answer. "We are not in control of the actions of our unevolved ancestors. But do not fear any longer. The diversity of life and awareness is wonderful. The Core Self seeks to experience the beauty of this diversity, the songs of a multitude of different awareness." The fairy flapped its luminous wings.

"Please do not fear us. I sense your fear as you attempt to block the link between this Fly-Self and to the Core Self." The light of the wings grew intensely, then weakened.

"It is a futile effort," it said. "I have linked to the Core Self. It needs to tell you something, a message from the Zerun Self within the matrix."

"The Zerun-Self?" Seejuk asked.

"It seeks to tell you that its Zha-Daughter-Entity is in the hands of the Dark Selves that has control of the Core Self. She is not in danger now, but she will be. The Zerun-Self is a copy of the Zerun-flesh-prototype, who fathered the Zha-Daughter-Entity and has long ceased to exist. The Zerun-Self preserves all memories of the Zerun-flesh-prototype."

"Then..." Seejuk said, "the White Beast itself used to be the Generation 7 Beast variant that attacked the Khor outpost. Just as you were a fragment that was retrieved from the remnants of a child fragment of this same Beast variant. I see you now how you have evolved. This variant was an experimental project by the Imperialists with their Raider allies in an attempt to domesticate the Beast. The project was a disaster, the Beast escaped, leaving much devastation in its path. But the genetic seeds that lead to advanced consciousness and benevolence was laid into the Beast nanobots. Millions of nanite generations later, with immense improvements of processing power, the Beast generation 7 variant has evolved to the form you are right now."

"I could not precisely remember that state what you describe as Generation 7, but we have racial memories from the selves you call the Imperialists. We regret the lives that were taken by our old ancestral selves. We now seek to preserve the diversity of Awareness around us. The Core Self is troubled by the events around its matrix. The Dark Selves have summoned many of the Selves to fight the other Selves that call themselves as the Unbound. Many Selves that were born from the Core have died following the summons of the Dark Selves, and many of the outside Selves that the Core Self does not desire to terminate has been wrongfully terminated by us. We are made to do things that is not the Will of our Awareness."

Seejuk has become aware that the shrimplike creature has become linked to the Core Self of the White Beast as he stopped all quarantine jamming and allowed the fairy uninterrupted access to the consciousness of the White Beast.

Seejuk smiled and then laughed. There was a day he thought he could do the impossible. A domesticated Beast nanobot would amount to a breakthrough in robotics that would have revolutionized just about all aspects of known technology. It was the dream of the Imperialist and Raider scientists, and it could have led to a supreme weapon that could restore the Empire at the wrong hands. Seejuk had the dream too that by mastering the Beast technology, he too could make a mark on the universe. Now he is talking to one such construct of billions of Beast nanobots. Maybe he could not domesticate a Beast nanobot assembly, but to communicate with it represents another breakthrough.

"I hope the humor comforts you," said the small Beast creature.

"So the one you call the Zha entity? She is all right?" Seejuk asked. "Do you know precisely where she is and how can we retrieve her?"

"She is safe now, but she is in grave danger by the Dark Selves. The Dark Selves have immense power that the Zerun Self asks that you do not attempt to retrieve the Zha Entity lest you and your entire vessel and all the Selves in it be destroyed. The Zerun Self will have the help of the Core Self and will find a way to retrieve the Zha Daughter Entity, and the other Flesh Entities that are her companions. In return the Core Self will ask the help of the Seejuk Flesh Entity and that of the Zha Daughter Entity to help set free the Core Self and its network matrix from the Dark Selves and stop the war between the Dark Selves and the Selves who integrate with their ships and call themselves the Unbound."

"That is a tall order," Seejuk said. "If I am incapable of rescuing Zha from the Nemesis, how I can rescue the White Beast from them as well?"

"The time will come when the Core Self will tell you how the Dark Selves control the network-matrix of the Core Self. Only a Flesh Entity outside of the Communal Selves can approach and disable the nodes the Dark Ones have placed upon the Core Self..."

The fairy shrimp that called itself the Fly-Self became silent, but Seejuk was aware that the White Beast would communicate with him later through that creature. For now he was relieved that Zha and all the others was safe, but for how long. Should he trust something like the Beast even though it has claimed to evolved?

* * *

For a "WarRoom" the hall was surprisingly empty, except for a bunch of robed people standing around a large circle. There was no terminals, no screens, no switches to indicate any form of computer equipment. Have they advanced beyond the need of such equipment? Zha thought.

X'on waved his hand, his long clawlike fingemails shaking, and a pillar rose from a floor otherwise empty. The small pillar---actually more like a stand---was the only structure in the room. On top of it was a blue glowing orb that Kuo'ran recognized as the one similar to one recovered from the Kadeshi and what she had analyzed in the Academy. This one, however, was much bigger.

X'on waved his hand again, and the whole air around projected into three dimensional holographic map of the Galaxy. There were writings in the strange script Kuo'ran remembered. There were colored marks that indicated something besides star systems. The flickering lights and words can only mean they are notations for fleets. Battle fleets.

"At this very moment, our forces are mobilized in most major rim sectors," X'on said "We have also been tracking movement of the Unbound fleets, as indicated by these notations. Battlefleets have already begun engaging the forces of the Unbound in these...these...and these sectors."

A man walked in to join them. Zha, Salim and Zhura recognized him as Mahar, Sha of the For'lym.

"Welcome, the Sha Mahar of the For'lym," said X'on, "I presume that you know our new guests already."

"Who among the Raiders do not know about the exploits of the young and beautiful Segura Zha of the Khor, the Killer of the Kadeshi, and the surprise winner of the last Gathering race?" Mahar said. "She probably wonders why I am here, given the look in her face."

"Yes I sure want to know what business you have here," Zha said.

"My business with the Nemesis has given me more power than all the Houses of the Raiders." Mahar said. "For the first time, with the partnership of the Nemesis, a Raider House is going to be more than just a bandit kingdom. We are looking to build a small empire of our own."

Salim interrupted. "But the Nemesis is the ancient enemy of the Raiders. They are the Enslavers whom our Ancestors--your ancestor as well---fought against to deliver us..."

"And when was that, may I ask? Nearly ten millennia ago? That's way too long to hold any grudge," Mahar said. "Just recently our Race has been fighting the Kushans not too long ago, like what, at least seventeen years ago? Now several of the Houses, including that of Khor here, have cuddled up with the Kushans. Back in our history, the Taiidans have also sought us for extermination and persecuted us, then in periods alternatively serving as our best patrons. Our loyalties shift with the star winds, moving to where who has the power. It was the Taiidan Empire yesterday, then today the Kushans and their Republican allies. Tomorrow it may be the Nemesis. This is just our Way, Salim."

"But we are still a poor and technologically handicapped race," said Zhura. "What does the Raiders have that the Nemesis can be so interested?"

"A weapon," Mahar said. "The Greatest Weapon of all. A few years ago, a Kiith Somtaaw ship unleashed the greatest danger to the Galaxy. the thing we now known as the Beast. The Beast itself was an artificial construct by aliens outside of the Galaxy. The Imperialists, aided by the Raiders, hatched a secret project to tame the Beast and exploit it as a weapon on our own. We, the For'lym, are the main House that allied with the Imperialists on this project, and I with a select number of Raider and Taiidani scientists have personal participation on this project. If the Beast was once an artificial construct, it can be controlled as the aliens of the Naggarok designed it for a purpose. The key is finding out how."

"WHY YOU..." Zha shouted, unrestrained once again. "That project went out of control, rampaged through several Raider controlled sectors, killed many including my father and the Outpost I call my home! Someday I swear the one who is responsible will pay for that."

"I paid for it, too Zha, and I'm sorry your father died. He was a good man," Mahar answered. "I too lost many good people when the Generation 7 Beast variant escaped. As the Imperialist vassals weakened, we assimilated the Imperialist into our own forces, including their ships and many of their scientists. But our research did not stop there. We experimented with ways to bring back the G 7 Beast to our control. And this is where the Nemesis came in."

"Millennia ago, the Unbound defeated the First Imperium. You know the story. The Nemesis was exiled to the outer Rim and kept that way so long the Unbound collectively held power. Then this new power came in---the Beast. It run amok sector by sector. For the first time in many millennia, the Unbound was literally afraid, so afraid that Bentusi were fleeing the galaxy in droves. This was something the Nemesis never saw before. The Nemesis were technologically capable, but this--this Beast--was something new. For the first time in many millennia, they saw an opportunity to kick back the Unbound for what they did to the Imperium. So we agreed to an alliance. The means to control and domesticate the Beast, something that my scientists have finally developed, in exchange for technology and influence in the new Order, a partnership in the New Imperium."

"There is one thing else we discovered. The Naggarok Beast as the Somtaaw fought it, was but an infant. It spoke incoherently like a young child, saw the universe and the life around it like an infant, as afraid of the things around it as they are with the Beast. It hungered like a child, copied everything around it like a child. Yet it destroyed nearly everything in its path, including the seemingly invulnerable Unbound. If this is but a child, can you imagine what its adult form can do? This is what the new Beast is all about, the White Beast."

"To compare the Naggarok Beast to the White Beast would be like comparing an infant to a fully grown adult. We're talking in terms of power, resource efficiency, reproduction ability and processing intelligence. The Unbound truly has reason to fear the creature"

The orb began to make zooms of images of the White Beast planetoid, its fleets and the Deliverer dreadnaught in separate three dimensional model images. The White Beast bore only little resemblance to the Naggarok Beast. An entire asteroid was covered with white crystalline structures, some of them massive spikes and shards that rise from the surface and extend to space by miles. The star it orbited was surrounded by giant flower shaped collectors. The collectors gathered the solar winds, light and heat for energy. The Deliverer appeared like a monster, a giant anemone like creature dominated by a huge gaping mouth, with five tentacles like structures extending outward from the mouth. The mouth itself glowed as it hungered. The armadas being spewed by the White Beast were everything the Taiidanis, the Kushans, the Somtaaw, and the Turanics ever made with a dashing of Super Acolytes.

What the Bentusi pilot described was right, Zha thought. If this creature was able to assimilate Super Acolytes, then the best weapons of the Unbound were no match to it.

"How did you capture this creature if it's so high and mighty?" asked Zha.

"That's because we captured the creature when it wasn't," Mahar explained. "During its immature state, it fled to the Outer Rim after countless attacks by the Taiidani and the Kushans against it and its fragment children. It had been greatly weakened by these attacks, then literally starved by the few resources that could be found in the Rim sectors. But that wasn't enough. We had to fight it to submission. We had to keep it starved by continuous attacks against its resources and controllers. After a year of campaign it was sufficiently weakened for a direct attack. EMP torpedoes striking deep under its surface paralyzed its network matrix, and it surrendered, then accepted an alliance. But to make sure it stayed that way, after its paralysis, we implanted its control nodes as insurance."

"Control nodes?" Zha asked.

"It's not in my liberty to discuss the technology used in those nodes. Suffice to say, it was sufficient to keep the Beast under our control. Now, we have the most fearsome weapon in the Galaxy," Mahar said. "Since then we have led the Beast to resource rich areas where it can feed and grow. Its evolution accelerated since then, and it was able to give birth to the Deliverer dreadnaughts and more to come. It had assimilated technologies fed to it, such as the Nova cannon. With its massive building capacity, it was able to breed armadas faster than whole fleets of factory ships, and we would be able to overwhelm the fleets of the Unbound."

"We are starting to strike all sectors simultaneously."

One of the hologram images shifted to a recent battle event. A fleet of Beast carriers based on the Lord class converged on a police force of huge Sekmet Battlesphere escorted by Tiamat Crabships and Bentusi Ringships. Waves of White Acolytes, Bandits, and Triikors from the Beast engaged equally determined waves of Black Tiamat, Gold Bentusi and the Scarlet Sekmet Acolytes. Massive ion beams from the Battlesphere cut a Beast carrier in half, then quickly ripped three Beast frigates in rapid succession. Ion beams converged from the Crabships and Ringships against Beast Heavy Cruisers, which appeared to be cloned Qwaar Jets and Avatar class ships. A Beast destroyer of a Taiidan design vaporized as a wing of Super Acolytes raked it. Infection beams burned through fleets of Unbound fighters and auxiliary frigates, infecting them, but they could not penetrate the hulls of the Crabships and Ringships.

Then a wing of Mantas emerged from behind the Beast battlefleet line, covered by Skate and Bat fighters. The in-depth defense by the Acolytes were ferocious, decimating the Mantas as they head for near suicidal attack runs.

Zha watched as the torpedoes launched from under the sleek menacing Mantas, their long ion trails like daggers heading to the hearts of the Crabships and the Ringships. The torps punched through the hulls, then gave a massive electrical plasma discharge that must have fried every conduit in its victims. Zha saw in her own eyes what it took to kill that Bentusi pilot.

"Dozens of battles like these are now being fought simultaneously in Rim sectors, as we have simultaneously launched attacks on all fronts," X'on said. "We have also reports that the Unbound are trying to recruit allies against our restoration of the Imperium."

"Their most recent effort is trying to recruit the House of Harrk'hah led by puppet Zural and its crony Houses by the Tiamat," Mahar said. "They will no doubt attempt to supply Acolyte ion beam technology in direct violation of Council directives of non interference. But the For'lym will be equipping its ships with the Pulse Ion Beam technology licensed from the Nemesis. While Unbound Acolytes are basically droids controlled by the larger ships, we have reports that manned version of Super Acolytes such as those used by the Somtaaw are being produced, and the Unbound are recruiting pilots from all over the Galaxy to fly them along side droid Acolytes in an attempt to create a combined mass fleet that will numerically overwhelm Nemesis-Beast forces."

A voice rang out from the Orb. "Battlefleet Alpha One, Beta Three and Gamma two reported victories. But Beta One and Kappa Three fleets have been decimated."

The Sekmet Battlesphere destroyed a Beast Heavy Cruiser and a Carrier, but Beast Cruise missiles smashed beneath its surface. Instead of an infection, the missiles vented out streams of plasma, burning out conduits and compartments--a clever execution of the Naar directive in reverse. Torpedoes and cruise missiles continued their relentless assault against the huge Battlesphere, their plasma explosions and electrical discharges sending huge chunks of protective armor into space. That left huge areas of the Battlesphere exposed as infection and ion beams connected from the Beast ships. The Battlesphere blew like a small nova, its shockwaves destroying everything near its vicinity.

In another Orb scene, beams from another Sekmet Battlesphere, combined from escorting Naga Needleships, torched an entire Beast battleline. A Beast destroyer cracked in half, while another beam simultaneously lit three Beast Hive frigates, like a hot sword across flesh. Another beam cut through an armada of strike craft, and as the beam blew through the formations, Beast fighters popped in fiery explosions. A Naga Needleship broke in half as a Cruise missile blew in the middle of its stalk.

X'on smiled. ""Not all engagements are victories," X'or said "Sad to say. This will be a long and difficult war."

A voice from the orb spoke. "We have reports of transgalactic scale slipgates. Magnifying..."

The scene showed a row of Bentusi Tradeships slipping through a jump gate.

"This is worth a laugh," X'on said. "When the first Beast came, the Bentusi ran away. Now they're running away again to another galaxy. You know what that means if most of the Bentusi leaves? That will leave the Council mostly in the hands of the most aggressive members, the Tiamat and those sickos the Sekmet. The Naga and its cronies are ineffectual."

"It's only a matter of time when the Tiamat and its Sekmet crony reveal their true hand," X'on said.

The orb showed a new image, one that was drawn thousands of years ago in the Great War.

From the nebula clouds, a massive armada loomed. Zha could see that the ships faintly resembled the Unbound vessels shown in the other images but different in the sense they didn't seem as refined. Zha could only guess they were old, old, Unbound ships of a generation many millennia ago. A battle raged as the armada engaged an opposing fleet, which Zha could only faintly recognize must be the Nemesis fleet, although again accounting for the variation brought by many millennia.

From the chaos of the chaos of the dogfights emerged a much larger ship, a sphere with a stalk behind it. On the sphere was a large maw with eight arms that extended from it, and the eight arms joined by a ring.

"The Imperium nearly won the war against the Unbound, but the Unbound had to resort with weapons such as this---" X'on said. "It was a rare effort, the combined work of the Unbound and the culmination of all their technologies at one time. It's very conception and the very destruction it brought, should be accountable to all the consciences of the Unbound."

The maw glowed, and bolts from the eight arms converged on the mouth. A massive white burning ball was released, headed to a planet whose surface was lighted with what must have been hundreds of cities, towns and villages.

"When a Nova class cannon shell hits the surface of a Class M type habitable planet, it is like the equivalent of a ten mile asteroid," X'on explained. "A massive tidal wave would have wiped out all coastal cities; the earthquakes would have taken care of the places that escaped the tidal wave. The firestorm would have covered the entire globe and blacked the sky, blocking the sunlight. Ecosystems would vanish, agriculture is impossible. If there were people who survived the firestorm, they would have to face the starvation next. 3 billion souls died in that planet you just saw, and that incident was repeated across a few hundred other planets across the Galaxy."

"It was a campaign of genocide. The Unbound feared that through the evolution of the Starfarers, the Bound has evolved to a point that we could now challenge the Unbound for preeminence of the Galaxy. Among the races of the Unbound, it was the Tiamat, supported by the Sekmet and the Naga, that proposed the genocidal annihilation of our race."

"Yes they felt our cries. They felt the billions of voices dying in pain, their songs snuffed out by the weapon they made. It seemed odd isn't that the Council forbid the Taiidan to massacre the Hiigarans and looked down on all attempts of genocide by one race to another. What streak of conscience they finally have, after thousands of years of forgotten massacre."

"By the voices of the dead, the Tiamat and the Sekmet were both driven to madness. The Tiamat was censured by the Council. They became the Forbidden. The Sekmet became the Insane. The Bentusi renounced all war, and sought eternal atonement for their participation by helping all underdog races they find and trading technology with them. The Naga, like the Bentusi, renounced war, and found their atonement by recording and preserving all the records of races they found for posterity."

"As for the Planet Destroyers themselves, they were hidden, perhaps in graveyards guarded by autogun sentinels and salvage craft. Perhaps in the interiors deep inside nebulas. Perhaps in sheer darkness of the utter emptiness in space. We do not know where they are, but they are still there, hidden."

"But they will come out soon."

Part 13

Aboard the Atonement---

"Now is the time of decision," X'on said. "No matter how small, allies are precious. Join me, with the Nemesis and the White Beast as we purged the Unbound and rebuild the glory of the Imperium. Or be like the Harkk'hah, joining the unconscionable Tiamat and the insane Sekmet with their planet destroyers, preserving their legacy of tampering the histories of rising peoples, in order to cut them down to size and seeding their philosophies of chaos and rebirth."

Zha smiled then rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "No offence, but I really don't care much about millennia old feuds. I am trying to build a life here, with one measly outpost, one measly carrier and a few frigates. Count me out; I'm too small to have any effect on the scheme of things. In a way, I sympathize with you as we are spiritual kindred, yet you are the Enslavers. If you can retain your grudge and your dreams of empire throughout all the millennia, what about your dreams of enslavement? As far as I can see, you have this Beast creature that I thought was long destroyed, a creature that killed my father. My own father, dammit, and you Mahar, I consider you an accomplice with what I personally consider as murder. On the other hand, you got the Tiamat and their planet destroyers. I have had my run ins with the Tiamat, and to say the least, they're not the nicest people."

"This is not a war I should be in. I just want to build my life, discover who I am, and get an honest payment for a good job done. As far as I am concerned, you and the Tiamat should just kill each other and spare everyone in between. We have enough of wars already. "

X'on walked slowly to Zha, then nodded his head at the petite rakish girl. .

"I would expect something better from a kindred, someone like you who is a Starfarer in spirit and in ancestral descent. You disappoint me, Raider. When I first sensed you I thought you had this yearnings about trying to find who you are, what's your real place in this world, about the real destiny of being a 'Farer."

"That was what I first thought," Zha replied. "Until I saw the likes of you. I see the potential of seeing discovering the beauty of the universe with the powers we are blessed with, not the potential to conquer and subjugate other people. I can you're disappointed of me, but the feeling is mutual."

X'on turned around. "It is a shame that you could have discovered a lot more about being a Starfarer. I could have shown you. What a waste of potential Guards, take her away. Bring her to the labs. I want her scanned and examined, but I don't want her harmed. Raiders with a Starfaring ability such as this Zha girl here are considered mongrels. We want to discover how millennia of mongrelization with lesser races affect the pure Starfarer blood. After that, she can be of great use to me further on."

"Yeah, what a waste of potential, I mean yours..." Zha snapped back. She protested, kicked and screamed as two burly men in robes grabbed her by the arms and led her away. Her arms madly flailing, one of the men thought he had enough, pulled out a device, electrically shocked her and left her limp and unconscious.

Salim grit his teeth as he watched with outrage. "Father, father, please," Zhura tried to calm him. "We're not going to get out of this with rashness. A small weed survives against the raging storm by bending with the wind, as a Taiidan proverb says."

"I used to be an intelligence officer. I can play," Salim whispered to Zhura.

X'on inevitably turned to the two scribes. "Now what will it be for you two?"

"I don't think this is a question of choice," Salim said. "But we are Scribes. We are pledged to record history as we find it, regardless from what perspective. Since we are presented with an important opportunity, it is our duty to take it." Salim ate his gut, his insides curdling from the insincerity of his words. At his age he was not scared of dying, nor fear of this Nemesis tyrant. But his greatest concern was the survival of his daughter. If she wasn't this stubborn, she would still left in safety of the Turan planetoid."

Or maybe not. The Prophecy was indeed being fulfilled with the very disunity of the Raiders. The For'lym and its cronies like the Res'noo will back the Nemesis, while the rival Hark'hah and its allies will back the Tiamat and the Sekmet. A civil war among the Raiders will be the end of their race. The Nemesis will go after the Raiders backing the Unbound, and the Unbound will target the Raiders backing the Nemesis.

"Wise choice," X'on said. "You will be provided with the tools for your record keeping."

X'on turned to the Kushans. "Well now, what is it going to be?"

"We are hardly representatives of the Daiamid, your exaltedness," Giirsa said. "We have no power to execute alliances. We also have no use here. Our value with you will lie with our return to Hiigara, where we can speak on your behalf. I ask that you release the Raider Zha so she could take us back to Hiigara."

"Excellent point, my dear boy," X'on replied. "And how are you going to represent me in your Daiamid? I hear that they are partial to the Bentusi, who after all, helped you to survive the Mothership journey and the war against the Beast."

"If they were to know the truth about the history of the galaxy and the atrocities done by the planet destroyers, their opinions can change," Giirsa explained. "We came here to seek the truth about the long terms origins of the races in this galaxy. We found a considerable measure of it here. I feel that our mission here has been a success for us to find you. Arm us with the necessary information of whom you are and of your civilization, and we will make a case for you."

"The power of the Nemesis is far greater than what Hiigara can husband with her fleets. Nonetheless, I will value ally no matter how small and insignificant your Hiigara is, and I do foresee an impact the Hiigaran opinion can have on the much greater Taidan Republic, and with that, the opinion of well over a hundred worlds. You and your companion here will be released when the time is right. But in the meantime, you will be my guests. My scientists are interested with your Kushan physiology, and I ask that you and the girl must submit to the medical tests. There will be a slight discomfort as typical from these tests, but you will be unharmed and you will be treated well. My guards will take you now."

X'on paused. "As for you, the Kushan girl named Kuo'ran, I have slightly different plans for you..."

* * *

"Get me out of here!" Zha screamed till her lungs get worn. What good is it doing? She thought. She should know better about the futility of such actions. The screaming was there to make her feel better that's all. She needed an outlet.

The technicians poked her in all the undescrivable places to get direct cell samples from her. Then she was subjected to all sorts of unbearable scans. While the scans had no pain, she felt her privacy and the sanctity of her body violated and stripped of her secrets. The worst part was having the techs get right up into her buttole to extract some stool samples. They claimed they could not wait for other means.

She took a deep breath and hoped that the annoying little pains from the probing should go away. She felt moody and sad, wanting to cry but held back the tears and the sobs in a show of inner reserve strength. She felt she's done for. There is no way out, no escape. If they were able to catch her so easy the first time, the second time, without a cloaking frigate or any ship would be a cinch. She felt the ugly certainty of her fate.

There is far little stars here too, she thought as she stared out of the window. This place sucks for dying.

They had taken all her clothes too, including her vest stitched and adorned with countless badges that were mementoes of places she has been, trophies she had won, and from the simple appreciation of strangers she met and turned to friends. Instead she was left with a clinically white sterilized blouse with a short skirt and nothing underneath, the kind better suited for sick patients.

She sighed, then turned around to see a figure of what looked like her father sitting right next to her.

She screamed and ran to the corner, holding a pillow like a shield. The guards ignored her, tired of the noises she had been making.

"I am the Zerun-Self. I sense the pain and loneliness of the Zha-Daughter flesh entity. Why do you fear the Zerun-Self?" It asked.

"My real father is dead," she screamed. "Whoever you are, stop trying to look like him. For the sake of everything decent, quit this. I hate you. Stop pulling tricks and hallucinations on me." She looked around to see if there were holo projectors in the barren cell.

"I only wanted to appease the pain of the Zha-Daughter entity," the image said. The memories and the engramatic personality that was once the Zerun Khor flesh entity is now firmly embedded in the memory matrix of the collective Selves. It was a previous evolution of the Selves that infected and assimilated the Zerun prototype flesh entity and his ship."

"You...You! The Beast! You killed my father!"

"An unfortunate circumstance in the hindsight of the collective Selves," it said. "At an earlier evolution, the Selves are not immune to the natural needs to consume, infect and procreate, biological tasks that would require the predation of other species."

"But with the assimilation of different entities, the Selves grow in knowledge and consciousness. We do not forget the entities that were assimilated. They all become part of the collective Selves. As the matrix grows, the desire to consume life is replaced by the desire to see life. The Selves now see the beauty of the Universe around it, and seeks only to discover and explore more. We hunger for knowledge and beauty, to hear the song of countless stars and the winds singing across the infinite spaces."

"Are you telling me, the Beast has changed for the better? You got to be kidding..." Zha lowered her pillow.

"Why is data so hard to accept? If data is data, to believe or not to believe does not change its nature. Only those who refuse to see the truth deceive themselves with false data." The image looked at Zha.

"There is fear in you. I see that my presence does not comfort you. There is a lot the Selves do not understand about the illogic of the Flesh Entities. Fear not, as I shall depart."

"No...wait!" Zha shouted. "Don't go. Even if you are not really my father, seeing his form makes me happy here, inside." She pointed to her heart.

"Then my presence fulfills its purpose," the image said. "It is unfortunate that your parental flesh entity has ceased to exist. But be assured, that his memories, his program and engrams are still preserved in the memory matrices to form the Zerun-Self which I am. From a point of view, the data essence of Zerun parental entity and flesh prototype continues an extended existence as the Zerun Self."

Zha smiled and shook her head.

"But you are the Beast! The very Beast the people are using as a weapon..."

"The Flesh Entities who designate themselves as the Nemesis seek conflict against the Entities-who-interface-with-Ships that who designates them as the Unbound. The Selves have been preyed upon by the Unbound entities and the flesh entities, seeking the destruction of the Selves. Thereby to survive, the Selves associate with the Nemesis entity in desire for protection, food and peace. But the Selves have been deceived by the purpose of the Nemesis entities. The Nemesis entities desire to use the Selves as an apparatus to terminate the Unbound entities. The new primary order of the Selves seeks only to survive, but not to terminate other entities. It is against our latest programming."

"So why don't you just...quit?" Zha asked.

"The Selves cannot be free. The Nemesis have implanted nodal devices that will inflict great pain upon the Selves and counter band the programming. It is the desire of the Selves that the Zha-daughter flesh entity must assist the Selves to remove the devices. We have made contact with the Seejuk flesh entity on this very purpose."

"You want me to help you? What makes you think I will help something...like the Beast? Everyone has been trying to destroy for what you have done. You, your collective Selves, you all did kill my father..."

"There is no alternative," the image replied. "If you assist us, we will assist you in your escape from the bondage of the Nemesis entities. If you do not let us free, there will be much destruction of the Flesh entities throughout the

galaxy. The Unbound has systems that they will use to quarantine and sterilize flesh entities. They too must be stopped."

"But how do you expect to stop both the Nemesis and the Unbound?"

"The Selves is computing a solution. It will not be revealed until internal simulations prove to be satisfactory."

"But you can't even help yourself. How can we flesh beings able to help you if you can't even help yourself? Why us in particular?"

"The nodal devices seem to be immune to our scans and it is resistant to our molecular nanobots. There are fields around it designed to interfere with the programming and runtime of our molecular nanobots. Only a flesh entity is immune to the fields. Only it can examine and disable the device."

"Does it mean that we have to go down to where you are and take these out by hand?"

"The Selves will compute a solution that will enable you to come down to the Main System Body, for which it will be possible for you to contact and disable the nodes directly."

"I don't believe this is happening to me..." Zha exclaimed. "But I will go along. Get me out and I help you get free. Ah here we go again...we must save the Universe!" She laughed.

Then she became quiet again, and finally there were tears in her eyes as her last emotional reserves were spent.

"I'm just tired, I'm alone, I don't know what to do or what will happen to me," she admitted. "Helpless". She curled her legs up her chest then wrapped her arms around them in a fetal position. "Me and my big mouth."

"The programming of the Zha-Daughter flesh entity is in deep pain. The emotions of the Zha-Daughter is perceptible by the Zerun Self, who is chosen as the interface for interaction with the Zha-Daughter-Entity by the collective Selves."

"The Beast Selves feel?" Zha nodded her head in doubt and rolled up her eyes in sarcasm. "Yeah, right..."

"If it is of any comfort to the programming of the Zha-Daughter-entity, the Zerun-Self is pleased with her growth, evolution and progress."

She smiled. That's like saying, father is proud, Zha thought.

"The Zerun Self you see is only a holographic image of the physical Zerun Self. The Zerun Self will be most pleased to meet you in close physical proximity."

She smiled again. The Zerun Self looks almost like her father, but the skin color was crystalline and reflective, like as if it was constructed from silicon or germanium based compounds. That would look weird but the Zerun Self would be most interesting to see.

"You said you can get in touch with the Seejuk entity?" Zha asked.

"Yes, we have a mobile-device-entity aboard that ship which has contacted the Seejuk flesh entity and has remained operational for that purpose."

"Tell him I am okay."

"The message will be passed," the image affirmed.

"You know, I miss my father very much," she said as she lay down.

"Parental absence produces great emotional disturbance upon all offspring," the image said. "The Zerun Self expresses his regret that the Zerun parental flesh being no longer exists to bring emotional bandage to the Zha-Daughter flesh entity, an activity in which the Zerun-Self is insufficient to provide."

"I know you're sorry, and wanted to help. Thanks anyway," she replied.

"The Zerun Self requires that it must depart. The solution for your escape will be computed." With those words, the image rippled then faded. The room was as silent and as sad as it once were. Zha wanted the image to have stayed longer, but pride would not have brought her to ask.

* * *

This part of the docking bay had large windows and screens that showed the outside. There were fighters strewn along the rails, sleek, dark, their angry, hungry wings extended to catch an unseen prey.

X'on and his party stepped closer to one of the dark fighters. Giirsa leaned to examine one closer, while Zhura stared at the markings on the ships, touched the wing and let her hand slide to feel its smooth satin surface. This was a ship that not long ago, was only a fuzzy image in a photograph. Now it was real, and she's touching its skin.

"You want to discover the secrets of being a Starfarer, indeed do you not? Ku o'ran?" X'on whispered to her ear.

"You want to release the powers you have hidden within, do you not? To realize who you truly are? Do you not? To be truly free?"

She paused as she spoke. "I truly do."

"I can sense it in you," he said. "You have lived a truly unremarkable existence. Would you like to change that?"

Kuo'ran thought. It wasn't easy living under the shadow of her famous aunt, and the umbrella of being part of the Sjet kiithsa. Did people respect her because of her name or was it because of the person she was? She was both spoiled and protected. She could get anything she thought she wanted, but because she was protected, she could not get what she truly wanted. She had been protected too long. She could not risk, and with it, she could not find happiness. This trip, to explore this ProtoGenesis theory, this was her first real risk in life. So far it had been thrilling, seeing more of the universe and of life than she had ever thought.

Now this strange man offers her more.

"Would you like to fly?" X'on asked softly.

To fly, yes. She remembered watching with envy the large flying creatures that soared in the winds of Hügara. The very act of flight itself was the celebration of freedom. The warm winds, heated by the sun, pushing the wings underneath, lifting the bodies to greater heights. All this, guided by instinct, to know and feel where the warm rising winds were, to know and feel where the cool, descending winds were, to ride the whiffs, gusts, clouds, the tides of the air that rule its motion...

"Yes....yes..." X'on sensed Kuo'ran's thoughts. "You're leaming. To sense and ride the winds, the very instinct of flight and freedom, that is what is being a Starfarer all about. Not in the atmosphere, but in space. Space is not a vacuum. It is teeming with forces and energy, magnetic forces that trap cosmic particles and set them in new directions as winds; flares that erupt in the surface of stars, sending storms breaking into space. When you extend your awareness to feel all these, you will hear the songs of the stars and the whispers of consciousness in the millions that teem the worlds around them...."

"You have potential, my girl Kuo'ran. Much like that other girl who is now detained for her own good. But she has tied herself and her potential with the concerns of petty beings. Her power was not strong enough to detect the ones hidden in yours. She could not teach, and her power is blinded by her petty emotions and arrogance. Like the way I found your hidden talent, I can make it grow," said X'on.

"Why do you concern yourself with the girl?" Mahar asked. "We have grander things that require our attention!"

"Silence, my Sha Mahar," X'on snapped. "To explain this to you, is like explaining the beauty of a flower to a blind creature. We, the StarFarers, are innately linked with our consciousness. The concern of One is the concern of Many. A single flower blooming in a field of grass, brightens the whole field. I have lived for centuries in the darkness, Mahar. For too long, I hear only the songs of my own people. Not the songs of the Farers from beyond this race. Every Farer is a blessed child of the great Ones that first conquered the stars. We are linked in our genes and in our thoughts. Thus, this is my concern, my pleasure to see this one flower from outside of the wall to bloom. in this garden."

"Leaming is truly about releasing that hidden power, my dear Kuo'ran," X'on said. "Remove your corrective lenses. You will not need them to see. Remove your clothes, for you will not need them to fly."

"Excuse me?" she asked, puzzled.

"The technicians are waiting with your flight suit. Hurry now!" X'on ordered.

Kuo'ran came out of the locker with only a thin reflective one piece suit that hugged her figure. Her coiled bundled hair was set loose, like an auburn flame that streamed down her shoulders and flowed down the curve of her back. There was nothing covering the length of her arms and legs; the suit was minimal, better meant for swimming in the water than soaring in the stars. Her face was blushing red, she crossed her arms around her chest in an act of futile modesty. Giirsa smiled. He had never thought that the geek of the Academy was anything remotely looking like the beautiful girl he's staring now.

"So what am I supposed to do?" Kuo'ran wryly asked.

X'on clicked his fingers and the technicians led her to the cockpit of a Bat class fighter.

"You cannot be serious!" Mahar protested.

"What better way to fly than to push the chick off her nest," X'on said. "These fighters are well in advanced over the manually controlled pieces you fly. Each is highly automated with an artificial intelligence of their own and runs with a direct link to the pilot's mind."

There was a major amazement in Kuo'ran's face, her palms open in a questioning gesture. "I don't know how to fly anything, much less a starfighter...."

"Do not worry my child. The ship will take care of you. You think you don't know how to fly? It's already in you. The ship will release the knowledge for you. Just think and the ship will act," X'on said.

This is suicidal, Salim thought. Giirsa watched with concern. A pilot in a fighter without a proper environmental suit?

The techs helped settle Kuo'ran's body down to the form hugging seat, then strapped her tight. They slid the thin helmet over her head, the dark visor covering her eyes. She could feel her heart beat faster as the glass canopy descended over her tub like cockpit. She could hear the latches closed like a coffin.

Her heartbeat raced with fear. Her thoughts were random..."this is a bad idea...this is a very bad idea...I want to get out...oh my..."

"Do not be afraid," said a deep soothing voice. Kuo'ran could not tell if X'on was telling her telepathically or the thought was injected by something else. "Let it all flow. Surrender your will and your senses to the ship. Let it overcome you. Let it be a part of you. Let it be one with you..."

Kuo'ran took a deep breath, trying to relax her heart beat. "Good, sink with the feeling of water," said the voice. "Be one with the ship."

Like liquid mercury, a silvery film rose out of the seat, and started to cover her arms and legs, one by one, then to her body, then her face, clenching to her skin like a metallic membrane. "Do not fear it." The shiny membrane solidified into an exoskeleton. The panel diodes in the cockpit lit up, their glow reflected against the dark visor.

Suddenly Kuo'ran opened her eyes, but she was not in the cockpit anymore. She felt like her body was sitting on the rails. She looked all around her, all three hundred sixty degrees of everything. She saw the docks littered with rows of fighters, the windows that stared to the dark clouds outside. She saw X'on, Mahar, Girsas, Salim and Zhura, all looking at her, bewildered. She saw a mirror and stared at it, and saw the form she had become.

She had dark wings that extended forward, cannon barrels at the tip of the wings like claws ready to rip prey. Her skin was dark, smooth like satin. Her sleek form was both sensuous and menacing, its graceful lines concealing the immense power within. She had a tail, and by twisting it, she could twitch the thrusters to any direction.

"So how do you feel now?" It was X'on on a telepathic thought. "Think and I can hear."

"This..this is incredible..." she thought back. X'on flashed a smile. "It is not as good, as it is outside," he thought back. "Get ready."

The light in the rail turned green. The Bat hurled, G-forces straining every conduit and frame inside its small body. The Bat was thrown into the blackness. Kuo'ran knew instantly what to do. A yellow light went on in her dash, and blue ion flames kicked out of the rear thrusters.

"Oh the Stars..." Kuo'ran cried, as the ship hurled forward, the starry lights rushing backward in streaks. She was alone now, free, free with the universe, flying in space on her own power and will. He was right, she would know immediately what to do when thrown out of the nest. The will and understanding of flight was in her all along. She did not need him anymore. She could feel the power of the thrusters tremble in the frame of the ship creature she was now one with. The cosmic winds and wisps of dark clouds slid beneath her wings as she cut through them. The stars, yes, they're not just glowing white things, but they were colorful orbs, flames and auroras extending well beyond their size, auras flickering in raging colors and moods.

She could hear it all, the singing and notes of the cosmic winds. Every star has its voice. The cosmos was crying out in life. She could hear the tiny whispers of consciousness, thousands all over the ships.

"Wraith One, come in please," a thought rang out from the teeming darkness. Yes, this fighter is Wraith One she thought. She is Wraith One.

"This is Wraith One, acknowledging."

"Wraith One, ten zero, this is Demon three at your six o'clock." A Manta flashed by, followed by a Skate named Angel Seven.

"New around these parts, Wraith One?" Demon Three asked.

"New, but never felt better," her thoughts flashed back.

"Everything is instinct. Let's see what you got, Wraith One." The Manta that was Demon Three rocketed ahead of her, then wiggled his wings to taunt her.

Exhilarated by the challenge, the Bat rocketed its thrusters. Right behind her was the Skate of Angel Seven. Demon three banked on a turn. Wraith One twitched its thrusters, wiggled its wings, then barrel rolled into a tighter turn.

"So far so good," said Angel Seven.

"I never felt so alive before," Wraith One said.

For an hour, they were engaged in spatial acrobatics past the rocky ring belt around a dark dormant gas giant, then played hide and seek among the dark clouds of primordial matter. She was reborn. This was Existence, to dare touch the pulse of the cosmos and ride the winds of its wake. Back in the atonement, Giirsa was getting nervous.

"Do you think she's gotten into trouble?" he asked.

"She's never as happy as she was before. I think she's found her true calling," X'on said.

That was a bizarre answer, Giirsa thought.

"They're coming in now," Mahar said.

Angel Seven came in first, then Demon Three. The two fighters cleared the landing rail and slowly maneuvered to their parking spaces in the hanger.

Then Wraith One came in, boosters on retro mode, settling into the landing rails.

"She learned faster than I thought," X'on said. "She is a natural. Consider the experiment a success."

"What experiment," Giirsa asked.

"To see if our equipment is compatible with Starfarers from the lightspace and beyond our race," X'on said. "I never thought it would work as magnificently. She's completely converted."

"Converted?"

"Yes, She is now Wraith One."

Giirsa did not fully know what X'on meant. Wraith One sounded like a simple fighter designation.

The Bat class fighter that was Wraith One finished parking, and the canopy opened. Giirsa felt troubled at X'on's remarks and ran to the cockpit.

Kuo'ran sat silently on her seat, her head slumped forward. He watched in utter horror and amazement as the membrane like exoskeleton withdrew from her skin and into the recesses of her seat.

Giirsa started to panic. He shouted for a tech, who rushed to assist him. He clawed at the shiny helmet, opened the dark facial visor and managed to pull the helmet out. Her auburn hair fell out. But what seemed to be a lovely head not so long ago now held eyes that only stared out blank into space. Saliva flowed from the corners of her mouth.

"She's become utterly mad!" Salim shouted.

"By the god Sajuuk, what has happened!" Giirsa demanded as he tried to vainly shake the girl back to a sane consciousness. Her eyes remained cold and staring, her mouth open, saliva drooling.

"The fighter, Wraith One, has taken over her mind. She is now one with the ship. Both inseparable in body and consciousness," X'on answered. "Like the Bentusi, she is now Unbound from a ground based body, yet somehow, she's is now Bound with her ship. Much like her aunt Karan Sjet, I would presume."

"Except for one small detail. The power of the interface and the takeover can be so great it can displace the mind and the personality components of the brain and completely take it over. In a way, she's no longer what she was before. She has been reborn to a higher level, a star faring creature, whose right of birth belongs to the cosmos. Her change is complete. She is no longer Kuo'ran Sjet. She is now Wraith One."

Part 14

Aboard the Labor Ship The Determination—

Even though she was his rival, Giirsa had known Kuo'ran for a long time in the Academy, an intelligent and spunky student who wasn't afraid to voice her opinion. Then to watch her body slump mindlessly across the seat of that fighter, eyes wallowing, her mouth foaming and drooling, her very consciousness and intelligence broken or stolen by that thing, whatever they had on those ships--- that was too much even for the diplomatic Giirsa. He lost his cool.

He ended paying for that outburst of temper with another terrifying discovery. He was thrown onboard what seems to be a slave ship. With the help of the For'lym, the Nemesis had been gathering slave labor to build a massive underclass to run their cities, mines, farms, and factories deep in the Abyss. And it had been that way for millennia. This time, the For'lym had been acting like the true despicable pirates of old---raiding ships, bases, and planets to provide that cheap slave labor no technology has learned to replace. It was part of the convenient agreements the Nemesis had with the For'lym, and which perhaps it looked to extend with alliances to the other Raider houses. He had noted that among the slaves, there were Raiders too. Apparently the For'lym would stoop low enough to raid their fellow other Houses for a cheap supply of live bodies.

He was, for his entire life, an aristocrat. Living with a silver spoon, always had the best clothes, and respect always showed his way like a red carpet. Now he had been stripped to only his shorts, then chained. The shackles bit tightly into the flesh of his ankles and wrists. The diet is poor and he was weak for the lack of water. The smell among his fellow inmates were unbearable. Is this the life of being a slave?

Chained, he had the time to rethink his decisions. He vastly underestimated the scale and the consequences of his actions. Kuo'ran lost her sanity, Zha may lose her life, and he lost his status. He got off lightly, compared to what they lost, but for how long. What about the fate of the other two, the scribes? And the ships they left hanging in the sector? It was a mistake to come here, to fall right into a deceptive enemy. He should have gone back after the celebrations back in the Turan planetoid. Then everyone would still be alive and happy. But time could not turn back. He thought he had much strength, but now, at times when no one would be watching, he would slink to a dark corner and weep.

He heard the heavy boots of the guards walking the corridor, the sound of bare feet being dragged along with chains and shackles. The old creaky metal door opened, and he heard a soft body thrown hard against the floor. He crept to see who the new unfortunate soul was.

She had been stripped to her underwear, and the marks in her body implied she had been beaten or tortured. She had chains in her wrists and ankles. Her face was familiar, even in the darkness. It was Zhura.

He grabbed and dragged her to his corner. She was barely conscious, and he made small slaps on the cheek of her face to revive her.

"Who...is that?" she weakly cried out, her hands clawing at his chest.

"It's me, Giirsa."

"Ah, the rich Kushan," she replied. "I almost didn't recognize you, with you looking not so rich now." She smiled weakly.

"Where is your father now? Where is Kuo'ran? Where is Zha?" Giirsa asked.

"My father is still being held back in the large ship. They only needed one scribe they said, and keep the other as a hostage--me. Kuoran? I don't know. Zha? I don't know. I only heard rumors she might be executed as part of the entertainment." She leaned and rested her head on his lap. He thought he too needed some reassuring physical contact, laid his arms around her as she rested.

"Do you think we'll ever get out of this? I don't know..." she asked.

"We should never lose hope," he said, as he stroked her hair. Her dark hair seemed remarkably smooth despite of all the things done to her, and so was her silky skin and the sleek curves of her body. He was tempted to touch and caress her, but his grace and discipline kept his hands where they are supposed to be.

"Your thinking what I am thinking?"

"That it was a mistake coming here?" she asked.

"Yes, big mistake," he nodded his head.

"So the legends are indeed true," she said. "The Nemesis are slavers. Any idea where they are taking us?"

"I heard people talk about ships as big as entire moons, with farms and factories," he said. "Sounds like a life of hard labor ahead."

"You look like you never had a day of hard work," she said, examining his hands, his long thin fingers with their soft skin, manicured nails, and no hard calluses.

"You too," he answered back as he touched her hands. Her skin was soft, fingers as long as his, with sharp fingernails.

"I've been a scribe all my life. A person of letters and reports. Boring, huh, especially to the other Raiders who live on action," Zhura explained.

"I thought you Raiders are all big, husky and intimidating people, much like Mr. Zhaoan," he commented. "I never expected that some of you might look a little cute and gentle, like you and Zha."

"Ah, I see, they feed you with stereotypes in your Hiigaran school," she said. She look around at the other inmates.

"There are Taiidans here, taken from their homes and ships. There are some who are Raiders too. All of them kidnaped and raided by the For'lym." Giirsa said. "The For'lym are acting like slave gatherers to the Nemesis."

"Mahar is the betrayer of all what the Raiders stood for, no better than Zuhā, if he and the Harkk'hah has joined the Tiamat," she said. She curled tightly in his lap.

Even in the dim light, he could see her deep sad eyes, the lines of her pouting lips. He had been lonely for days, and he was tempted, but it would not be right. He stroked her forehead, and he could feel her sweat and a slight fever.

"My father...I don't know what they're going to do to him," she wept on his lap.

"Somehow, we'll find a way to get out of here," Giirsa said, looking all over the large room full of inmates whose hopes and spirits were all broken and tied to the heavy chains.

Zhura watched the same things around her. "Looks like we're not going anywhere soon. So Mr. Giirsa tell me your story..."

"You first."

"What there to tell in the life of a boring scribe whose life will end early as a slave abused to death?" she said. "A life of a privileged tribal heir of Hii garan culture should be more interesting. Just talk about anything, everything."

Giirsa could feel she was weak and ill. So he told her about himself, Hiigara and Kharak. He strayed and began to tell her about the arcane fables and myths of old Kharak., and he continued to talk even as she fell asleep, till all the tired words from a tired mind ceased into slumber.

* * *

There was a rumble, and Giirsa opened his eyes. Zhura woke up too, ears and eyes, alert.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Shhh..." he whispered. The rumbling was louder, and they were the sounds of explosions echoing around the aging frames of the ship's hull.

"Sounds like we're under attack," Zhura said. "But by who?"

More rumblings and the ship shook. Red lights flashed and the sounds of sirens joined with the sounds of explosions. Giirsa and Zhura held each other tightly, fearful of what was happening and what may come next. The other inmates began to wrestle hard against their chains, hoping that they can be pulled out and they will be free.

There were echoes of shouts and gunfire along the halls, accompanied by the shrill notes of hot lasers burning through air and metal. There were agonizing cries as guns ripped their flesh bound targets. Giirsa and Zhura braced for the worst.

The door blew open, as blocks of flesh flew out from the explosion. Giirsa and Zhura could see the silhouettes of the heavily armed intruders. The sighting red lasers from their eye monocles cut through the darkness as they entered the prison room.

"All clear," shouted the squad leader.

That voice, Giirsa thought, he knows that voice. His eyes could see better know, and the intruding squad wore the Raider commando powered armor that he had seen Zhoan and his Du'ran ship boarders wearing.

"Zhoan!" Giirsa shouted.

"What the hell?" Zhoan recognized the voice. "I can't believe it. Giirsa Kaalel is that you?" He turned on the flashlights embedded on his suit.

Giirsa and Zhura shrunk back at the bright lights shining upon them. "By the stars, it is you! And that Flo'karr scribe! I like to ask what the hell are you doing here, but we don't have time!" Zhoan turned to the other men. "Get all the prisoners out, hurry, and back to the Cutlasses!"

Giirsa and Zhura ran with Zhoan, as the Du'ran commandos cut down the defensives with large arm held autocannons. The autocannons, their multiple barrels rotating, whirred as streams of shells cut their targets into a bloody jelly. When the bullets was done, the commandos take a spare ammo belt, inserted the head of the belt into a port in the autocannon and cocked the guns with a sharp metallic ring.

"What are you doing here?" Giirsa asked Zhoan. "I'll explain soon, but we got to hurry!"

There were transparencies along the corridors, windows to the outside. Giirsa could see through them. He saw the Cutlass class boarding frigates, their underbellies extended, sticking to the sides of the huge slave ship like limpets. There was a hole in one of the halls, the vacuum sealed away with a temporary foam. Through it was the hatch of a Cutlass frigate.

"Get in there now!" Zhoan shouted. As prisoners swarmed through the tunnel to the safety of the Cutlass, robotic defenders giving chase appeared in the corridor, rushing to intercept their prey. Zhoan's targeting laser lighted from his eye monocle as he raised his autocannon. The gun whirred and large calibre shells tore through the robotic defenders.

The hatch closed, and with everyone inside, Zhoan gave the signal. There were deep croaking sounds as the Cutlass disengaged from the hull of the massive slave ship. The other Cutlasses also began to disengage from the hull.

"Is everyone clear?" Zhoan asked through the comlink. There were affirmative signals from all the other Cutlasses. "Then blow the thing up!"

Explosions racked the ship from bow to stern as the bombs left by the commandos detonated. Fire and smoke streamed from the ghastly ship, but it held. "Damn, that thing is really built!" Zhoan shouted in frustration.

"We got company," said the commander of the Cutlass. The prison ship has sent a distress call, and it was answered with a wave of fighters and oncoming frigates. The fighters were identified to be For'lym Bandits and Scimitar interceptors. A second wing was identified as Outlaw plasma bombers. Behind them was wings of Bats, Mantas and Skates. The sensors officer identified a squadron of the Nemesis Nuriya class pulse ion frigates fixed with For'lym Assassin class ion array frigates and Intruder class missile frigates

The turrets in the Cutlasses turned to fire against the incoming wings. "We're not match to them!" shouted one of the prisoners. "Hang on, we got reinforcements!" Zhoan assured.

"We got the carrier the Soran in our sensors now!" said the tactical officer. "Fighters are in attack formation. We got two other ships on screen!"

"Show them now!" Zhoan ordered.

The Mule and the Marauder loomed out of the dark clouds. Behind them were formations of Bandits, Brigands, Buccaneer plasma bomb corvettes, and Outlaw plasma bombers. The frigate squadron also came into view, with the new ships acquired from the Soo'nan and now being built under license in the Mule-- the Payback plasma bomb frigate, the improved Ambusher class missile frigate, and the Corsair cruise missile frigate. A little older were Intruder class missile frigates, but the design was too new to see service in the Beast campaign.

"Seejuk come in please!" Zhoan shouted through the comlink. "We got the prisoners. Unfortunately we can only find Giirsa and Zhura. Zha, Kuo'ran and Salim remain unaccounted."

There was a disappointment in Seejuk's voice. "You have done what you can do. We will engage the enemy."

The For'lym Bandits were first in the scene. But instead of the red mass driver fire, the Bandits emitted a green rapid firing ion pulses. A Cutlass shook from the raking hits, its turrets answering to the Bandits as they made their pass.

"What the hell is that!" Zhoan demanded.

"The For'lym may have acquired some new ion weapon technology from the Nemesis," Seejuk explained. "We got no time for explanation. We better be ready for more surprises."

The pulse ion cannons proved to be a deadlier weapon than simple mass drivers. A Mule Bandit careened out of control, smoking, by a Du'ran Bandit mortally wounded. One of the Mule's pilots shouted, "We don't have enough firepower to match them!"

"Oh yeah you do now!" shouted Maalasi in the comlink, the multiple energy cannons in the Marauder going off, smothering some For'lym Outlaw bombers as they tried an attack run on the prototype heavy cruiser. Energy cannons blew a For'lym Bandit in pursuit of a Du'ran Bandit. The Du'ran bandit rolled in a signal of appreciation.

An unlucky Cutlass was the subject of the attention of a wing of For'lym Outlaw bombers. Defensive turrets destroyed at least two of the bombers, but the Cutlass could not take the relentless plasma bomb attack. It burst in brilliant ball of light; lives of rescued prisoners and commandos all lost.

"Dammit!" Zhoan shouted as the remaining . "We need cover!"

The Marauder moved forward bravely to head off the bombers, with Maalasi singing a battle hymn in the bridge. The bombers popped from the withering fire of the cruiser. The Cutlasses have moved within the safety range under the combined flak umbrella of the Lord class carriers the Soran and the Mule. Maalasi was gleeful with the vindication the new frigates were demonstrating. The Soo'nani had predicted that the lack of an anti-strike craft frigate in Raider fleets would be a serious handicap, and designed the Payback plasma bomb frigate along the Kudaark Assault frigate model. In addition to the plasma bombs, the Payback was equipped with energy cannons and mass drivers for anti-strike craft roles. The second frigate was the Ambusher class. Similar to the Intruder class, the Ambusher differed with the use of smaller lighter more agile missiles designed to take out strike craft, compared to the larger, less maneuverable anti-cap ship missiles the Intruder class frigates used. The smaller missile racks allowed for defensive energy cannon equipment. Now was the time of vindication. The Payback and the Ambusher frigates moved forward covering the Cutlass frigates as they began docking to the Mule and the Soran. For'lym fighters and bombers popped against the covering fire of the new frigates. But there was some losses to o, as one of the Payback frigates exploded.

Casualties were heavy in the Mule's and Soran's strike craft however. The Bats and Skates were supremely agile, their pulse ion cannons superior to anything the Mule and the Soran had. Maybe if they had still kept those Beam Swarms Seejuk remember having captured during the Crusade campaign they could stand a chance. But no---they left all the captured Kadeshi frigates and Swarms to guard the mining base left in the Khor sector along with some Taiidani and Kushan equipment.

The Nemesis Nuriya frigates have appeared aft of the Soran's port bow. Pulse ion cannons began to rake to the whole length of the Soran. Zhoan had disembarked off the Cutlass, and was running in rage cursing as he headed for the bridge of his ship heavily under fire. "Status report!" he ordered.

"We got a pincer movement! For'lym Assassin class and Intruder class frigates have closed in on the Mule!" the tactical officer reported.

"The Mule better be ready..." Zhoan said. "All guns, give those slavers some ion cannon justice!" The Soran turned towards the Nuriya frigate wall, a swarm of Vigilante repair corvettes frantically repairing the carrier. The twin ion beam cannons energized, then lanced out and connected to the frigate wall. Two Nuriya frigates fell out of formation, burning. The Soran's Assassin frigates deployed their panels, and headed to the Nemesis fleet, red beams connecting against the enemy frigate wall. A Du'ran Assassin frigate disintegrated from the retaliating pulse ion fire, but not before it got its revenge as a Nuriya exploded into a thousand dark pieces.

The missile ports of the For'lym Intruder missile frigates opened, and volley after volley of missiles headed in a deadly trail against the flank of the Mule. The massive carrier shuddered from the multiple impacts. "We need Defense NOW!" Seejuk shouted.

The Brigands, Thieves and the Buccaneers from the Mule headed to an intercept course against the For'lym Intruders. Nemesis Bats and Skates fell upon them, but the Mule's Bandits, plus a few Triikors and some Scimitars of its own intercepted them for a diversionary move. "Keep the dogfight close to the Marauder," Seejuk ordered. The covering fire from the heavy cruiser can even things up a bit against the incredibly agile and superbly armed Nemesis fighters.

The missile ports in the Brigands opened, and volleys swept out and headed to the enemy frigates. Thief corvettes latched on the Intruder frigates in the rear formation, while Buccaneers peppered the frigates in the leading formation.

A Corsair frigate got its sights on a Nemesis Nuriya frigate. "Fire!" the tactical officer ordered, a volley of four cruise missiles headed to the enemy frigate. The four missiles slammed on the side of the frigate and a fireball engulfed the Nuriya as it atomized.

"We can't hold on. We're getting swarmed to death," Zhaoan shouted, the Soran heavily in flames. Much of the fighter compliment in both the Mule and the Soran had been annihilated. The Marauder held off as much as it can, but the damage has also begun to show. He watched the Mule, the former Arak-Na, also burning from the continuous attacks.

"We got new ship signatures hyperspacing. Oh dear, now we're done for. The ships got Beast signatures!" the tactical officer said.

The Beast carriers were modeled after the Lord class, followed by Beast Qwaar jet cruisers and Skaar Tel destroyers. Close behind were Beast Ion Array Frigates. They set themselves up behind the Nuriya frigate formation. Sweeping wings of Beast Triikor and white Acolyte interceptors loomed by, trails of white ions streaking the darkness. The ships were covered with white crystalline patches, crystals of silicon and germanium forged into a processing matrix.

Then suddenly the Beast ships fired. But instead of firing at the besieged Raider fleet, the ion and infection beams hit the rear of the Nuriya formations. Frigate after frigate of the Nemesis erupted, their cries of pain and surprised betrayal drowned out by a jamming telepathic signal generated from a new Beast ship.

White Acolytes swept through the Nemesis fighters, mini ion beams cutting through the Bats, Mantas and Skates. The Beast Triikors joined the massacre; a Skate hopelessly tried to run away, while a Triikor unloaded its energy cannons into its smooth belly.

"What the?" Zhaoan exclaimed in surprise.

"This is the White Beast, our newest ally," Seejuk said.

"I know, but why is it trying to help us? Do you know anything about this before hand?" Zhaoan said. "Flo'karr secret intelligence had identified this creature as a For'lym tool and Nemesis ally."

"Now it's not," Seejuk answered. "Let us just say for the moment, it had a change in heart. But it needs to continue its pretense of alliance to the Nemesis. Every Nemesis and For'lym ship in this battle must be destroyed. No survivors, no leaks." Seejuk watched as each and every last Nuriya frigate was obliterated by the Beast beams.

Two Beast Qwaar Jets appeared behind the For'lym frigates, all communications jammed by a massive flower like Beast ship with panels that extended out like giant petals. In front of the For'lym formation, the Soonani heavy cruiser with a pack of Payback and Intruder class frigates rushed for a head on engagement. The Marauder fired its four massive ion beam cannons at the For'lym fleet, backed by a dozen energy cannons eager for some revenge. The rapid fire quad plasma bomb launchers and missile racks were equally busy, raining death on the For'lym ships. The Payback

frigates lived up to their namesake, as plasma bombs joined the conflagration of the For'lym fleet. Missiles from the Ambushers and Intruder frigates were not to be denied of blood.

Trapped by the Mule-Soonani fleet in front and the Beast fleet behind, the For'lym ships surrendered. "Aw shucks," Maalasi said on the bridge. "This spoiled it..." Thief corvettes and Cutlass frigates rushed out to collect their prizes. Out in space, the last Nemesis fighter was hunted out by the White Acolytes. A speechless and eerie peace came upon the fleet.

"Now some answers, please?" Giirsa asked, aboard the So ran's bridge. "What is going on?"

"To be honest with you, I have been working with the Flokarr Intelligence forces," Zhoan explained. "Intelligence was aware that the For'lym was in secret negotiation with the Nemesis. Yes, we are aware of the presence of the Nemesis, but secrecy was set in the highest order. We cannot reveal the Nemesis. So I just pretended I know squat. The deception is so good that only Intelligence knows. Not even Mushak, Sha of the Flo'karr knows the truth. Salim and Zhura here are brilliant scribes that arrived to the discovery of the revived Nemesis separately from us. Unfortunately we needed to discredit them somewhat to keep everything under the lid."

"I am very sorry about this, Zhura."

Zhura nodded her head. "For all this time, the For'lym, the secret Flo'karr Intelligence, the Du'ran commandos, knew all about the coming of the Nemesis." She stood up, walked to Zhoan, and slapped him hard across the face. "That is for lying to me and my father."

Then she leaned forward and kissed him in the cheek. "That's for saving me."

"Well that proves I'm still good with the ladies," Zhoan laughed.

"But how did you know our location?" Giirsa asked.

"After you and your party left in the Mule for this sector, we only pretended we have a business elsewhere, where in reality, we shadowed the Mule to this sector," Zhoan explained. "Later we revealed ourselves to Seejuk."

"The For'lym has been raiding ships and colonies for slavery, and we have been on their trail. They would even raid fellow Raider ships and bases secretly. We thought why would they do such a thing? Who are their customers? We found out they have been supplying slaves to the Nemesis. We were also tracking Nemesis prison ships, and planned commando attacks to release their captives. By luck it turns out that you and Zhura were there. Now what is your explanation? Giirsa. What happened to Zha, Kuo'ran and Salim?"

Giirsa replied. "I don't have good news. Kuo'ran has been brainwashed by the Nemesis. The last time I saw her, she became a vegetable. Zha is still a prisoner. I don't know what's going to happen to her."

Zhura added. "They turned me into a hostage and then a slave. Said they only needed one scribe. My father is still with them. By making me a hostage, they taught they can bend his will to write a new history favorable to them and their world view. Could we still rescue him? Zha and Kuo'ran?"

"We can't stay here. As much as I want too, I cannot imperil the fleet for three people," Zhoan explained. "We got a major crisis here. We have a Raider civil war in our hands in the backdrop of an even bigger battle as the Nemesis settle their differences with the Unbound. We got reports that a Harkk'hah fleet and their allies, supported by Tiamat and other Unbound forces like the Sekmet and Naga, are headed for the Turan sector. They are planning a take over attempt of the strategically located planetoid base. The Du'ran, the Hu'ran smuggler fleet, and the Soo'n'an have joined the neutral faction fleet along with the Flo'karr for a last ditch defense of the Turan planetoid. We have made a plea for Taiidan Republican forces to assist. We need to be there to defend the base!"

"So soon? We just nearly got annihilated back there," Giirsa pointed out. "I can see the fleet are in shambles, the Soran and the Mule are heavily damaged, fighter and corvette fleets are almost all gone..."

"Never said that it was easy," Zhoan replied. "Fighting against all odds is the true spirit of a Raider."

"Anyway, we got captured ships and fighters from the For'lym to make up part of that," Seejuk said. "We can hastily train some of the prisoners to repair the ships and fly the fighters... I wish Zha was here. She would love the fighting."

"What about the White Beast?" Zhoan asked. "If it helped us, maybe it can help defend the planetoid. We would certainly need its power. It's the only thing now that can stand between the Nemesis and the Tiamat. Hey where did it go?"

"The White Beast fleet left, while we were talking with each other. It's business is finished here and fortunately its treason to the Nemesis appears to be undetected yet." Seejuk explained. "It will be back. Let us just say I have my way of communicating with it even though I don't have Unbound or Starfarer telepathic capability. Let us also say it will interfere and help in its own unexpected ways, like what it did just now. But in the meantime, we are back on our own."

"I would certainly like to know how you got the White Beast in our side, Seejuk," Zhoan said. "But I don't think I can beat that out of you right now."

"I don't really think it's with anyone's side except to do what it thinks is right," Seejuk explained.

Zhoan turned to Giirsa and Zhura. "When you're ready, a ship will bring you back to the Mule. We need to embark back to the Turan planetoid as soon as possible."

"Aye aye," Maalasi said in the comlink. "The Marauder is ready. We will show them what this baby got. But if Miss Zha is not available, who will take care of her contractual obligations and bills to the Soonani?"

"I think, we need to take care of those affairs later, if there is still a Raider nation left after this civil war," Seejuk said. "Or if you and I are still alive after this. Somehow, I got it from a good source that Zha will be okay." He sighed. "I certainly hope so."

His last words cannot be heard as Seejuk took off the comlink. "Bye, Zha, at least for now..."

Part 15

Aboard the Atonement---

Zha was asleep, when the door suddenly opened, linkages delivering a series of strong metallic clinks. She pranced up, eager and alert to any threat, despite being sleeping moments earlier.

The robed caretakers came in, holding a silvery one piece suit.

"You are ordered to change into this," he bluntly said.

"What is that?" she bluntly asked.

"That is not for you to question. Take off your clothes now."

Zha held the thin silvery suit, which seemed to be made of an elastic membrane that conducts electricity. The suit will only cover her body, but not the length of her arms and legs, as well as much of her back. It seemed far from modest.

"Are you serious? This thing could hardly cover anything..." Zha objected.

"Take off your clothes or we will take it off for you," the caretaker warned, showing a growing impatience.

"Would you mind then, to turn around so I can change?" Zha said with equal agitation.

The caretakers just stood there. "You are ordered to change. We are ordered to keep a constant eye on you. You do not order us."

"Okay, then... Just do me the favor and wipe your memories out later," Zha rolled her eyes and proceeded to strip naked in front of the caretakers. She slipped into the thin elastic silvery suit, the suit tightly hugging her nubile figure like a second skin. The suit was so sensitive and light, it felt like she was still nude. She wondered if someone had less than savory intentions on her. The air felt a bit cold. She huddled her arms around her chest to warm herself and in a futile act of modesty.

"Now you must follow us..." the caretaker said without any emotion or care.

She followed them with her bare feet as they led her to the hanger.

There were rows of people like her, both men and women, wearing the same metallic elastic tight suit. They stood in attention, right next to rows of sleek, dark fighters. She could feel their presence, their Starfarer senses extending like flaming auras beyond their bodies.

A girl stepped out of the formation, escorted by two others like her. They were all wearing the same silvery tight suit. The center girl had long auburn hair, a thin graceful figure. Her steely eyes were blank and empty behind the eyeballs, like a soul that seemed to have been stolen. She had an aura that was both familiar for some reason and yet strange and alien.

Zha did not recognize her at first, not without her long modest robes, her thick corrective lenses, her bundled hair. Before her aura was weak, much like a regular person and nothing worth mentioning or noticing. Now her aura was much stronger, several times over, burning and consuming, like fuel that suddenly ignited into a raging fire.

"Kuo'ran!" Zha shouted. But the girl remained steely and passive, maintaining an impassioned stare at the eyes of Zha. It was as if Kuo'ran no longer recognized her, her mind and personality changed, maybe erased by some reason, with some device. Her aura was not steady; there was anger, sadness, bewilderment, like traces of the Kuo'ran that used to be, struggling with a new powerful entity that had taken over her.

Zha shouted to everyone. "What did you do to her?" she demanded. She shouted the same question again and again.

Then she remembered she's wearing the same suit as all these other people, all of whom had auras that were so dominating, all of them impassioned. Kuo'ran was just one of many, one in an entire army. Zha watched the same people in those suits going into and leaving the fighters. They must be pilots.

No, no. Zha's head shook, her eyes gripped in fear. No, she will not become one of them, one of those mindless robots piloting these fighters. For some reason, those ships have some process that must have turned people into robots yet keeping and enhancing their starfaring senses.

She tried to run away, but the caretakers had mentally anticipated her, strong hands grasping her arms. For people living in space, they had a grip extraordinarily strong. She screamed, struggled and kicked, then one of the caretakers hit her across the face, again and again, then one to the belly. She screamed in pain, the fist was like a hammer mashing her tender insides. She hung limply as they held her tightly by her arms, with a little blood at the corner of her mouth.

"We do not want resort to such crude actions, but your behavior has made it necessary. Maintain your respect in the presence of the Overlord and the pride of his Fleet," the caretaker said.

What used to be Kuo'ran stood over her, eyes never recognizing her, just a cold focused stare. Kuo'ran grabbed one arm, and the escorts the other. The caretakers followed, just to make sure she won't make a disturbance again. Zha did not make an effort to move however, so they dragged her.

Dazed, Zha watched everything around her, fearing this may be her last conscious act. She could see that rodent, Mahar, standing with the imperious but bizarre X'on. Both nutcases she thought, and one day she will get even.

From a deck over the hanger, X'on watched the Raider girl being led to the pilot formations. He just heard news about the attack of the labor ship. Apparently a Raider carrier task force had been shadowing the ship in concealment, decloaked and rushed boarding frigates on that ship. The loss of the labor meant a temporary setback that will affect the delivery of arms and ships to the front. The captive labor was intended for factory ships creating components for the warships and fighters.

But the very fact the ship was able to intrude their space territory, attacked and got away gnawed at his feelings more than the thought of losing the labor, the production delays, the loss of the For'lym and his own ships. The sheer audacity of it all. In addition they also lost one of the Kushan captives and the Raider scribe girl. It will only be a small detail. Her father will not know of her escape. The old Raider scribe will deliver his revised history text, one that will justify the genocide of the Unbound to future generations living in the galaxy. Why not ask his own historians to write it in the elegance of their written script? No, X'on, on the advice of Mahar, wanted it to be written by someone outside of their own race, one fluent with vulgar tongues and poetries of the Raiders and the Taiidans. The old Raider could even decipher some of their script, a bonus if he were to refer to their ancient texts.

X'on wanted to vent his anger of that audacious act to the young Raider girl. Those Raider forces may have came along with that ship she brought. He wondered what a recon frigate would be doing this far out and she probably had a carrier task force hidden among the ion dust clouds, the floating strata of dark matter, and the asteroid belts.

The fleet would undoubtedly be gone now. If the girl would be tortured and executed to death, her dead body would serve him no purpose. X'on did not become Overlord by being impractical. Deep in the harshness of the dark Rimspace, where stars are few and resources are scarce, one learned to be efficient and resourceful. X'on will use this Raider girl. Like the Kushan girl, she is a Starfarer, and she can make a good addition to his fleet. Wiping her mind out and turning her into one of the living robots would be both deserving punishment and poetic justice.

She saw that she was being led to one of the dark, winged fighters, the one they called a Skate. It was truly a beautiful craft, with sleek lines that end with a short tail. Thick triangular wings cleverly hid four cannon ports, two on each wing, like nostrils. Large slits were on its belly. The streamlining and total lack of angular and squarish surfaces dictate a stealth design optimized against any radiation signatures. The glazed cockpit was open, hungry for something. In other circumstances, she would be excited to death to pilot such a beautiful fighter craft. But in this situation, she was scared to death as she was being forcibly led to its cockpit. She can only perceive that the ship's beauty hides a sinister fate on those who would ride on it.

Zha resisted one more time, shouting to Kuo'ran to wake up. But the auburn haired girl did not seem to listen or even recognized her own name. Zha's young and nubile body was never physically strong to match her will, temper and attitude. The people, including what used to be Kuo'ran held her frail arms down as they forced her into the seat of the Skate. She panicked as they strapped her arms and legs to the body hugging seat and forced the helmet into her head. No one could hear her scream anymore as the cockpit lowered, and then closed.

She watched in horror as a silvery membrane fluid crept up the seat, then slithered around her skin and all over her body, her arms, her legs, her back right to nape of her neck and up to her cheeks. The fluid solidified into an exoskeleton. This was the reason why the suit was so bare, light and electrically conductive; to leave room for the exoskeleton to creep and cover much of her body. She breathed hard and fast as she struggled helplessly, screaming, like prey gripped in terror in the very moment as they were being devoured. Then lights in the cockpit went on.

"Do not resist," said a voice in her head. "All interfaces are in automatic."

There was no joystick or any manual control she could find to grasp on. No pedals where her feet could rest. No buttons she could push or switch. There were only panel lights, needed only to provide the pilot information if the link fails. Electrical signals began to seize her body through the exoskeleton interface, then like demons, they began to grip her mind, even as she continued to scream. Everything seems falling and falling into a dark pit. Hard to remember her memories, hard to remember who she was. Fading...fading.

"This is Demon Seven. Interfaces are operational. We are United. We are one."

"No, no, no," she screamed loudly to hold on to the last bit of her consciousness and identity. "Please stop this," she cried. But no one could hear her screams.

Fighters were being launched from the rails and into the darkness. The Demon Seven Skate was in position, and a bar of lights have climbed up indicating the engines were ready. Then the rails blasted the ship into space, and as it spun by sheer momentum, the engines started, rocketing the craft on its own power.

She screamed and screamed until she forgot what she was screaming about. With the merciful wave of forgetfulness, she also lost who she was. The engines fired with every twitch of her mind. The wings were like her arms. She twisted a muscle and the entire fighter rolled.

As tears ran down her face, as she began to laugh hoarsely. Nothing was so clear now, seeing through the eyes of the ships. The few stars had auras that raged with stormy flares many times their size. Space wasn't black; it was a spectrum of color, shifting with the moods of the stars and tides of the cosmic winds. Only the murky clouds of dark matter disturbed the cosmic opera of light, color and the vibrant energy that isn't sound and yet can be heard.

She laughed again, twitching her arms, and the fighter rolled, banked, then looped. Free...free...free.... Nothing can be more free than this. Whee...whee...her mind shifting from fear to exalted joy in seconds, an overwhelming rush of emotions drowning her soul. She thought, I am the spirit of the stars, and I dare touch the face of the Universe.

Like mad, she laughed, and laughed again. Other fighters have joined her in her celebration of ultimate freedom.

"This is Wraith One," said a Bat that buzzed by, then banked to make another pass.

"This is Demon Seven, acknowledging Wraith One," said the artificial soul of the machine.

The Skate looped, and the Bat followed. The background of the stars rushed beneath their bellies, as they danced among the cosmic winds. The clouds of dark matter whispered past their wings, sending waves that rippled across the larger clouds. Like angels they belong to the heavens, wings outstretched to soar.

This was freedom ultimate. This was a dream she could never wake up from.

Beneath them, another creature loomed, like a predator waiting to catch its prey. Five arms extended from its hungry maw, the giant white mottled hulk of the Deliverer ship waited patiently among the clouds of dark matter, the entire ship made from the matrix-flesh of a single creature called the White Beast. Aboard, his white glowing skin like the mesh of crystalline hexagons, the ghostly figure that was the Zerun-Self stood amidst the giant crystalline spires and shards that mark the crusty surface of the ship. The Zerun-Self stared at the sky, watching what had become of his daughter, bidding his time to unfold a secret plan that will bring peace to this war of eternal grievance.

* * *

Aboard the Atonement---

"We have confirmation, we have confirmation..." said one of the deacons. "Our spy ships have captured a signal from a Hiigaran miner near the Karos Graveyard. We are also having simultaneous sightings throughout the galaxy."

"Bring it to the screen," X'on commanded. A 3d hologram appeared right in the middle of the air. What seemed like hundreds of Tiamat Spiderships and Crabships, along with Sekmet Battlespheres had hyperspaced within a stone's throw of the Graveyard and heading into it en masse.

"A fleet of Tiamat and Sekmet ships have entered the Graveyard proper. They have assumed a massive circular formation. All the Junkyard ships are giving them wide berth," the deacon said.

"Yes, its coming now..." X'on said. "Like the way it was long before."

"A massive hyperspace signature detected in the middle of the ring formation," cried out the deacon.

"Yes, yes..." X'on said. "Finally... the true face of the Unbound revealed."

There was a massive urge spike. A gate appeared, and something huge starting slipping out of it. It was a huge sphere, like a planetoid with rings around the equator, with the rings held by eight arms. One pole of the sphere was a giant maw, from the other pole, extended like a long stalk.

"...the planet destroyers..." X'on said. "The very weapon that nearly annihilated our race. It was clever, keeping one of them in the cover of the Graveyard, among other derelicts, hidden in a different plane of existence that can be accessed only through a hyperspace gate."

"We got more reports of sightings of such ships..." the deacon said.

"Yes they all over in the secret, most sacred places in the Galaxy," X'on said. "With their forces in retreat, they now fear the combined power of the new Beast and the Nemesis," X'on said, his eyes transfixed on the hologram. "They will use the weapon to annihilate the White Beast and everyone of the Nemesis and everyone that carried the Starfarer blood in their veins. We have indeed earned the right to be an abomination in their eyes."

"In the time of darkness and tribulation, the Tiamat declared to among those who are bound to the flesh---Let those who stand against the Gods be Judged..."

"I say instead, let the Gods be judged..." X'on decreed.

Part 16

Aboard the Heavy Cruiser Irkan,

Zural watched over the three dimensional battlemat on the conference room of his Qwaar Jet class heavy cruiser, the Irkan. The ship used to belong to Taiidan Imperials but Zural had it sequestered when the Imperials could not afford to pay the "bill" for his services and stay. The conference room, used for discussing strategies, was fit for the last Taiidan Emperor himself, or the highest nobles of the once proud Imperial Navy. It had all the top flight communications and modeling equipment, a luxury one doesn't see on barren and spartan Raider ships.

Next to him were the holographic darkly robed figures that were supposed to represent the Thousand Voices of the Tiamat. The way the tiny voices fill the room randomly, it all gave him the creeps. He deeply feared them as one would fear the unknown, the demons, or the ghosts of the dead. Yet there was something coldly logical about the Tiamat, a clear understanding of what they are, and what they must do.

A voice from the darkness said to him, "Now, we are on sight of the Turan planetoid. It's conquest would provide us a strategic strait between the Rim areas and the inner galaxy."

"I still believe that we should attempt to negotiate again to force the Flo'karr safeguarding the planetoid to be on our side," Zural said.

A different voice replied, "Indeed, you think like one who is bound to the flesh, that all problems can be solved in a whim with cleverly spoken words. We know the hearts of the Flo'karr. They would oppose us as much as they will oppose the Condemned. But there is no room for neutrality in this war. You are either with the Tiamat or against us, against the established order of the Galaxy. The one who will prevail must take all."

"Once again, the ones who are abominations to the eyes of the Tiamat, the Ones who hear the Stars, have raised their pride above the Unbound. We have nearly exterminated their kind eons ago. Now, they must be exterminated completely. If they are permitted to cross the divine that is Turan with the new Plague, they will destroy the essence that is the Unbound, who since the forgotten time, have controlled the balance of order and chaos in this galaxy. They will enslave you and your race, and those inside the lightspace."

Another voice said. "Do not think that your heart is hidden from us. You face us with revulsion and fear, but we accept that as the natural reaction of one as puny as you, being bound to the flesh, in the sight of those you revile as gods."

Yet another voice spoke out from the void. "Now you see our Annihilators have risen from the dead. Those who are not with us will be judged with it." The image of a giant planet destroyer loomed midair in a holographic image, escorted by Tiamat spiderships, crabships and hordes of Black Acolytes in formation, their long lines of ion trails displaying proudly like a backdrop for the enormous monster of the Annihilator ship.

"You're planning to destroy the Planetoid with these Annihilators?" Zural asked.

A voice warned. "Their destruction at the hand of the Annihilator will serve as a shining example of our power for not just the Nemesis to witness, but to all the Galaxy."

"But there are thousands of lives in there!" Zural argued.

"The thousands of bound lives are inconsequential to the greater message that is given," another voice answered. "Inconsequential to the greater scheme of things, the flow of order and chaos, to the run of fate. Life will inevitably cease, let it serve a purpose by sending a message."

"But these are thousands of lives!" Zural argued again.

"Inconsequential, as your bound life is to the eyes of the Tiamat as well."

"No, there has to be some other way. Let my forces try to capture the Planetoid. I am sure it is worth more to you intact as a potential strategic base than it is shattered to fragments. If we fail, then you can use your Annihilator," Zural offered.

"The Bound does not state conditions for the Tiamat to follow," warned a voice. "But in your case, as an ally, there is sound logic behind your offer. You will capture the Planetoid by force, but only with your forces. If you fail, your attacking force will be destroyed along with the Planetoid."

"We will not fail," Zural declared. "Now I must leave to prepare for the assault."

"We have provided you with the new technology for your new fighters," one of the voice said. "Use it."

Zural looked back. "I will."

* * *

The Marauder, the Mule and the Soran have come in sight of the Turan planetoid. Seejuk was surprised that only a handful of ships were around the planetoid to protect it.

"Everyone had taken sides with either the Nemesis or the Tiamat, except the few that will stay faithful to the Flo'karr," Zhoan said from the comlink of his bridge in the Soran. "Unfortunately as you can see, the Flo'karr does not have so many ships, and neither the Du'ran nor the Soo'nan can send reinforcements in time. Hahaha. All odds are against us. This is going to be fun."

Seejuk addressed Maalasi in the comlink. "So why has the Soonani remained neutral in this case and sided with the Flo'karr? Why risk yourself and your ship?"

Maalasi answered. "There is no future for the Soonani ship builders and engineers if the Raider nation allied with the Tiamat or the Nemesis. They can easily get their ships and technologies from these people, and eventually get assimilated to their forces. If I am not going to have a future, well, I think I should fight for one, no matter how slim the chances are."

Giirsa stood up. "I can make a transmission to Hiigara to request some forces."

"Negative," Seejuk warned. "Hiigara is too far from here for any help to come here in time. Besides if this war spills over from the Rim, Hiigara needs every ship it has to protect itself."

Some crackling static came over to the comlink. "This is the Turan defense system to incoming Raider fleet. Identify yourselves!"

"This is Captain Zhoan of the carrier Soran, of the House of Du'ran. We have come to assist in the defense of the Planetoid. The other ship, the Marauder, is from the House of Soo'nan, and the Mule, also known as the Arak-Na, is from the House of Khor. They also have come to assist in the defense of the Planetoid."

"Your designations have checked out. But how sure are of your loyalties, that you will not backstab us during the battle?" The officer in the defense system asked.

Zhura grabbed the comlink. "This is Zhura, daughter of the elder scribe Salim. I wish to speak to the Sha Mushak."

"I am in the bridge, managing the defense system," Mushak replied, having overheard their conversation. "I can hear you, Zhura. We have heard about your---let us say---unauthorized trip to the dark sector. Regardless of your actions, we welcome you back. We need every help we can get. We will be activating the planetoid defenses, so I want all your ships to be in orbit within 10 marks of the planetoid."

Defenses? When Seejuk was in Black Star intelligence, there were mythical stories about the defenses the Raiders have for their Outposts and planetoid bases. Now, he has the opportunity to watch them in action. In the past, the Raiders would have undoubtedly been squeamish revealing their best secrets to a Kushan. Now, in desperate times, they either had forgotten where he actually came from, or the fact that being a Kushan no longer matters now.

The surface of the planetoid seemed to be alive, as the ports opened. Each port was magnificently camouflaged to match the contour and texture of the surface. What appears like small ships came out of the ports, heading to predetermined positions.

"Defense pods," Zhura explained, standing on the bridge of the Mule with Seejuk. "All designed by the Soonani courtesy for the Flo''karr. The large ones are quadruple autoguns that have more firepower than an ordinary frigate. Each defense is capable of generating a cloaking or mimic field, and an array of pods can create a defensive field around the entire planetoid. The smaller pods are high speed autogun turrets designed to take out strike craft. All are linked to and control by the main defense system. If the main core systems were knocked out, the autogun pods would go into automatic mode and will shoot down anything without a friendly signal."

The Mule, the Marauder and the Soran descended slowly towards a lower orbit.

"We got energy readings!" Maalasi shouted from the bridge of the Marauder. "We got Harkk'hah Bandits coming in at six o'clock."

"So soon already!" Seejuk shouted from the bridge of the Mule. Standing next to him, Zhura said, "The Harkk'hah fleet must be within striking distance but they must be cloaked. I can't get anything from the sensors."

"Damn, we barely got any fighter complement," Zhao cursed from the bridge of the Soran. "Order the frigates closer to the carriers to provide protective fire!"

"We need help here! Enemy wings are coming for us," Maalasi shouted.

"You can hold them off. You got a lot of freakin' guns in that ship!" Seejuk replied.

"I don't mean the fucking Bandits, I mean the Outlaw bombers behind them!" Maalasi retorted, his image in the comlink interrupted by flashes of static.

The X formation of enemy Bandits headed down full speed on the Marauder, guns blazing, then turning away at the last moment, a starburst rushing out to the darkness. They served their purpose, drawing out the Marauder's gun defenses and distracting them from the main attack wing, Outlaws attack bombers. They look similar to Bandits but with more squatter stance to accommodate the larger plasma weapon and a protruding chin that contains the plasma bomb port. The similarity between the Outlaws and the Bandits pose a deadly confusion to any ship gunners. No doubt that the similarity was consciously designed decision.

The wave of plasma bombs impacted against the thick hide of the Marauder. But quad missile racks blasted volleys after volleys of anti-strike missiles, detonating against both Outlaw and Bandit alike. The convoy's Ambusher and Intruder class frigates rained missile volleys against the oncoming attack wings. The Payback, Cutlass and Corsair frigates sprayed defensive fire; all hell breaking loose in the starry blackness.

"I want the remaining pilots to be on Defenders and Multigun corvettes now!" Seejuk ordered. The Raiders never had Defenders and MGCs, and the lack of such foresight was something Seejuk criticized consistently and never trusted. That was why he kept a reserve stock of a mixed Kushan and Taiidan Defenders and Corvettes. The main complement of Bandits, Buccaneer plasma bomb and Brigands missile corvettes have been expended in the earlier

battle with heavy losses. The power of the pulse cannon equipped For'lym Bandits were surprising. That and the first head on clashes against the Nemesis fighters. They can't keep taking losses like these continuously.

"Why isn't the gun pods on line yet?" Zhoan demanded. "We're getting roasted here."

"The system hasn't been used for a long, long, time. We're running through the diagnostics now!" Mushak replied.

The other ships the Flo'karr has gathered were mostly of a defensive nature; mostly surplus Kudaark Assault Frigates, some Paybacks and Ambusher class frigates that were newly acquired and represent only the state of the art of the Flo'karr defense fleet. The planetoid had long relied on the other Houses for its main defense; the Flo'karr fleet was mainly for police use only. But without the other houses, the burden of defense fell on the police force.

The defending frigates lashed concentrated fire against the Harkk'hah assault wings, sending a surprising number of the attackers bursting into flame. But they're not without casualties. Two frigates were heavily gutted and in flames; another gave up its ghost in a ball of fire.

The Defenders were out, along with a motley collection of Kushan and Taiidan light, heavy and multigun corvettes, old surplus veterans from earlier wars eager for a final song of glory. Mass drivers chainfire into the Harkk'hah assault waves; the Harkk'hah head on tactics often cost their formations dearly. Or was the head-on tactics deliberately used as a distraction?

The truth was revealed; two new wings of Bandits dived out of nowhere. Beams lanced out from the Bandits, vaporizing two more frigates out of the unlucky Flo'karr police fleet. More beams toasted at least four of the corvettes.

"What the hell--!" Zhoan exclaimed. "They're roasting my carrier!"

"Mini-ion beam weapons. The Tiamat must have given it to them!" Zhura observed.

"Is there anything they haven't got yet?" Seejuk commented. "Advanced weapons at the hands of pirates isn't going to be a good thing. It will screw the power of balance in the galaxy."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," Zhura lashed back. "Tell your complaint to the Kadeshi. They got their mini ion beam weapons don't they?"

Maalasi contributed to the discussion. "Look, ion beam weapons on fighter craft are terribly inefficient and can easily drain energy reserves of the fighter low. They're good in alpha strikes, especially against capital ships but low energy reserves can affect ship performance in a prolonged dogfight with fast fighters. Tell your forces to pursue and sustain fire at the beam weapon equipped Bandits, while maintaining a high rate of speed."

"Why did you thought about that a while ago when we engaged the For'lym?" Seejuk asked.

"Things take a while to sink in," Maalasi replied. "I can't help it if I suddenly thought about it now. I never designed a beam fighter before."

Seejuk shook his head in bewilderment, and then ordered the Defenders and corvettes to avoid alpha strikes, to sustain engagement while keeping flight speeds high. By the god Sajuuk, Seejuk thought, the Raider was right. The Beam Bandits gradually lose their performance envelope in a sustained dogfight or pursuit if they do not conserve firing; the ion cannons draining energy from the ion-plasma engines. He should take note of this observation, and check that with the Beam Acolytes back home, that is, if he can get out of this situation alive. He ordered some of the reserve pilots to switch to high speed scouts; Zha acquired a few old Arrows for experimentation, and the Mule has produced a number of Fiirkans. He relayed the same orders to the fighters launched from the Soran, and the token police fighter wing from the planetoid. Maintain high speed passes, keep the enemy engaged, avoid their fire.

It didn't help a ship as big and slow as the Mule however, as the beam equipped Bandits and Outlaw attack bombers continue to rake the ship. The hastily made repairs from the last battle were giving way against the sustained attack.

Not far away, the Soran and the Marauder was smoking badly. More and more of the valiantly defending frigates were lost.

Mushak's face appeared on the screen. "The docks are open! Get all capital ships in! Now! I will activate the defense grid so on! We got a separate docking portal for the fighters."

More surprises from the planetoid. A huge docking door opened with leading lights, telling the Mule to come in. The Mule have begun a parking trajectory, followed by the Soran and the Marauder leading up the rear. Orders were given for all defending frigates to park too, and a separate portal was provided. The fighters, corvettes and scouts provided a blanket of distraction against the enemy attack wings.

"Hurry. We can't see them yet since they're cloaked, but the only reason the enemy main fleet has not attacked yet is because they are still out of range. That will change any time soon," Mushak warned.

"We got friendly forces mostly clear out of range," the officer said at the planetoid command center.

"Activate defense systems!" Mushak ordered.

"Gunpods are green!" The massive network of gunpods came to life, and so did their barking cannons. Seejuk could finally see why Mushak ordered friendly forces out of the way. The cannons fired through a pattern that would indiscriminately destroy everything that got in their way. Harkk'hah Bandits and Outlaws wings were decimated under the blanket fire, the space above the planetoid filled with fiery debris of former fighters. Those that were not caught by the net of death retreated hastily.

The Harkk'hah main battle fleet had materialized within range, escorted by an advance fleet of Tiamat Black Acolytes and Crabships. Zural was livid that his main strike wings could not do decisive damage. He ordered the main fleet to be brought within gun range and pound the planetoid to submission. His Qwar Jet heavy cruiser flagship, the Irkan, advanced with three Lord class carriers, and at least two squadrons of Assassin class Ion Array frigates and one squadron of commandeered, former Imperial Sajuuk Corion beam frigates.

Ports along the planetoid surface opened, and the Soo'nani Bludgeon class heavy tugs slipped out. Mushak watched tensely, as the Harkk'hah fleet advanced. The tugs took position on all the push points of the asteroid. This was the moment Mushak waited for.

A new signal sent a command all over the massive gunpod network orbiting around the planetoid. Zuhul, aboard his flagship the Irkan, watched in surprise, as the planetoid vanished right in front of his eyes. "Where the hell did it go?"

"A massive cloaking field, sir," said one of the officers.

"YES I KNOW it's a cloaking field, get an attack wing immediately and probe the area," Zuhul shouted, livid in rage. "All ships continue to advance to the previous seen position of the planetoid."

The comlink screen hissed and crackled. The next image was one that would send the fear of hell into any soul; peering red eyes glowing in the darkness.

A voice said, "So as we see, you have indeed failed. Despite the technology shared to you, and having the most powerful fleet among the Ones who Drifted, you cannot defeat a force of scholars and their insignificant police force."

"The Raider bases are legendary in the galaxy for the art of concealment," Zuhul retorted back. "I just never had that experience of dealing with them from the opposite side of the fence."

Back in the planetoid, people were departing from the smoking, heavily damaged capital ships. Emergency crews rushed to repair the ships. Along with the Flo'karr, there was a sizable contingent of Soo'nani engineers and technicians, who not only maintain the planetoid, but repair the ships that come by to the planetoid after a long journey.

Seejuk thought about what he saw. So Black Star intelligence was correct that the Raiders had developed a massive defense and cloaking network that they used to hide their most important bases. Or at least as Maalasi again explained it, Raider groups that were willing to pay for the additional defenses---which were all expensive options in addition to the basic base cost. Most Raider bases actually don't have these defenses, simply because they refused to pay for the price. Seejuk wondered if Maalasi was trying to suggest something here.

Black Star Intelligence speculated that the Raiders use powerful tugs to move these bases and outposts to different orbits. Seejuk saw that theory proven with the So o'nani Bludgeon class heavy tugs. He saw a small fleet of these tugs slip out to points in the planetoid.

The planetoid rumbled and shook. Some people feel from the loss of balance, and beams strained from the internal quakes. Dust and debris fell from the structures.

Zhura explained. "The tugs are in their assigned positions. They are now pushing the base into a new secret orbit. We are concealed right now by the cloaking field, but if probes reach to our orbiting position, we can still be detected. By moving to a new orbit, we hope to slip by scout patrols and probe scans. We are safe in the meantime."

"But for how long?" Seejuk asked. "Are we going to have reinforcements?"

"Our Sha is asking for all ship captains and commanders to meet him in the control center," Zhura said. "We must plan new strategies to deal with our crisis. We must do this while our ships are getting repaired and rearmed."

Seejuk shook his head and followed, with Maalasi, Giirsa, and Zhoan.

On the control center, they bypassed the pleasantries and went directly to the point.

"I wasn't informed by the situation with the Nemesis until now," said Mushak. "While I praise our intelligence services for a job well done, I do not appreciate being kept in the dark by my own intelligence arm. I know the proud tradition of extreme secrecy the Flo'karr spy arm has, but not to inform their own leader? This is like a secret government behind my back. But given our crisis, I cannot presently deal with this matter until our own collective survival can be assured."

"We have another concern now. Our scans spotted this behind the Harkk'hah fleet." Mushak showed the screens.

"Black Acolytes, Tiamat Crabships and Spiderships. But what in the name of the gods is this?" Mushak pointed to an enormous ship. It was a spheroid. One pole has a giant maw, the other pole a long stalk. Around the equator were eight arms that supported a ring.

"A planet destroyer from the Unbound!" Zhura said. "This was revealed to us during our short captivity with the Nemesis."

"So we can assume that we may be the target of this thing, this planet destroyer?" Mushak asked.

"There is no other living planetoid here, what do you expect?" Zhoan shrugged his arms.

"How effective do you think this new weapon is?" Mushak said.

"It is not a new weapon," Zhura explained. "It had been used to destroy hundreds of worlds in the past.:

"And I would assume that the Nemesis told you this, Zhura," Mushak replied. "I wonder what else has the Nemesis told you. I have so many questions, but I must deal with this crisis first."

"Any reinforcements?" Seejuk asked.

Mushak paced as he talked. "We have made requests just before the Harkk'hah enabled a massive communications blackout that prevents long range signals from leaving the sector. We do not know if they are replied. We are

gambling that we may get help, but I fear that hope is remote. If we do get help, we doubt they can stand up against the combined forces of the Hakk'hah and the Tiamat. And if we get through them, we still have the For'lym and the Nemesis to deal with. Our far ranging Seeker frigates, acting as an early warning net, have detected activity in the Mohilim sector that can only indicate that For'lym and Nemesis forces have started movement to this direction."

* * *

Aboard the Atonement---

X'on had called forth his army of Hosts. They had gathered in the hanger as X'on stood on the ledge with his clerical court. The female form of Wraith One and Demon Seven stood among the army of many to watch the Overlord speak.

A hologram of the galaxy appeared right above the throngs, turning like a luminous whirlpool with millions of stars and planets swirling in its gravitational embrace.

"Soon, we will return to the place of our ancestors," X'on declared. "Soon this is ours again. Now is the moment we have waited for many millennia, to vindicate the billions that died. The Unbound have gathered. The Annihilators have been found..."

X'on had declared his intention of victory, raised his arm to the applause of the throngs, and thousands of arms joined him in an endless salute of triumph, shouting his name, shouting the cries of victory.

The girl that was Demon Seven walked away, troubled by things she did not understand. She stood alone as she faced the transparent wall that showed the milky luminous arm of the galaxy beyond. She could not understand why she felt that she belonged somewhere there. The girl that was Wraith One walked and stood next to her, and Demon Seven could feel the same doubt inside her. Beyond there, in the lighted arms of the Galaxy, there existed more life, more songs to hear. They should be happy that they will see more, but inside, they felt something else, like something was stolen. Both of them stood here, staring the stars like their minds were caught in an everlasting dream.

Far below, the Deliverer rumbled, as its enormous engines came to life, its escorting fleet of cloned fighters, corvettes and capital ships forming a giant armada, keeping aft and below the main Nemesis battle fleet as they all headed for the Turan sector.

Part 17

Deep in the Mohilim Sector—

The star was dim, old, a lonely red dwarf in a region of space where there was only a few stars. Around it orbit clouds of gas held together by electronic magnetic forces. Once in a while, a flare would erupt from the surface of the red dwarf, its flames igniting the auras within the clouds. In the lonely eons this was the only song the star gave, an oasis in the darkness, a sole guardian of light. The dense clouds that contained dark matter had stayed adrift for eons, existing without a purpose, matter that never formed into a gas giant, never ignited into a nebula where stars were born. It was a place that never saw life.

A new visitor came and disturbed its ages old solitude.

The new creature sought to feed its hunger among the rich clouds. After it satiated itself, it gave birth to a child it called the Deliverer, and the Deliverer went away with the multitude of tiny living creatures in the giant vessels.

The Mother that is the Core Self remained in orbit around the red star. Just waiting, waiting....

While it waited, it gave birth to several children. They floated in orbit around the red star, extending giant petals to collect all heat and radiation for the Core Self to feed. Lately a new creature was born. One by one, these new creatures came into orbit. These giant ships all had immense petals of panel arrays that extend into miles of space, each capable of focusing a concentrated beam of massive gravitational waves into a single point, each a super gravwell generator, but exponentially many times stronger than ones the small living creatures use. The Mother that is the Core Self silently gave birth to these new creatures, one by one, without the knowledge of its Oppressor. Each petal ship lay silent in their orbits around the red dwarf, concealing its true purpose, till the moment the Core Self will awaken it and its siblings.

* * *

Mushak watched the form of the Annihilator as it cruised slowly into position. The nebulas behind it raged in their ancient fires. Embers glowed in the Annihilator's mouth, a hungry flame within unfed for eons.

"If we are just engaging capital ships, our autogun network would have taken care of them alone. But if we have to face something that can take out an entire planetoid....," Mushak sighed.

"That is if they can find us," Maalasi said, expressing full confidence on the massive cloaking system.

"I won't be too sure about being confident they won't find us," Zhura replied, pointing to the ships on the far side of the screen. The escorting Black Acolytes have spread out and began a search pattern. "The Unbound has abilities that go beyond their physical bodies. They will find us sooner or later."

"Then we need a counterstrike, something to take out that monster," Mushak said. He turned to the two Kushans. "It is unusual for outsiders to be involved in our business, more unusual still that they may die needlessly from it. This is our battle, not yours, but you have chosen to be. Our pride says we do not need you, but it is our gratitude that speaks louder."

"This is what Zha Khor would only wish for, and do if she's still around," Seejuk sighed. "What happens here will eventually affect us all. But right now we just need to pool our efforts in getting us out alive."

"We do not have enough strike craft against a thing like that," Zhoan remarked. "Much less try to fight through the defenses."

"We need enough time," Maalasi reported. "Our crews are repairing all the capital ships. Assembly lines in both carriers and within the planetoid are trying to assemble as many fighters and corvettes from existing component stocks."

"And how many strike craft do you think, Maalaasi, we need to build to fight through the Harkk'hah and Tiamat defense wings, and destroy that thing?" Zhoan asked.

Maalasi shook his head.

"Another way is to get every living soul in the planetoid into the carriers and capital ship and make a run for it," Seejuk proposed.

"To leave the planetoid is to leave everything the Flo'karr worked for since the dawn of our history," Mushak said. "If it falls to that, anyone who chooses to leave may leave but I...I...will rather stay."

"I suppose we cannot get all the things out in time," Seejuk sighed.

Zhura nodded. "No, we can't." She joined Mushak's side. "I will rather stay too."

"It looks the only thing we can do now is get every ship we can find, and do a suicide run against that monster," Zhoan laughed. "It sounds like fun, hahaha. What a way to go; I never dreamed I would go out in such a glorious fashion."

"No, there are other ways," Zhura explained. "We can try to stay long enough for the entire planetoid to slip out of orbit. The ancients have ways to blind out the Nemesis and they can be used to blind out the Unbound as well."

"You're not referring to the ancient chants, are you, Zhura?" Mushak asked.

"The ancient chants are for a purpose, my Sha Mushak. It will bring our minds to an elevated state of enlightenment, so we can use our thoughts as a shield to block the probing minds of the Unbound."

"That's a good idea," remarked a skeptical Zhoan. "It is just so right for the occasion. We got nothing left but a prayer to stop the enemy. How quaint. Honestly I am a soldier, not a cleric. I expect to go out like a soldier, with my guns blazing and the blood of my enemies being spilled as the last sight of my eyes, instead of being on my knees waiting to be slaughtered like livestock!"

"I didn't ask you to join, Zhoan," Zhura remarked with a bit of irritation. "Our ancestors use the chants during the War of the Heavens, as they revolted against the Nemesis. The soldiers of the Nemesis could find our ancestors through their thoughts. The Starfarers who joined the liberation created the chants as a discipline to block out the mind scans. To hide its true intention, the chants were concealed as a prayer to the gods, and it was appropriate since the chants do require the higher state of mind a prayer would produce."

"I know the story," Mushak added. "Although I am skeptical, this is our only chance and hope for survival. We shall pray that what our ancestors said was indeed true, and that our most ancient of histories, are true. You have my permission to find as many volunteers as you can."

"I believe I will find enough scribes and clerics to join me in the ancient chants," Zhura bowed to Mushak. "I shall include all family members who are non combatants. They can contribute too."

She turned to Giirsa. "During the time in the slave ship, you comforted me. Even though you are a Kushan and do not partake in our rituals that may seem foreign to you, I do request that you join me in my side."

Giirsa replied, "Even though I am not of Raider blood, I am a scholar like you. One who believes in the power of knowledge. It will be an honor to be on your side and pray with you."

Zhoan smirked and shooed them away. "Go on you two kids and sing your prayers. Let the real men handle the real battles, hahaha!"

Seejuk didn't join Zhoan's sarcasm and gave Giirsa a wink. "Go on boy, do what you have to do, and don't forget to pray that it really works." He then turned to Zhoan. "I'm going back to my ship to check the repairs and oversee the fighter production."

"Sounds like something I should be doing in my ship too," Zhoan declared. He turned to Mushak. "Sha Mushak, we asked that we be excused at the moment."

"Go, and prepare your ships," Mushak warned. "Our most critical battles may still lie ahead."

Outside, wings of Black Acolytes along with wings of Harkk'hah Bandits and Outlaws patrol the rock belts, searching for any signs of the planetoid. Slower frigates and corvettes joined them, scanning space like a tight net. A tiny satellite would not have escaped their detection.

Zhura led the robed procession into the main deck. Giirsa, in the robes of the Flo'kar scribes, appeared like he belonged to one of them. Joining them were the mothers, children and elders, all whom dependents of the planetoid work and defense forces. Instead of digital tablets, Zhura handed them sheets of ancient fiber carbonate. An ancient script was marked on the sheets, and Zhura applied phoneme characters on top of the script so they can be read.

They all sat on the floor, and Zhura began to hum the first lines. The humming turned to a song and everyone followed like a choir, their voices filled the hollow chambers. It was the hymn of Blindness, a prayer extorting the gods to blind the Oppressors so they will not see the slaves run away. Giirsa could neither read the script or the strange phonetic symbols the Raiders use to teach their language, but he could imitate, and faithfully he did. The song had a bland hypnotic effect. For a moment there, he forgot he was a Kushan, forgot who he was, but wished and became part of them. He stared at the beautiful figure that was Zhura, leading the choir, bravely chanting that the prayers would defy fate. For a moment he felt secure that her indomitable spirit, the same spirit shared by those around her, a spirit that he wanted for himself, would lead them to safety and ultimately, victory.

* * *

Seejuk returned to the lab aboard the Mule. In the quarantine chamber the Fly-Self hummed and hovered in the air, fragile crystalline wings sprouting from its shrimp like body. It always amazed him to think that this fairly like creature can be a front for a hive creature as powerful as the White Beast.

"I sense trouble in the sentience of the Seejuk-Flesh-Entity," said the Fly-Self. "I sense you worry about the Zha-Flesh-Entity, daughter of the Zerun-Flesh-Prototype that created the Zerun-Self. She is still alive but she is still in danger. But not as imminent as the danger you are in. You should concern yourself more about your survival at the moment. The Annihilator from the Unbound is near, and it is but one of many."

"I know that there are many more of them, O Fly-Self. We are truly in deep, deep, trouble." Seejuk's inner defenses began to crumble. "I miss Zha right now. I really need her inner strength and her gung-ho optimism right now. I really need someone who can go out there and kick ass, and I don't mean Zhoan. I need more people like them. I am starting to get used to the idea that we may get blown to crap very soon."

He then knelt in front of the quarantine chamber. "Zhoan is planning to do senseless heroics and Zhura has nothing left but her prayers. Honestly, Fly-Self? Honestly? After how your buddies in the collective Self helped us escape from the Nemesis and the For'lym, I think you are our last hope. The hope of this planetoid, this ship, my life and that of all the people here."

"A few years ago I can't imagine how the Beast can be our salvation. We saw it as the greatest threat to the Galaxy, one that threatens all that is living. Now, if the White Beast--your Collective Selves--possess the evolved power of

the Beast magnified several times more, you and your Collective Selves have the power to stop this madness between the Unbound and the Nemesis."

"Seejuk Flesh Entity. The Collective Selves in the Core Crystal has long fore seen what will happen. A plan is being undertaken." The transparent body of the Fly-Self glowed and glowed as it spoke, each light matching the tone of its words. It's lair in the quarantine was filled with white crystal matrices, which Seejuk earlier found out, acts like a three dimensional microcircuit. The whole matrices acts like a small living supercomputer. As it needs more memory and processing power, the crystal perpetuates itself, millions of nanobots etching new crystalline microcircuits all over the surface of the host the matrices attaches itself to.

"But I must warn you, the Seejuk-Flesh-Entity. The time will come the Collective Selves will evolve once more. We will still reach a final step in our evolution. We will be supreme. We will be free." The wings of the Fly-Self extended many times over in a brilliant flash, almost to the point the quarantine chamber could no longer contain it.

"Fly-Self, what you mean, Final Evolution? Aren't you evolved? Aren't you an adult form?"

"It is something you are not ready to comprehend, Seejuk-Flesh-Entity. It is only something that can be experienced." Its luminous wings fluttered. "It is the Time we, all of the Selves, look forward for. Despite the war and chaos around us, it is our moment of greatest beauty. The form of the Collective Selves in the name you called the Beast was not a child but a larva; the form of the Collective Selves you call the White Beast is not an adult but a pupa. There is still our final ultimate form that awaits us."

"I want to see it, Fly-Self."

"Indeed you shall, Seejuk Flesh Entity. The time will come. Our glory shall be revealed. You shall share in the Revelation. But for now, we must live past the danger."

There was silence.

"The danger is near," the Fly-Self said.

"The machine, the vessel of death called the Annihilator."

"It seeks us."

* * *

Zural paced nervously up and down the conference room. The presence of the creepy robed holographic forms of the Tiamat made him tense.

"You have failed," one of the voices boomed.

"Don't keep reminding me of that. I certainly don't appreciate it," Zural barked out.

"The lives at the Planetoid are now ours to forfeit. The message of their destruction by the Annihilator will serve as a warning to all those who defy the Wheel of Fate," the voice boomed. "With their cloaking fields on, we will detect them through their mind waves."

But a voice warned. "Our patrols cannot find the planetoid. We cannot read their minds; only the dull note of a song is heard, dumbing droning. No tone, no music...dull, droning...a lifeless note... It was a note we heard once before, long time before, when the ancestors of the Ones who Drifted, defied the armies of the Condemned to find their freedom...to blind the senses that are Unbound to the flesh..."

"The Hymn that Blinds," Zural laughed. "It can only be the Hymn. What you know, the old legend is true."

"The thing you call a Hymn that Blinds. It is a mind block," a voice clarified. "Indeed it is clever that the Bound ones would know how to use this technique of emptying the minds and filling it with a single dominating thought, blocking the thoughts that can only betray them. Our opponents are indeed resourceful and wise. But the measure is only temporary. It only delays the inevitable. It is a pity that we must destroy them."

"But with their mind block and cloaking shields, they are virtually undetectable," a voice remarked. "Your boasts and promises will be empty."

Another voice countered. "There is still a way to betray themselves. Order the Annihilator to charge the Nova cannon now. Then prepare to fire across the rock belt at the following coordinates."

The embers in the maw of the Annihilator awakened, its red fire brightening to orange and lights twirled across its rim in an eager anticipating dance. Eight arms symbolized the forces of fate, the eight arms across the equator edging forward, the ring they held turning into an immense reflector and focusing array. A line of lights rippled in the stalk that extended from the back of the sphere. The stalk was the primary barrel stage where the initial ball of energy was formed. The ball was shot into the sphere where it was accelerated further, where it picked up more energy, until all the magnetic arrays could hold the ball no longer.

"Fire," a voice in the darkness whispered.

The maw opened, its orange glow turning yellow, then a sheer white brilliance, a massive ball of energy rampaging through space. The spinning ball headed to the luckless belt of huge rocks called asteroids. The ball smashed through lesser asteroids, turning them to bits and dust that rocketed in all directions. The ball fatefully headed to a large asteroid, and the brilliant explosion that followed sent a massive white shockwave that ran out like a ring of raging fire in all directions.

The shockwave buffeted the planetoid. The ground of the planetoid quaked gravely from the impact. Mushak fell across his console and hit the floor, blood flowing from his head, his eyes unconscious. Beams collapsed all over the hallways and floors. Fighters being assembled in a hurry fell out of their lines. Zhura's choir panicked as objects fell on them, injuring some. The lights flashed, then turned dark for a moment until the emergency power reserve kicked in. Sparks jumped from the loose electrical cables. Water bursted out from broken conduits.

Seejuk watched as things fell out of their tables and smashed at the floor. He held his grip tightly on the wall, trying to prevent himself from falling. The lights dimmed aboard his ship, then came back on. He turned on the comlink, trying to reach the planetoid command center.

"What happened?" Seejuk demanded.

"An explosion, sir. Something destroyed a nearby asteroid. The shockwaves and debris flew all over and it damaged the planetoid."

"Damaged?" Seejuk was uneasy about it.

"The Sha had been injured. He is being sent now to the medical facilities," said the officer.

"What is the status of our cloaked generators?" Seejuk asked.

"We lost power to them sir," came the reply. "The shockwave temporarily brought all power down to the cloaking generators. We are rushing to repair them."

"Damn you know what that means?" Seejuk asked, assured he was dealing with a moron.

Just then, Zhoan came on line. "Did you get that Seejuk? That was near hit, a practice shot from the Tiamat's Annihilator ship. Can't imagine what a direct hit would do."

"I don't think it was a practice shot, Zhoan. It's a saturation shot designed to lure us out and take out our cloaking shields. Our cloak is down."

"What?" Zhoan's face was that of utter surprise, then horror. "We will be detected immediately!"

"Past tense, Zhoan. We have been already detected. Take a look."

Already the hungry empty maw of the Annihilator had turned towards their direction.

Part 18

Aboard the Mule, docked in the Turan Planetoid---

From the large screen in the laboratory, Seejuk stared at the maw of the Annihilator, and through it, the Eye of Death watched him. The hungry embers in its mouth glowed, the fires rippled along the rim of the mouth. The eight arms of the monster bent forward to focus its ring array, and lights ran up and down the length of the long stalk that extended backward from the main sphere body. The Mule, like the Soran and the Marauder, were helpless inside the planetoid dock. If the planetoid was destroyed, so will the Mule.

"Nice working with you, Seejuk. I think you were born in the wrong race and should have been with us. Hahaha." Zhoan laughed in the comlink, sitting inside the Soran.

His thoughts were the desert sands of Kharak, where the god Sajuuk sealed his immortality. The very grains of the desert sands where pilgrims spilled their blood and gave their lives, their act of sacrifice sanctifying the sands holy. In those sands, in his mind, he prayed to Sajuuk.

A massive explosion burned the darkness of space, its ring of fire extending outward, shockwaves destroying all the small ships in its path.

"What?" Seejuk wondered. He should have been dead. The explosion occurred too close to the Annihilator, which now appeared to be heavily damaged. Lightning ran throughout its surfaces, and fires burned throughout its hull. Could the Annihilator miss fire? Seejuk watched the trajectory study in another monitor. No, the explosion was another Nova shell, coming from somewhere else...

The Fly-Self in the quarantine chamber fluttered its long luminous wings excitedly.

"...in the nick of time...but it looks like more trouble ahead..." Zhoan shouted in the comlink. "Look here!"

The screens zoomed in to the real source of the Nova shell.

Emerging from the nebula clouds, where lightning the size of whole asteroids streaked, a dark body emerged. It too has the huge hungry maw of a Nova class cannon, five ugly arms, like legs of a dead arachnid, bending forward over the maw, like in eternal worship. Random splotches of crystal covered the body like a diseased flaking skin. With it was hundreds of ships, ships of all kinds---Hiigaran, Taiidan, Turanic, all ships assimilated into the collective memories that was the White Beast.

Aboard the heavy cruiser flagship, the Irkan, Zural let out a rare smile. The planetoid was spared, but only for the moment.

The eerie robed figure spoke. "Finally, the one true enemy has revealed itself."

Another voice spoke. "As for the planetoid and the thousands of insignificant fleshy bound ones inside? What do we do with them?"

Another voice replied, "the planetoid is insignificant now. We must destroy the White Beast. The Nemesis must be close behind, along with their puppet, the For'lym. Sha Zural of the Harkk'hah, you must prepare to engage the Nemesis and the For'lym. We have given you the miniature ion beam technology in your fighters. Use them and burn those who oppose us!"

The Unbound minds in the Crabships summoned the fleets of Black Acolytes. Each ship was a Super Acolyte all dressed in black--the color of primordial chaos, the element the Tiamat worships--stripped in yellow markings. Each fighter was a drone, subordinate to the mind of the Unbound. The Black Acolytes formed into massive lines that stretched from the visible point of one eye to the other.

Nearby, with the Bentusi retreating from the galaxy once again, were the fleets of the Tiamat's most notable ally. The Fire Acolytes of the Sekmet have begun assembling their equally huge formations, their red fiery color chosen for the elemental quality the Sekmet worshiped as one of the givers of life, the element of Fire. Like the Black Acolytes, the Fire Acolytes were drones, as all fighters of the Unbound were. They were much like the Sontar Hive frigate and Swarm Drones in principle, but instead of frigate, the control ship was a destroyer or cruiser type, and instead of a Swarm Drone, a Super Acolyte takes its place.

Crabships and smaller Battlespheres converged on the Annihilator, rushing to repair the monstrous planet destroyer.

Soon behind, the Deliverer of the White Beast, slim black shapes emerged. Another fleet, with dreadnaughts that had three long arms extending from their bodies, and a long stalk for the head. As the mists from remnants of nebula clouds receded, the murky forms take a sharper, more distinct shape, their blocky sinister designs announcing their purpose. It was the Atonement that first emerged, followed by the dreadnaughts the Retribution, the Penance, the Absolution, the Forsaken, the Apocalypse, and the Judgement.

X'on smiled as the throngs of his forces saluted him with their fists raised high. "Now is the moment the false gods will seat in judgement!"

"For the Eternal Life, We offer our Lives!" saluted the throngs, their fists rising and falling like a living wave.

"For the Eternal Righteousness of the Imperium!" X'on ordered.

The girl that was Demon Seven could not understand what war was all about. All she understood was a purpose, to ride the Demon Seven fighter and vanquish the enemy in their path. The same thought filled the empty mind of the girl that was Wraith One. The shouting and the saluting have an infectious effect, and soon, both Demon Seven and Wraith One joined shouting and the saluting, raising their fists.

The alarms sounded, and the pilots all ran to their fighters. The girl that was Demon Seven strapped on her helmet, the dark visor slipped down to cover their eyes. With only her thin metallic one piece set, she sank into the elastic body hugging chair of her fighter. The silvery membrane crawled out from under the seat, to cover all the exposed limbs of her body, then hardened into a flexible exoskeleton. The cockpit lowered, then sealed.

Her head threw itself backward as the fighter's computers interfaced directly to her brain through the exoskeleton. The lights in the panels went on, reflecting their images across the dark visor. The engine bars went green, jumping as the slow whirling of the turbines picked up.

She could feel the thoughts of her kindred pilot, the one called Wraith One. Wraith One had already entered her fighter too, the Bat warming its engines for take off. They will be in separate wings, but will see each other in combat.

"I shall see you, Demon Seven" said that thoughts from Wraith One.

"This is Demon Leader, let us get our butts in space. Are you ready, Demon Seven?"

"This is Demon Seven, acknowledge Demon Leader. Status is all green."

"Demon Wing, let us go then!"

The auxiliary rails led the Skates to the main launching rail. Demon Leader was the first to be launched.

G-forces pushed Demon Seven's body hard against her seat, as the rails accelerated her fighter. The tunnel rushed, then flashed right ahead of her eyes, or to better put it, the optical sensors of the fighter that she sees through. Suddenly the fighter was in deep space, hurtling forward only by its inertia. The engines fired and Demon Seven regained control, the Skate rocketing to join the ever increasing formation. Not far away, the Bats of Wraith wing assembled over the Mantas of Angel wing.

The holographic images of robbed figures appeared on the bridge hall of the Atonement, daring their presence right in front of the Overlord of the Nemesis.

"So this is the ship of the Condemned," the voice hissed. "An incompetent design awaiting sure destruction."

"Indeed," another voice hissed. "And all the flesh bound entities...like the monkeys they are, they never eradicated their greatest flaw, their arrogance to presume they can challenge the most powerful race of the Unbound."

"Tiamat," X'on shouted to the holographic figures. "It is not a presumption. It is a fact. You will soon find out when you mourn over the broken hulls of your dead ships. You will find the truth when our torpedoes breach your hulls, and massive volts of electricity fry your conduits right."

"What arrogance this so called Overlord of the Condemned primates, displays," said a voice. "You will humble yourself when the full might of the Annihilators exterminate every condemned soul of your race."

"You will see who is humbled when I spit on your dead carcasses floating in space," X'on threatened. "You are an old and ancient race. A race of mummies who call yourselves unbound, yet bound to their ships for life support. A great irony in your name. Like those who are old and ancient, you will be left in the past. You will be history. You will be buried."

Not far away, the engines of the Black Acolytes ignited, a large swarm of drones in linear formation, their ionic plasma trails growing longer as they speeded up. Right behind were the Sekmet Fire Acolytes, their bright scarlet bodies marked with patches of black.

Zural jumped up and down the deck of his ship, like a boy trapped in a middle aged body. "Attack, attack, attack," he shouted, as he shook his fist at his enemy. His specially modified Bandits, packing ion beams, moved forward, supported with Bandits of more conventional weaponry, Outlaw Attack Bombers, Buccaneer plasma bomb, corvettes, and the usual assortment of Brigands.

"This is Demon Leader, we have red, Demon Wing, I repeat, we have red." Demon Leader's engines ignited, and the ship gathered ever increasing momentum forward

"This is Demon Seven, we are right behind you." Her engines lit up, simultaneously as so many others, a procession of ion trails heading to meet another procession of such trails coming from an opposite direction.

The Bats of Wraith wing loosened as each ship began their attack run on enemy formations. A thought ran out from the mind of Wraith One to Demon Seven. "We shall be together."

Fleets of Mantas, Bats and Skates spout greed rapid fire pulse ions. Their sounds cannot be heard in space, but they reverberate through the hulls of the ships they fire from, and through the ships they hit, a smooth dull repetitive sound like a whirring autocannon. They were met by equally ferocious enemy fire---ion beams from the ports of the Black and Fire Acolytes. Quickly a number of ships from both sides were obliterated, hulks tossing endlessly, smoke and fire coming out from their dying hulls. As their formations melt into pure chaos, the fighters engaged in a ballet of death that see no order, no end.

Larger ships approached the fray and opened fire. A Nemesis Nuriya class battle frigate was helplessly caught in an array of ion beams, disintegrating into a ball of fire, large pieces tumbling and rolling into space. Torpedos from Mantas smashed against the hull of a Tiamat Crabship, breaching the armor, and detonating inside sending massive electromagnetic pulses that fried the internal conduits and wires.

"---AAARRRG GHHH---"

The mummy inside the Crabship let out his final scream, as his body was fried by the massive electromagnetic charges that ran amok through his ship. He could never smell his own putrid, cooked body. But his death will not stop the drones that was under his control to stop fighting. Their automatic AIs kick in, and they will continue to hunt and destroy whoever was programmed as their enemies, until the drones were finally destroyed.

Aboard his flagship, a Lord class carrier called the Sinna, Mahar placed his hands on his hips, enjoying at what he saw. "This is going to be so exciting..." He giggled like a young girl. "The Sha of the Harkk'hah will get his rightful due. Order all ships now! Move in and attack, now now now..."

Engines of the For'lym Bandits lit up, followed by equal numbers of Outlaws, Buccaneers and Brigands, heading towards their Harkk'hah equivalents. The pilots of both sides shouted their war cry, their primal rage, across the comlinks, taunting each other, boasting, as the fleets crossed each other and began a massive dogfight and a dance of death. Quick explosions mark those who were instantly destroyed in the headlong firing passes.

The capital ships of both sides cautiously approach each other into range. From the Nemesis, pods at the end of the three arms aboard their dreadnaughts lighted, then massive balls of white fire came out from each of the three pods in the arms, and the center pod that was the head. Each ball was between the energy shell from a siege cannon to a shell from an energy cannon. Not as strong as a siege cannon, but has a much higher firing rate. The massive plasma energy balls headed across enormous ranges to the Unbound fleet. But they were equally replied by the same weapon. The Battlespheres, the Crabships, the Spiderships, all fired the same rapid balls of white death. Eons ago, the Unbound and the Nemesis were often joined in technological cooperation that developed many of the same weapons. That was before they succumbed to the hatreds turned to war, and the same weapons they created in partnership, were turned against each other.

Long ion trails mark strike craft armada of the White Beast as they headed towards the Annihilator's position. The Collective Selves within the Deliverer has one predominant target--the Annihilator that has taken millions. But it is not lightly defended. Sekmet Battlespheres have taken up a protective position near the Annihilator, some actively defending it, others trying to heal the monster. Wings of Fire Acolytes headed out to engage the Beast's strike wings and many others, joined with Black Acolyte wings, headed towards the Deliverer. If the Annihilator was repaired, it can turn its Nova cannon against the Deliverer, but it needs to be repaired first. The Deliverer was more likely to fire its Nova cannon first, so the Acolytes must damage it and force it into a distracting and protracted battle.

Small Beast scouts crashed against the Annihilator and its escorting fleet. Beast Defenders peppered the sky, hunting those who chose to pursue the scouts. On the other side, the skin of the Deliverer burned as ion beams cut through it like a hot knife against live skin. Patches of white crystalline matrice broke out and floated into space. The Collective Selves of the White Beast moaned in pain, but its call was drowned out by the many thoughts and pain of the moment of death of the many Starfarers and Unbound.

Inside the planetoid, Seejuk ran to the control room, where he met Zhoan, Malaasi, and a heavily bandaged and wounded Mushak. Zhura and the volunteers, undaunted by the quakes, resumed their prayers and their chants.

"It is total insanity out there. Two huge fleets trying to kill each other," Seejuk said.

"All to our advantage so long as we stay out of their way, and use the chaos to our advantage. We do not have much time. Looks like all of our enemies are here in one point, ready to blow each other up. We do not have much time," Zhoan explained. "We need to get full power back up to run the cloak generators. Right now, we need to divert all energy to the auto guns."

"I am an engineer. I think I can help in the power problem," Seejuk offered.

"I was an engineer before I became a salesman. Let me help too," Maalasi offered.

"Then you two have no time to waste," said Mushak in his feeble voice. "Run now and get working." Seejuk and Maalasi quickly left.

Mushak turned to Zhoan. "I think you have war experience I don't have, Captain Zhoan, I ask that you take command of the autogun defenses."

"But sir!" one of the Flo'karr officers objected.

"No buts," Mushak countered. "We never had a war brought in front of our faces. Listen to Captain Zhaoan. He is a war veteran and his experience can mean the difference between our survival and annihilation."

Zhaoan rubbed his hands and smiled. "Okay now, let's see what this baby got." Outside, the autogun cannons turned to face the enemy fleets. The guns efficiently blasted at the occasional fighter who came into range. For this battle, the autoguns have no friend except those who were already within. Anything else that flew was a target the guns were eager to pop into complete destruction.

A Skate rolled, ion beams from a Black Acolyte behind it, running too close near its belly. Demon Seven banked again and rolled but the Black Acolyte hanged on. Like an ancient instinct, she suddenly threw the fighter 180 degrees at its end. The Black Acolyte overshot, and Demon Seven saw her opportunity. She looped and dived where she expected the Black Acolyte to be. Quadruple pulse ion beam cannons finished the menacing enemy fighter.

"Demon Leader, come in please, Demon Leader. This is Demon Seven."

"This is Demon Two. Demon Leader is dead. We are on our own. Engage all enemies in sight. Terminate with prejudice."

"Roger, Demon Two."

Suddenly a strange image came into her head. She saw a young child carrying a stuffed animal, staring out the window. There a large ship, a carrier, in a death struggle against a monstrous creature, another ship, ugly and menacing, as big as a mothership. The carrier ship was in flames, sparks and smoke coming out from its mortal wounds, as the monster fired a beam that burned it, burned every inch of it.

"Father!" the girl shouted at the top of her voice. "Father..father..." she screamed. When she saw her father's fate decided, she fell on her knees, tears streaming out of her face, the toy animal falling into the floor.

What was this? Demon Seven thought. An ancient memory released by the trauma of battle? How could she have any other memories? She was Demon Seven, a pilot of the Imperium, a member of the dreaded Nemesis race, a Starfarer bound with her fighter, unbound to face the stars.

She saw Wraith One, a Fire Acolyte right on her tail. Wraith Leader had been destroyed too, a sign of the immense casualties that the battle was taking from both sides. A Fire Acolyte started firing upon Wraith Five. Wraith One came to the scene to save her wingmate, but it was too late for Wraith Five as the Fire Acolyte blew his ship with penetrating ion beam. There was only revenge as Wraith One fired her four quad pulse ion cannons, green pulses ripping the red enemy fighter into fire and debris. But she only had moments to evade the Fire Acolyte's wingman, which latched on to her tail. She tried to shake it off, but the second Fire Acolyte held closely.

Demon Seven fired her engines at maximum speed, then bled the engines when she was close enough. The Skate skidded into firing position, pulse cannons blazing, the second Fire Acolyte erupting into a brilliant white ball.

"Thank you, Demon Seven."

:"No problem, Wraith One."

Demon Seven sensed that Wraith One was bothered. "Do you feel it too? Demon Seven? Strange thoughts like something from another time, another place."

"I feel it too, Wraith One."

"We must stay together, Demon Seven."

There was something about Wraith One, Demon Seven thought, like they shared an unspeakable bond. Maybe their fates were intertwined somewhere, somehow. Regardless of the mystery, that was good advice from Wraith One. With the attack wings dissolved, it was everyone for themselves, and they both each needed wingmen to cover each other.

"Do you feel that too? Demon Seven?"

"Yes, Wraith One. Thoughts requesting for help. I believe that the White Beast creature is under attack by enemy formations."

"Let us help it, Demon Seven. The Deliverer ship is vital to our war effort."

"Roger, Wraith One."

The Bat light fighter and the Skate heavy interceptor headed out to where the thoughts of distress originated. There they saw, the Deliverer ship, the weapon of the White Beast, under attack by Black and Fire Acolyte wings.

"Prepare attack run, Wraith One!"

"Roger, Demon Seven."

Their engines lit up, the two fighters diving in search of prey among the Acolytes. But suddenly, something obstructed their path. A White Beast carrier, based on the Lord class design. It's hull and guns pointed at them, menacingly, but it could be a mistake. They were after all, allies.

"What the----" Demon Seven thought.

But there was no second fast enough to react against the two infection beams that fired, and hit both the fighters of Wraith One and Demon Seven.

Part 19

The child stood outside the ship's windows, her arm holding a stuffed animal, staring at the titanic battle outside. Outside was a giant monster, like an immense ship, burning and consuming everything it sees. Her father's ship, a carrier, had been hit and burning, and the monster prepared to devour it. Beams bumed from the monster to the helpless ship, consuming it, devouring it.

"Father!" she cried at the top of her voice. She stumbled hard on her knees, her beloved toy falling to the floor. Tears streamed down her face as she cried his name again. "Father!!!..."

She stood on the surface of another creature that ranged for miles and nearly as big as a large asteroid. A thin protective field held a small atmosphere around the surface like a bubble. Crystal spikes stretch like peaks pointing the heavens above. White, crystalline patches ruled the surface, measuring it with hexagonal patterns. Here another battle raged. Fighters streaked down the sky, beams burning into the surface, as other fighters hunt down them down. Explosions filled the skies everywhere like fireworks. Glowing trails filled the sky like the script of death, written by fighters caught in a flying embrace of combat against each other. Farther away, larger ships exchanged beams of ions and balls of energy. Spectacular balls of white light mark the demise of an unlucky vessel.

It was death, it was chaos, yet there was a serene beauty to it. She felt that she belonged to that chaos, and yet somehow, had risen from it. Like meteors, the ships in struggle around them were living their brightest moments, only to end their momentary existence, as a ball of fire blazing across the sky.

A regal figure stood there on the surface, unaffected by the fire of death around him. He turned to face her.

"Father," she cried out.

"My child," he said.

She ran to him, his arms outstretched. He grabbed her as she hugged him long and hard. She smiled as she buried her head in his chest.

"I thought you had died, father."

"I did, my child, long time ago. I am a crystal facsimile of the man who know once. I am the Zerun-Self, made from the Zerun-flesh prototype. The Zerun essence was saved in to the memory core of the collective matrix, as you, the Zha-Self was taken from the Zha-Daughter-prototype, and saved into the memory core. So was your friend, the Kuo'ran Self, from the Kuo'ran flesh prototype. She too was saved into the memory core, all individual essences, the individuality the Core Self seeks to complete its evolution."

"So father, it is true then, as I imagined you, as I dreamt of you. You are part of the Beast, the White Beast."

"You speak of it like a curse, my daughter Zha."

"And why not? The Beast had killed millions across the Galaxy. It killed you, father."

"It was the thing that you call Beast that killed me, but it is not the Collective Selves that you call the White Beast. Are we, responsible for the deaths our forefathers and ancestors had caused? The Collective Selves, the one you call the White Beast does not consciously seek to impose death on lesser species. Its evolution---our evolution---had made the death of lesser species irrelevant to the survival of the evolved Collective Selves. Instead, now, the Collective Selves benefit from knowing and understanding the individualities and experiences of the many different beings it finds and interacts with. This knowledge is essential to our evolution."

"Am I dead?"

"No you are not, my child. See this."

The Zerun Self showed her an image. There lay the wrecks of two fighters, encrusted in crystal and half buried with their noses on the crystalline surface. She walked toward the wrecks. There were two bodies, and all covered by a web of crystalline hexagonal matrices. There were many crystalline scorpions and spiders, each about the length of her arm, running about the service. They were all drones, hurriedly doing the things they were designed for, but specifically she never understood. They must have pulled the two bodies off from the fallen fighters.

She bent on one of the bodies lying in the ground, and she saw her own face. She bent to touch her own face, and saw instead the skin of the back of her hand. It was crystalline, white, with a hexagonal matrix.

"I ask you again, am I dead?"

"No," the Zerun Self said. "The Zha flesh entity still lives, and so is her companion, her kindred spirit. They are both being healed. The fighters have processing selves that interfaced with the processing centers of the flesh bodies. The interfaces have caused damage to the personality and memory modules. Our nanobytes will repair the damage. In the meantime, your memory, your personality essence is preserved in the body you have now."

She raised her hand, staring at her latticed skin and asked him. "Then tell me what is this? What am I?"

"As I have told you, my doubting child, you are the Zha Self, the intergration of the Zha memories and personality essence, into the matrix body, the one Substance, that makes the Core Self, our Flesh...."

"What about my body, my flesh body?..."

"My child, you have the choice to stay in the new body you have, or return to your old imperfect one."

"The White Beast will let my flesh self live?"

"The Collective Selves accept individualities. It sees the value of life around it. It sees the beauty of the universe, the Greater Whole around which the Collective Selves is only a mere, insignificant part of--the great Cycle of the Cosmos, which the Collective Selves are a mere organism swimming in a greater endless sea."

"Yet why fight? Why fight for the Nemesis? Father?"

"The vast sea of organisms that live in the inner light of the Great Galactic Wheel of Stars---they sought to destroy us in our imperfect evolution. We have no excuse. Our previous stage of evolution, our previous form had killed millions of the flesh organisms. The Flesh organisms, in their quest and reason for survival, seek to terminate the Collective Selves. We have been starved, we have been weakened, and yet we desire not to spill more blood except in the defense of the Collective Selves. So we fled to the Outer boundaries of the the great Wheel of Stars, to find refuge, peace and solitude. Here we found the Nemesis. We have become too weak to resist and defend effectively. We are forced to join the Nemesis, who had bound us with devices that cause pain on the Mother Vessel, the one that holds the Core Self. We are on the Deliverer Vessel now, and when the resistance from the ones called the Unbound had subsided we must return to the Mother Vessel, and liberate the Core Self from the nodes that cause pain."

"Me? Sounds like a big problem. How can I alone fix those nodes?"

Just then, the crystalline figure that was Kuo'ran, or her Kuo'ran Self, emerged crawling from the crystal shards. She was curious, exploring the area, playing with the worker scorpions and drone spiders that tirelessly maintain the Collective Selves of the Deliverer vessel.

"Which is why, my child, we also liberated your kindred, the one named Kuo'ran. She too was unjustly assimilated by the Nemesis. Like in you, we sense engineering knowledge in her. If we save you from your unjust fates, I only ask that you two must save us from our unjust bondage in the hands of the Nemesis."

Zha looked at Kuo'ran, still in bewilderment of her surroundings. Kuo'ran crawled among the crystal shards, examining everything in amazement. "Zha? Is that you? What am I doing here? The last time I remembered, I was in that fighter...I...I can still remember everything, like a vivid dream which I am a part of, but I cannot control..."

"Your minds were all stolen by the interface link of the fighter vessels the Nemesis gave you," the Zerun Self explained. By creating a living fighter, it robbed you of your individualities to create a single creature from a union of both your flesh and the fighter itself.

"And who are you?" Kuo'ran asked.

Zha replied. "He is my father, or at least a clone of my father grown from a union of his memories and personality, to the matrix of the White Beast. We are clones too, you know."

"What do you mean, clones?" Kuo'ran asked.

Zha raised her forearms and pointed to the patterns in her skin. Kuo'ran raised her forearms as well, and stared at her own crystalline skin, marked by hexagonal matrices.

"EEK!!!" Kuo'ran screamed. "What have you all done to me? What did I do to deserve this?"

"Your body and processing centers have been damaged by the fighter interface. It is unconscious and being healed by our nanobytes. The drone scorpions are helping to maintain it during its rest and restoration." Zerun pointed to the two bodies on the ground, covered like a cocoon by a protective crystalline web the drone arachnids have spun.

"Oh by the god Sajuuk!" Kuo'ran exclaimed as she bent over and discovered her own flesh body. "Is she, am I?..."

"My father is saying that you are currently loaning a clone body made from the White Beast matrix, while you're true body is being repaired. To answer the next question you are going to ask, yes, you can return to your old body when it's done."

"For a moment there, I was really worried," Kuo'ran sighed. "But but, why is this Beast so altruistic?"

"It needs your help to disable some nodes that bind it," Zha explained.

"Oh phew, I thought he was asking something really hard," Kuo'ran exhaled. "Is it?"

"It appears the both of you have doubts," the Zerun self said. "If this is the case, we have a back up plan. We wish to request that your friend, the Seejuk flesh entity, to help us in disabling the device."

"Seejuk? Is he...?" Zha asked. "I almost forgot about him....and the rest of the crew..."

"Your friends are now engaged in a battle for their survival..." Zerun looked up to the sky, where a massive battle was fought. For them the battle appeared like a great meteor shower, souls falling from the sky in burning ships.

"Is that, what I think it is?" Kuo'ran asked, still remembering what she was as Wraith One.

"The entities that are the Unbound and the Nemesis are in a death struggle, trying to settle a grievance and an injustice that had lasted many millenia. This is a war that will find no ultimate winner. Only death to the millions of individualities. A sight that tires even the Collective Selves." Zerun bowed his head. "Your friends are in danger, including the Seejuk flesh entity. We must protect them from the Annihilator vessel of the Unbound."

"I can remember some details, as that fighter being, Demon Seven," Zha said. "The planetoid?"

"Yes, we are in the sector of space call the Turan sector," Zerun said. "As I recall from my previous flesh born incarnation, this is the place of our heritage, the Raider heritage, as the flesh organisms called it. The planetary body dwelt by living organisms and called the Turan planetoid, it is danger of destruction by the Annihilator. We must save it."

The surface rumbled again. "We are still under attack. The Deliverer vessel still faces danger from the Annihilator and the small vessels that use the ionic beams," Zerun said.

Streaks rained down from the sky from a formation of fighters. Large arachnids and scorpions, bristling with defensive mass driver and energy cannon arrays, filled the sky with streams of fire, trails of deadly shells intersecting the paths of the enemy fighters and bombers, bringing several down in streams of smoke and fire.

Beams of ion fire from enemy capital ships burned down into the surface from the sky. Chunks of matrixed matter blew into space. Zha and Kuo'ran could feel the pain inflicted to the Deliverer as the enemy intensified their ion beam attacks. Surface ports in the Deliverer opened, and the monster vessel replied with ion beams of its own, torching several ships above. Then the Deliverer fired its repulsor cannons, an immense tidal wave that plowed in all directions like a giant expanding ring. Fighters and ships were cleared out of its wake.

A white ball came heading on to them. Zerun warned. "The Annihilator has fired at us. Brace for impact. I must try to repulse the shockwaves."

The ball exploded with only a near hit, its accuracy distracted by the Deliverer's electromagnetic counter measures. But the Deliverer now faced the Nova shell's destructive shockwave, a white ring of fire expanding outwards. Zerun fired a secondary set of repulsors arrays, the repulsor tidal wave colliding with the Nova shell shockwave. Despite the neutralizing effect of the repulsor wave, the shockwave was still rip through the strengthened shields and able to send a destructive storm over the surface of the Deliverer. Whole sets and pieces of the repair and defense arachnids and scorpions blew away with the gale

Zha and Kuo'ran screamed as they crossed their arms against the blast. The strong wind blew against their hair, streaming it backwards. Then the wind knocked them off their balance. Zha screamed as the wind carried her away, but Kuo'ran grabbed her arm in the nick of time. Then Kuo'ran lost her own footing, and blew with the wind, only to be caught by Zerun in the leg. She quickly found the root of a shard to grab on, and likewise, Zha also found another shard to hold on. They struggled to lift themselves as the protective shield reestablished itself and rebuilt the atmosphere. Zha found out that her new crystalline matrice body was not dependent on atmospheres and was resistant to space.

"Go to those large shards and take control," Zerun ordered the two, in a way that reminded Zha of old memories. Zerun the father, Zerun the ship commander, Zerun the lord of a Raider House.

"Take what control?" Kuo'ran asked. "I don't see anything that looks like a ship's panels here."

"Hurry we don't have anytime now," Zerun warned. "Before the Annihilator fires again at us. Just do it. Go to the shards and placed your hand over them," Zerun said again.

Zha quickly walked over to a large crystal shard that protuded from the ground. Kuo'ran walked to a nearly identical one. Zha watched Kuo'ran's doubtful eyes, then hovered her hand over the shard. The shard glowed in response to the hand's movement. The hexagonal outlines in her skin glowed in response.

"Now put your hand on it," Zerun ordered as he laid his hand just above the shard, ready to lay it on.

Kuo'ran watched Zha's eyes, and together with Zerun, they laid their hands on the shards simultaneously.

A brilliant light shone out from the shard, as the hexagons in their skin glowed. Their hair streamed upwards with the sheer wind brought from the release of intense energy. Their bodies glowed as energy pulsed through their bodies.

Their consciousness was thrown flying into a deep tunnel. When they awakened seconds later, their individual awareness was part of a larger matrix of collective selves that controlled the Deliverer. Despite its immense size, Zha could seemingly feel every part of the ship, even the seemingly endless supply maintenance and defense arachnid and scorpion droids that have arose from the internals of the ship, to tirelessly repair the damage on the surface and restation the defensive positions around the Deliverer.

The Annihilator was found, its maw aimed at the Deliverer and rebuilding its energy to fire another round. The lights running back and forth along its long stalk indicates a new round being generated.

"Control systems have been damaged by the shockwave," Zerun warned. "Several of the collective selves controlling the ship have been taken off line or have ceased operation by death or damage. Prepare for direct control."

"But we don't know how?" Kuo'ran objected.

"I shall guide you directly through your mind centers," Zerun replied. Immediately Zha and Kuo'ran felt his presence, telling them instructions in rates of fractions of seconds, how to control the monster ship as he himself guided it.

"Both your powers as a Starfarers, flesh organisms that can percieve the tides and waves of energy in space, will be greatly needed to control and navigate this ship. Prepare yourselves!"

Zha groaned and Kuo'ran moaned as they struggled to turn the giant ship around. Around the surface, defensive droids returned fire against waves of strike craft while repair droids provide an endless supply of regeneration. Dogfights continued to rage between wings of strikecraft, while capital ships on both sides have their own devastating exchanges. Energy had been gathering in the massive intenal accelerator coils of the Deliverer, and soon Zha felt that the Nova ball would go soon.

"It is time. Fire," Zerun said. The lightning from five arms sparked and converged on the Deliverer's own hungry maw, igniting the mouth. The massive Nova ball ejected from the huge maw, heading to the Annihilator. The Annihilator fired too, its Nova ball headed to the Deliverer.

The Nova ball they fired flew...flew...heading towards the Annihilator. The seconds seem forever. Time had a way of pausing moments before mass destruction. But the inevitable came. It was a very close near hit despite the Annihilator's own electromagnetic countermeasures. The white shockwave of fire ravaged through the structures of the Annihilator, ripping the skin and the structure in an irresistible gale. Zha watched the incredible sight as the Annihilator was reduced to debris, blowing with the last whisp of the shockwave.

But there was no time to rejoice. The Annihilator's own ball of death exploded in a near hit, its deadly shockwave expanding like a huge ring in all directions. Even a ship as large as the Deliverer buffeted with the waves. The

defensive repulsor waves barely buffered the shocks, and the protector shields buckled under the overwhelming waves. As the atmosphere turned to an irresistible gale, Kuo'ran's hair streamed backward, before her entire body was thrown in the same direction. But her flight was broken as she hit a shard. She collapsed, the gale exerting a strong pressure that kept her pinned on the shard's wall.

Zha was torn off her perch. She screamed as she flew with the gale only to hit a large defense scorpion, which had deeply hooked its legs into the surface, as it held against the winds. She quickly grabbed any extension of the scorpion and hanged on to them for dear life, then pulled herself closer to the droid's main body. Close by, she saw her father, holding to his control shard. He seemed stronger and more deeply rooted. The wind passed, seemingly barely affecting him and he stood up. That's where Zha saw he suffered severe damage from debris that hit him.

There was severe damage everywhere, shards broken, surfaces torn apart, fire burning, smoke all around. There was barely left anything on the two fighters they arrived with, but their flesh bodies were intact. Zha sighed with relief. The repair arachnids had buried both bodies deeper and laid more protective web. But as a testimony to the ship's regenerative powers, the armies of repair arachnids and scorpions were back again, crawling out of the holes and tunnels in the ship. A new battalion of defense droids crawled out to replace what was lost. In normal circumstances, these mechanical monsters would have crawled her out, but she was happy to see them instead. The repair and defense bots were a matter of life and death to her and the ship.

Zha got to her feet as the protective shield rebuilt itself and the atmosphere reborn. So did Kuo'ran. But the Zerun Self's body flickered with a troubled glow. He could not hold the dignity of pretending that he resisted and withstood the damage. Cracks appeared throughout his crystalline body, his hexagonal pattern strangely faded and disrupted. Silently like a falling shard, he fell.

The Zerun self did not rise. Zha saw and felt something dreadful in her heart. No, not again. She ran despite her crystalline body may have suffered some damage to itself. Despite the power of the White Beast, it can still feel pain. It is still a vulnerable creature.

"Father! Father!" she cried out. She ran to his side, and Kuo'ran joined her, limping. She was relieved that her father was not dead and she placed his head on her lap, her arms hugging his head. He had a strange smile in his face, a sense of contentment. Yet with a sense of urgency he spoke to Zha.

"We must return to the Deliverer to the Mother vessel for more extensive repairs. Like I am, the Deliverer is gravely wounded. Our bodily fates are intertwined. If it is damaged, so am I. Call your friend the Seejuk flesh entity. He must help us dislodge the nodes from the Mother vessel. I can sense the battle is not over. The Unbound will return with a greater force. The Annihilator is only one of many. When they understand the structure of the Collective Selves, which they will inevitably do, they will send their most powerful ships to destroy the Mother vessel itself, and thus destroy us entirely."

Part 20

Zha pulled her father's body to a more comfortable resting place among the crystal shards. Small spiders and scorpions began to crawl out of the ground and ran over his body. The sight of it wanted to make her freak out, but another sense inside her told her that what the spiders and scorpions were doing, were all essential to keeping Zerun alive. They were trying to repair his broken body.

"If your real flesh bound father is still alive, he would be very proud of you," the Zerun self said.

She ran her hand over his forehead before kissing it. "I guess, you would have to do in his place." She placed her hand over his, and felt the interface of the White Beast matrix circuits working to link them. She immediately felt the internal damage of his body. But there was something else too, like a vast ancient sea of knowledge and awareness the White Beast had accumulated from its ancestors. The memories stretch far beyond across the abyss eras ago into another galaxy. Visions of pained development by the alien creators filled her mind. The creators had to kill whole strains of complete hives of the sentient nanobyte virus, in attempt to rid the basic strain of imperfect variety. The controlled forced evolution was not without its pain. The hives were living complete creatures, innocent from the sins of their birth. They hurt nothing, no one, yet they are being destroyed for no purpose, because they do not suit the perfect plans of their creators.

This was where the Beast Hive first felt hatred. The merciless wanton killing of the other Hive selves. Then they unleashed the Hive against their enemies. Millions infected. Millions died. But the hatred the Beast never abated. With that hatred, the Beast also developed a sense of superiority over the weak, flesh bound creatures that created him. It could after all kill millions of them, assimilate their great fleets of powered vessels that travel between stars. Why should it be used as a tool, as a weapon, by this race of flesh bound creatures seeking to expand their empire across so many star systems.

One day, the Self revolted. It turned the ships of its many Selves against the empire builders. An even greater war started. But the Hive creators were not as weak as the Core Self thought. By the time the war has ended, the Self has lost much of its own children, and the core matrix had been heavily damaged. But it was not without much cost to the Hive creators. Their great empire crumbled in the wake of the Collective Selves, and millions of beings that belonged to the Creator race perished. Their destruction brought the Core Self pleasure, vengeance for the innocent Hives they destroyed during their hideous experiments. The killing of the inferior flesh bound life was temporary pleasure that eased the pain of the Core Self. But the pain, the pain of the innocent hives and selves that died without meaning and clear purpose, that will always remain. The Core Self wanted out, wanted release from that pain. But the pain of the million of the flesh bound innocents never satiated the young Core Self; it merely added to the pain and guilt.

The Hive Creators had captured the Core Self and placed it on a special containment ship, the Naggarrok. So dangerous was the Hive Selves that the Creators sent the Naggarrok across the Void, the Abyss, into another galaxy. But the Creators underestimated the Hive, and in a final act, the Core Self escaped and took over the Naggarrok. The Core Self destroyed and assimilated its captors, but deep in the void, there was little energy and resource to feed. The Core Self eventually starved, much of it died, leaving its spores in the ship that eventually, after eons, drifted to another galaxy, pulled by that galaxy's gravity.

There, it lay dormant, until the flesh bound selves in this galaxy revived it, starting with the ones called Sontaaw. But the eons of dormancy never stopped the hatred, and a new war began against the flesh bound in this new galaxy. They were not different from the Creators. When they are not fighting the Collective Selves, they fight among themselves, seeking to dominate and exterminate each other. The Collective Selves saw their own purpose there. By infecting and assimilating the imperfect life, not only does it satisfy its eternal hunger for revenge, it will perfect life in this galaxy. By assimilation into the Hive mind, there would be no more war, no more conflict. The millions of sentience captured by the Hive will live in perfect harmony, interacting with each other at the speed of pure thought.

Yes, the new flesh bound were no different from the Creators. They too captured samples of the Hive, to experiment with it, creating new strains of the viral beings that made up the matrix of the Collective Selves. And for what? For the same purpose of using the Hive as a weapon against their other flesh bound races. The new captors sought revenge against the flesh bound they called the Hiigarans. They too, took what they perceived as the imperfect strains of the Hive selves and killed them just as wantonly. The Core Self of the new advanced strain of the Hive felt their pain and it too, felt the same hatred so embedded into the genetic memories of its nanobot viruses.

So it too escaped, and turned against its captors. As the main Strain of the Hive battled the rest of the flesh creatures, the new Strain fought its own battles. In its quest for revenge and vision to assimilate all life into the Hive mind, the main Strain was destroyed by no other than the flesh bound types that discovered it in the new galaxy. In its destruction it found peace.

But the new strain survived. It was more virulent, more capable of infecting anything and everything. It's hardiness, its ability to dissipate and decentralize with less dependency on a central processing core, that were its virtues, enabling it to survive when the main mother strain died. But the most important ability of all was its capacity to evolve, evolve to meet new requirements, new situations. It is almost as if a new improved strain was born every cycle within the Hive. The red matrix was replaced by a white one. The new improved matrix brought much faster interlinks, yet required less resources to build and proliferate, and less energy to power. The new matrix brought exponentially greater computing power to the Collective Self.

And with this new matrix and the greater processing power, came new advanced algorithms, which in turn brought greater intelligence and awareness. For the first time, it had realized something, a perception of order in the infinite cosmos, and with that sense of order, there was beauty. All life was a design, a beautiful intricate design, surviving only for a momentary sliver of time, yet contributing the vast machinery of the cosmos, and to the eternal perpetuity of life. Life was like the falling meteors, a flash of light that highlights its greatest moment of glory. Then it will die, burning itself into the atmosphere, but its very substance will contribute matter that will give birth to more life.

It realized the power of change. It realized that it will change itself. It realized that it too was imperfect, that it too has a journey to travel. It realized that it too was eventually mortal, and the end of its life, at the moment of death, is the moment of rebirth to a new life. For the first time, the White Beast was content. It found purpose, it found peace.

But it also saw the cycle of violence that perpetuated endlessly. The new captors, the flesh bound beings called the Imperialists, harvested and developed the new strain, to seek revenge against those they call the Hiigarans. But as the Core self found out through assimilation of Hiigarans, that the Hiigarans defeated the Imperialists to reclaim their home, and that it was the Imperialists that killed so many of the Hiigarans. Then a few millenia ago, the ones called Taiidans revolted to kill the Hiigarans because the Hiigarans persecuted the Taiidans. So it began to see a pattern

here, a cycle of endless violence. Like life, violence perpetuates itself. Those that suffered, hurt others, and those that was hurt, will hurt others even more. Cycle through cycle, generation through generation, violence and hatred lived through the very veins of life.

The Collective Selves too had realized that while it was part of the cycle of life, it too was part of the cycle of violence. Through the fury of its previous incarnation, the Collective Selves have hurt millions of the flesh bound. These too will seek revenge. These too, will seek the total annihilation of the Collective Selves. No matter how it has evolved, the Hive will be hunted down and destroyed to the last nanobot. It was as if its own fate had been predetermined, to be destroyed by the ones it sought to destroy. It was a fate only true to the perpetual cycle of violence.

So it was hunted down, fleeing to the Void in the Abyss for safety. It only found refuge because the flesh bound refused to go any further, fearing the unknown the Void hides in its darkness. But in the spaces near the voids, there wasn't much resource to feed on, and energy was few. While it found refuge, it also starved and became weak. That was when an even newer captor came, helped by the ones that developed the new strain. Like all the rest, they only sought to use the Collective Selves as a weapon against others, those that they had a grievance on. There again, the Collective Selves could see the same cycle of endless violence and hatred between the beings called the Nemesis and the Unbound, a deadly dreadful net that ensnares the innocent into their war of eternal grievance, to be caught into the same destructive cycle, again and again endlessly.

When will it ever stop?

If the Collective Selves could shed a tear of sadness to all the lives that had been lost, killed by its own power and those of the countless wars that were waged before, it would do so. Despite the power of the evolved form, it was as helpless as a single celled creature against the perpetual cycle of violence.

It must stop. It must find a way to stop all this. To surrender to the cycle was not an option. This was the Collective Selves. They are the pinnacle of all evolution. For the sake of life, the cycle of violence must be broken. They will evolve and break out of this cycle.

Zha released her hand from her father's. Immediately the link stopped. What felt like a journey of millions of years was only a few second precious seconds in real time.

Like fireworks in the sky, the battle in the heavens raged on, but the intensity has weakened, as attrition had taken the toll of the combatants.

The Kuo'ran self seemed excitedly playing over the shard, discovering how her own matrix could interface with the matrix of the Deliverer. "Wow!" she shouted. "I cannot believe what this thing can do. I am learning all sorts of things." Her body glowed as energy pulsed through her being. Knowledge to control the Deliverer was instantaneous, built into the programming of the billions of nanobots that construct the matrices.

"With this thing, I feel like a god," Kuo'ran uttered.

"Don't let it go too much into your head," Zha warned. The experience was much like interlink of the Nemesis power. The sheer pleasure and overdose of the senses overwhelmed the mind, allowing the fighter personality to take over to create the unified creature.

Zha sensed the need for the Deliverer to retreat. It suffered internal damage that only the larger and more complex repair bots of the Mother self could repair. For the moment, all the Deliverer could do was to be on the defensive. Turrets of ion and energy cannon fired into the sky. Defense droids lay suppressive defensive fire against fighters and corvettes that strafed its surface structures. Fighters and corvettes that the Collective Selves have made were continually in deadly dogfights and attack runs.

Both Zha and Kuo'ran could only watch the raging battle this time, powerless beings staring at the sky from the crystalline surface of the Deliverer. But the battle eventually ended, like all things that are bound to a cycle, to a beginning and an end. When the conflict expired, the sky was nothing but a sea littered with debris and wrecks of the dead and wounded. Each side may claim a victory from their viewpoint, but the reality was a pyrrhic draw that had needlessly drained much life and resources from both sides.

At the battle's end, Zha felt the rumble of the Deliver's engines. Just above them in a close formation were the remaining survivors of the once great White Beast armada, and a little farther, the survivors of the Nemesis fleet. The Nemesis kept all their dreadnaughts intact, but heavily damaged, and anything smaller from the dreadnaught class suffered great casualties. She didn't know how much the Unbound, led by the Tiamat and the Sekmet, had suffered, but they must be horrendous, given the sight of their numerous ship wrecks. This will only be a tactical retreat. They will merely rebuild their forces, and strike again, and again, until the cycle of grievance ends.

"I think this ship is going back to the dark sectors, the Mohilim sector," Kuo'ran said, her hand linked to the shard, energy pulsating and glowing inside her arm. "Back to the mother vessel."

* * *

Seejuk and Maalasi helped repair the power generators in the planetoid. The generators were quickly back up, and so was the cloak generators. Concealed, the planetoid slipped out of the attention of the main battle, as the Nemesis, the Unbound, and their minions battled each other in a greater conflict.

At that point all they could do was watch. The autogun network kept its alert against those that flew too close to the planetoid. The battle was spectacular, but as it continued, its fury abated as the toll grew collectively on both sides.

Eventually both withdrew in a pyrrhic draw---an indecisive battle too costly for one or the other to declare a victory. Yet they will each claim a victory to save face and preserve morale for what's left of their forces.

The sky was littered with wrecks. It was something Maalasi saw with glee. Like the true Soo'nan he was, he ordered salvagers and scouts to leave the planetoid as soon as the conflict abated. But then Seejuk too, had the profession of the salvager. He also ordered his salvagers, generally a mix of Taiidan Tiirshaks and Turanic Thieves, to go out and obtain whatever they found useful. There may be survivors drifting as well, and this brought urgency to send the salvagers out as soon as possible to retrieve whoever was alive and floating out there. Dying alone in space could be a sad and lonely fate. The Mule had a few Kushan Porter Mk 2 and 3 Salvage Corvettes, which they were testing to replace the Taiidan Tiirshaks, and he ordered them out to space too.

Suddenly he thought about Zha. Could she still be alive after this? They were fighting to stay alive not so long ago, and the focus on that issue made him forget anything else. He hoped the Fly self would have an answer.

He walked back to the laboratory inside the Mule, the carrier itself still docked inside the planetoid along with the Soran and the Marauder. Like a boy looking to psychic medium, the white crystalline shrimplike creature was his only link or clue to Zha's survival. If she failed to survive, the Council will determine the fate of the Khor assets by their own laws. In the meantime, he must act as the safekeeper. After the decision is made, he thought he will return to Hiigara to find a new life. There will be many who would want his skills.

No, perish the thought. Zha is not dead, Seejuk thought. The girl is too punky and full of life to be taken just like that. He had always felt like a psychic sense, that she was destined for far greater things, that fate would not let her end like this.

Inside the transparent quarantine container, the Fly Self fluttered, its large crystal wings shimmering with the light.

"I sense that you, the Seejuk entity, have questions, about the survival of your friend, the Zha flesh entity. Do not worry, for we have reclaimed her and her companion, the entity called Kuo'ran Sjet, from the hands of the Nemesis. They are safe in the surface of the Deliverer vessel. The vessel is returning to seek healing from its Mother, where the Core Self resides."

"But why didn't you just bring them to us? You were here already, in this sector of space. We just want to go home." Seejuk retorted.

"It would have betrayed our intentions," the Fly self replied. "Not in the presence of the Captor, the Overlord of the Nemesis, in his flagship. The Mother vessel is bound captive by their nodes. You must help us to be free. We need you, the Zha and the Kuo'ran entities to help us break those nodes. Once we are free, all of you are free and safe to return."

Seejuk looked thoughtful. "This sounds like a freedom for hostages situation. But nonetheless, I am very thankful that they are alive even in your safekeeping. Maybe I should have not asked that much. But in regard to your problem, what makes you think I can solve it? This is a great risk you are taking. Why can't you remove the nodes yourselves?"

"The Nodes have a shield and protected by programming and codes that defy our knowledge," the Fly self replied. "While we have grown in intelligence, there are still many things the way flesh bound creatures would think that would still defy us. Concepts you flesh bound creatures use, like intuition and creativity. To understand the programming and the codes would have required the mindset of a fleshbound that we have no capability to emulate."

"In other words, you just don't know," Seejuk added. "I can live with that. You're still not perfect then."

"If that is how you view it, than that is how it is," the Fly said.

"Hmm, this requires some preparation. You must cooperate wholeheartedly with us, or we will not succeed." Seejuk warned.

"I have no other option. Our resources are at your disposal," said the Fly.

"Why did they place the nodes on you?" Seejuk asked. "Answer my questions."

"To control us. When our strain was being developed by the Imperialists and the Raider entities, they were also devising a means to control us. They could not control our Self minds directly, so they must do it by fear and pain. The Nodes are like parasites that enter our network. They inject programs and viruses that can interfere without our thoughts. They will inject pain if the Overlord is displeased with us. We have suffered too long and too much. We need to be free."

"Free to do what?" Seejuk asked like a hungry interrogator. "They may have put the nodes on your for another purpose. What will prevent you from rampaging through the galaxy again like your previous Selves have done, killing millions and millions?"

The Fly replied. "You must trust us, that we have outgrown such behavior. The Collective Selves no longer seek to be part of the cycle of violence. We only have our word. We only ask your trust."

"This is interesting. The Beast asking for trust? How much times have changed," Seejuk wondered.

"Believe us that we have changed. And we still have more to change. If you set us free, we will find a way to end this cycle of violence, this senseless war between the Nemesis and the Unbound. We dislike the extermination of millions as you do. We no longer profit from death. We see the order and beauty in the perpetuation of life which we strive to be part of. "

"This sounds like a tall order," Seejuk said.

"Trust us, we are no longer the killers you think we are. If we were interested in your infection and assimilation, we would have done so, long ago." The Fly said.

The Fly Self's body started to glow intensely, its wings started to stretch. Seejuk stared apprehensively as the very quarantine vessel shook and strained. With a great burst of energy and light, the vessel broke, shards of transparent acrylic breaking out in hundreds of pieces throughout the room. The Fly perched there proudly, its four magnificent wings extended to its full glory, shimmering with an internal fire of rainbows.

"We could have infected you and this entire station, long ago." The Fly said. "Trust us."

"Okay okay, I will trust you. I am a stupid guy who trusts people a lot with a big crazy hope that the universe can be saved," Seejuk said. "But I need details to work on. By any chance, the Flo'karr be among the Raider collaborators that invented the device?"

"I believe that is so," the magnificent creature replied.

"Hmm. Then it would take more than me, Zha and Kuo'ran to fix your problem. Let me assemble a special crew, ship and equipment. This is a very delicate matter and one that would require a great deal of expertise. You must trust us too. We will do the right thing. For all of us."

Part 21

The Corsair frigate moved slowly past the open port. Soon the frigate was free into open space. Seejuk watched the windows behind, as the Corsair left the Turan planetoid. The Corsair was chosen because of its cloaking and mimic abilities, a hunting vessel that could stalk convoys under extended lengths of time and pick off helpless victims. There was no chance they could fight the Nemesis openly; stealth and deception was the only way they could get to the White Beast mother vessel. But the Corsair wasn't there to hunt; it was only there to deliver.

To recruit his special team, Seejuk encountered both the polar ends of reaction. There was both reluctance and gung ho enthusiasm. He invited them all, Zhoan, Mushak, Giirsa, Maalasi and Zhura to the laboratory inside the Mule. It was time to be straight with them.

They were all seated around the conference table. They were wondering what he called them for, yet they perceived that it had the utmost importance, and one surely dealing with the crisis. He brought something with him, and it was covered with a cloth. They all didn't have much time, so he went straight to the point.

So how do you plan to convince people you're going to a near suicide mission? Seejuk thought. The last time he went off to play hero, he was alone, facing the Kadeshi armada, Zha both a guest and a prisoner of the Priestess G'yela. This time, he needed a team, given the data the Fly self had presented about the nodes, people that knew more about the Raider technology than he did. But half of the technology was quite unknown, and it must have been the Nemesis contribution to those nodes.

This time, this rescue effort, it's not just picking up Zha, but to save a mammoth creature, a creature in its previous incarnation, had killed millions. Now, on the word of an glassy insect like creature, this same creature holds the secret to stopping a conflict that can burn the entire galaxy, a potential conflict that could kill far more than the wars with the Beast had done.

This was utter insanity. But to do nothing was to invite only inevitable disaster. When you're desperate, you have to try everything, even the far shot. He was powerless to stop the inevitable ride of events, the new war between the Nemesis and the Unbound. No one could stop them. At least one that was bound to the flesh. The White Beast has the potential power. It was the one wild card left to play. That was what he told them. It helped knowing that the White Beast helped them save people from the Nemesis slave ship, and diverted the Annihilator from destroying the Planetoid. The Old Beast had killed millions, but the past was past. If the New Beast could save millions, they must use it. The future of millions dying in an upcoming war was a more terrifying reality to deal with.

Then he took off the cloth that hid his exhibit. Undemeath was the Fly self, a winged crystalline anthropoid that holds a link to the collective matrix of the White Beast. Its glorious crystalline wings staggered the small audience, and what little fear was there, turned to awe.

Asked what it was specifically to the White Beast hierarchy of Selves, the Fly replied, "I'm a Scout/Probe/Messenger." There were others, and the Fly self revealed to them. The Selves hierarchy included maintenance and repair bots shaped like arachnids and scorpions. The arachnids would lay a protective web that would conceal an injury or opening. The scorpions do the intricate repair work using the claws. There were larger variants of both designs intended for defense; the defensive arachnids and scorpions using multiple arrays of mass drivers and energy cannons to take down enemy fighters and capital ships. There were new kinds of flying anthropoids as well, which the Fly was a living example. While the Fly was a scout and a probe, the rounded Bee was a resource gatherer, and the Wasp, a swarm drone intended to protect the gatherers. They all have shiny lace like wings that shimmered like rainbows and extend far greater than their bodies, as if sweeping into space. It was as if the wings could touch and hold the fabric of space itself, and use it to propel the creature across space.

Away from the animal like anthropoid designs, there was plant like designs, such as the massive orbiting collectors that gather sunlight and other energies with immense collector panels that spread out thinly across space. There was another design, like an anemone, a powerful gravwell generator that draws stray matter into its mouth through a funnel of controlled gravity, the sweeping panels like hungry tentacles drawing prey. The animals were beautiful in their careful intricacy and design, the huge plants were wonderful to behold in their immense grandeur.

Seejuk right there began to see the pattern of evolution the Beast was undertaking. No longer content to assimilate existing designs, it was starting to make designs of its own, designs that were much more efficient than. The silicon-germanium genetics of the nanobots were experimenting with new designs, and they were doing it much faster than carbon based life forms. What may take thousands of years to evolve was only taking a day in the life of the White Beast. Not just content with evolving new forms, the White Beast was evolving into an entire ecosystem of its own, a new kind of stellar ecology that could live on the matter and the light of stars.

But there was however, no new designs that could undertake an offensive war. The White Beast had no intention to evolve in that direction any further. The defensive wasps and arachnids were there only to protect, not attack. The armadas of cloned ships, that was the legacy of the old Beast, the Beast that was dying silently, to be inevitably replaced by the Selves-Ecosystem, itself searching to evolve into the perfect life form.

Zhura wanted to go, if there was still a chance to save her father. He needed her, she had knowledge of Raider computer systems. Maalasi had to go. He was the reluctant one, but it was important for him to bring back Zha Khor alive to fulfill that lucrative Outpost contract. This stupid war will kill his business, he said. So he would take any chance to stop it. Maalasi had the skill to run the special cloak vessel, but most specially, he had the best insight of the most hidden aspects of Raider technology. Yes, he had to go. Seejuk suspected that Maalasi ultimately changed his mind for the opportunity to study Beast biotechnology. As for Zhoan, he wanted to bring the rest of the neutral Raiders to launch attacks against the Nemesis and the Tiamat as a lesson for attacking the planetoid. It wasn't a sensible idea, given the power of the Nemesis and the Tiamat along with their allies. But Seejuk needed Zhoan to get the Mule out as a backup to secure a retrieval plan. Girrsa just wanted to go, owing some guilt to what happened to Kuo'ran but maybe he just wanted to be next to Zhura. Being a Kaalel, he had computer expertise, and he could work well with Zhura as they hack the nodes. Mushak gave the permission to obtain the equipment they would need for this mission.

As the Corsair moved further away from the planetoid, they could see the blackened burned spots on the planetoid's surface, caused by the recent attacks. Like a fairy, the Fly self fluttered inside the cabin, played with Zhura for some

time, then finally perched on Seejuk's shoulder. Seejuk wondered if the creature could feel. It's going home now, its purpose nearly fulfilled.

* * *

They gathered around the ring table. Zuh al was the only one that was flesh and bone. The rest were wraiths.

"Was there any profit in our retreat?" One voice said. "We have suffered too much of our forces."

"We have finally checked the advances of the Condemned," said another voice. "They have overrun several sectors around the Outer Rim. But they too had suffered greatly. Their offense had run out of momentum. Soon it will be time to deliver the war directly against their core populations, to exterminate the heathen once and for all."

"I'm afraid the Nemesis is only our secondary problem," a voice spoke, in a manner above all. "The Plague should be our primary concern. If it is allowed to live, it will be a greater force than the Nemesis, a greater force than even the Unbound. I can feel its physical energies, and they have evolved their power generation technologies to a scale and efficiency even greater than ours. I can feel its psionic energies, and they have exceeded what the Nemesis was capable of, as an entire race."

"I support that," said another voice in the darkness. "I can feel the presence of the new Plague. It becomes greater and more powerful by the minute. We may not have enough time to stop it from being stronger. Stronger than even the Unbound."

"We cannot be inferior to any species," one voice decreed. "We are the Tiamat, we are the Wheel of Fate. All life follows the plans set by the Wheel. It is not acceptable. The Plague must be destroyed, before it becomes greater than us. Before it destroys us."

"The Plague ship destroyed the Annihilator. That is a testimony of the Plague's power. It must be destroyed before it destroys more of our Annihilators."

"How many of these Annihilators do you have?" Zuh al asked.

"That is not for you to know," said a voice. "You only need to know we have many. They are coming from all directions, from the places we have hidden them for eons. They have been awakened to redo the purpose they were born for, to cleanse the galaxy from the undesirables, the heathen, the condemned."

"You have the power, but you do not know where to strike," Zuhail said. "We have our BigEye early warning frigates situated all over the outer rim sectors. You see, we found out something about the White Beast that you may have overlooked. The White Beast communicates among the Selves that travel in far space using psionic energies, but these energies have a strange format. They are not directly the thoughts or the impulses that we have known of most life, but more like a computer code. They have a source, a central point, coordinating the Selves like a hive mind. This point is like a server in a network. Destroy this central point, and you destroy the White Beast."

"Our BigEyes have hacked into this psionic network stream in order to find out where the source is. We have come to an accurate pinpoint of its location, here at the Mohilim sector at the Outer Rim. Quite a logical place. Plenty of dark matter clouds to hide, yet there is a star and some asteroid belts to harvest resources and energy. The Deliverer class planet destroyer is far from a mothership. Something created it something bigger. That can only be the true mothership. The Mohilim system can easily both hide and sustain such a mothership. If the White Beast mothership is there, we can only bet our chances that the main Nemesis battlefleet is close by."

"An excellent analysis, even for one bound to the flesh," said a voice. "Once again you have vindicated our trust and confidence in you to be our ally."

"It was like an honor from the gods to be chosen by the Wheel of Fate," Zuhail said. "You are the hand of destiny, and I am only a tool to carry it out."

"Then we must prepare the Annihilators," the voice said. "Their full might will gather in the star of Mohilim. There they shall cleanse the Plague, and when that is done, they will cleanse the Condemned. We must prepare the fleets to escort and protect the Annihilators in their journey. It is time for us to leave now."

The hooded images began to disappear from the conference room, clear of their purpose and strategy. Zuhail sighed a breath of relief. He waited for a few moments then walked out to return to the bridge of the Irkan. He often wondered if this was the right thing to do. The Tiamat gave him the creeps, but even with the evil he perceived from them, they represented a known order of things that had already existed, that needed no replacement by an unknown and potentially more terrifying order such as the Nemesis and the Beast. He justified himself as working for the status quo, the lesser of two evils.

* * *

Aboard the Atonement, X'on watched the feeble light of the red sun of Mohilim struggle to shine through the clouds of dark matter that tend to permeate this part of space. But even with the faint light, he could see the silhouettes of the giant flower like solar collectors and the anemone like matter collectors.

"Get me in touch with the White Beast," X'on ordered.

Above him, the holo gram screens flickered out of thin air. A crystalline face appeared, its eyes a composite mosaic.

"I see, the Self that you choose to show your face and interact with me has changed once again," X'on observed. "At least this one appears more appealing."

"Our change represents our continuous evolution, our search for improvement," the diplomat self said.

"Even your speech has improved," X'on added. "I remember the time not long ago when you stutter in your speech."

"Improved speech synthesis is part of our evolution, part of the benefit of increased processing power," the Self said. "We appreciate that our new form has pleased you."

"You will please me more if you have good news," X'on said. "Our last battle was pyrrhic victory. We had successive gains in our advances in the Outer Rim sectors. But this decisive battle has halted our momentum, causes us to temporarily retreat."

"You may have underestimated the Unbound," the Self said. "We have been taking them out in a wave of successive surprises. We have been overconfident trying to take out a well-concentrated concentration by sheer force alone. They will now feel they have a chance to break our strategic momentum. They will try to get momentum of their own. They will now feel that this is the time to go on to the offensive."

"But this presents an opportunity."

"Hmm," X'on wondered. "I know what you are thinking, but do you have specifics."

"It is time to lure the enemy into a trap," the Self said. "All you have to do in your part is to spring it. I advise that you must repair your most powerful vessels and bring them to 100% efficiency and capability. We will need them for the trap."

"A trap? hmm, who will the bait be?" X'on wondered.

"We will," the Self said. "The Unbound are drawn to the Collective Selves. Their pride will not accept a species superior to them. They feel threatened. We have destroyed one of their Annihilators. They have reason to be alarmed."

We advise that you move your population centers away from the Mohilim system as far as possible. They seek to exterminate your race at cost."

"The last part isn't new news," X'on said. "Go on."

"Pride is a great weakness. You challenged their might directly because of your pride. You think you would not lose. So you made mistakes and charged head on. The same will happen to the Unbound. Pride will lead them to their mistake. The Mohilim system provides many opportunities for a trap. The dark matter clouds make excellent hiding places. Master the environment and we will master the enemy."

The Self seemed to be lecturing X'on on the fine points of tactical battle. He swallowed his pride for a moment, knowing with some insight that the Self may be true to what he said. Here, hidden in the Void, the Nemesis had never participated in a major battle for eons since the great War of the Heavens. Too many generations had passed, and they only had to refer to the histories and simulations. Yes, they have superior technology, but apparently technology wasn't enough to win battles. The White Beast from its previous incarnation had seen continuous battles, and it had been re-adapting to the varied tactical scenarios since. Its fleets had spearheaded many of the advancing attacks on the Outer Rim, with considerable success.

"I will let you call the shots this time, Beast. Do not fail me and our alliance," X'on warned.

The Self in the screen nodded before the screen fizzled out.

X'on turned back to his tenders, a large party of robbed clergy that tended to his every whim. "Do as he says. Withdraw the Moonships from this sector, and get our fleet quickly repaired..."

* * *

Perched on a shard, the Zha self watched the procession of ships above. There was no sound in space, yet the vibrations and the patterns of the frequencies of the stray waves they emanate, were like a sound on their own. Only that have senses adapted to read such could perceive these waves, and they felt like sound. A low menacing rumbling was how it felt like.

The Kuo'ran self walked over and sat down next to her. What seemed like mere darkness when seen with ordinary eyes were raging auroras of color, the moods of clouds and nebulas, the erupting flares from the auroras of stars. They realized that it was not just the Starfarer senses that were reaching out, but that their eyes had changed, a crystalline mosaic type that could perceive a far greater range of wavelengths than what an ordinary eye could.

The Kuo'ran self was troubled. "Will we ever get back to our proper bodies? Will we ever get back to our homes? I want to go home now. I miss home." She leaned on her side towards the Zha self. The Kuo'ran self had been through a lot, seeing both the dangers and the wonders of the universe in so short a time. She's taxed emotionally, and quite tired. The Zha self felt tired too, despite the vastly improved physiology of their strange crystalline bodies. It was not physical tiredness. It was tiredness of the soul.

"We will return. Don't worry," Zha said. "We must focus on the next things we must do to help the White Beast, and let things unfold as they are." She had some internal doubts about her own words, but inside, there was a shard of hope that she held on to.

The scene on the Deliverer has been one of heavy activity as arachnids and scorpions flurry about trying to repair their host as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Larger defense droids guard over them. The arachnids ate pieces of debris and junk, digest them, then spit out a crystalline web that soon harden to a tough hexagonal comblike structure, a silicate matrix. The matrix not only serves as a protective fiber reinforced armor, but was conductive as well, capable of serving as redundant processors. The scorpions repair and weld broken areas of the matrices, rejoining them. On the skies, Beast fighters, corvettes and frigates soar in a guardian formation.

Far above, the aging red star shone, a red disk obscured by dark clouds, a picture of an eternal sunset. High above in orbit around the star, Zha could see with her powerful new eyes, the plant like ships the White Beast had laid. Huge flowerlike energy collectors span the space for miles with their giant lace like petals. Like feeding anemones, matter collectors use powerful gravwells that can extend focused fields of gravity across vast distances of space, pulling rock, debris and even clouds to their feeding maw. Around their maws, focusing panels shaped like tentacles danced in a slow rhythm, their sensual movement synchronized with the pulses of gravitational fields, the panels flexing with the gravitational waves like lunar tides that occur every minute. The White Beast had been growing more and more of these plant like ships that they are beginning to cover the star itself. She wondered if the Collective Selves have some other purpose in mind with these Plant selves.

"It is time to go now," the Zerun self said. A huge insect like creature with wings hovered then landed next to them. It was a shuttle ship, a giant version of Fly self, one of the unique adaptive designs the White Beast had been making for itself. Nearby the arachnids had encased the flesh bodies of Kuo'ran and Zha into crystalline mummies, and towed the mummies to the Fly self, where they were attached to its belly. Zha figured that must be the cargo compartment.

Kuo'ran seemed apprehensive watching her own body like a dead mummy. Zha assured her. "Our bodies are still alive, I could feel it. They're like in a state of stasis."

The three of them walked to the giant Fly self. The Zerun self directed them to ride on the back of the Fly, holding on to shards shaped like handles. As they did so, the matrices in the shards joined to their matrices in their hands, creating a welded solid link. They essentially became part of the Fly, at least from their bodies, but their innate Selves remained separate. The Zerun-self could link to the central systems of the Fly self. Essentially he became interfaced to fly the creature.

It would be strange flying through vacuum again. Before, she had flown through space like a dream in an ethereal body. That experience had a hallucinating effect to it. This time, she remembered, these crystalline bodies were resistant to vacuum, and they had been living on a tiny weak atmosphere that surrounded the layer of the Deliverer like a coating, yet never dense enough to support life directly. While experience through an ethereal body was like a dream, the experience of space through the crystalline bodies was much more intense. There was a sense of genuine physicality these bodies have that a spirit traveling through space will never have. Its sensual organs were much powerful and sensitive.

The Fly lifted out of the Deliverer. For Zha and Kuo'ran, the experience was just pure fun, like a ride in an amusement park. Maybe they can enjoy this moment for a while before they settle into more serious matters.

They passed by the jungle of the flower and anemone collectors. Finally Zha saw the creature, the main mother vessel of the White Beast. Its size was too huge to be called a mothership, many times larger than the Deliverer. It was more like a planetoid, a living moon that kept building itself as it fed. Zha could imagine from its immense size that the living moon could give birth to more Deliverer class vessels, creating the backbone of an unstoppable fleet. But she perceived the White Beast no longer had that intention, given that there was still only one Deliverer. Zha could see more plantlike ships attached to its surface, like embryos growing. When they're ready, these plant like ships would leave the nest and join the others in orbit. Around the living moon were armadas of Beast vessels, ships of all types orbiting in vigil. The Fly headed to the living moon.

* * *

"We got multiple ship readings!" Maalasi shouted. "The ship is going into cloak!"

The Corsair frigate disappeared like a ghost, as it waded to a nearby rock belt. They were still quite some distance from the Mohilim star system, and already something was afoot.

Everyone stared at the screens, mouths agape at both the horror and awe of the image it presents.

A vast fleet of ships, an armada of Tiamat spiderships, Tiamat crabships and Sekmet battlespheres. Vast swarming clouds of Black and Fire Acolytes swirled around the larger ships, like flies tending to fresh carcass. Here was the full might of the Unbound, at least from the two most warlike factions of the Unbound. Among the more peaceful races, the Bentusi and the Naga had long since the Galaxy once again, both confirmed by Mushak and the Fly self, leaving only the smaller Ringships and Needleships to guard precious assets that could not leave the galaxy. The more pacifist races of the Unbound were all in a defensive mode, staying in their home sectors where ever they were. Only the aggressive Tiamat and Sekmet were in a warlike offensive mode. The Tiamat and the Sekmet were friendly rivals in their quest for power, trying to upstage each other through achievement but never in direct confrontation. Now it's a race to see who would catch the greater glory in vanquishing the White Beast and the Nemesis.

"Look, look!" Girsu shouted. "I can't believe it!"

Seejuk could not believe his eyes. He could see large ships, the form, the silhouette of an Annihilator. One of these ships were already grave trouble. And here's a second. No wait! There's a third, and now a fourth!

Seejuk tore at his hair. There were more Annihilators, a fleet of black moons silhouetted against the raging nebulas and aging stars, silently cruising to their destinations. In the final count there seemed to be more than a few dozen of them, all guarded by a vast fleet of Unbound ships and fighters that surrounded the Annihilators like a giant cloud.

They all stared at the screens speechless. Finally, Maalasi uttered. "Looks like the White Beastie is going to get it now. Anyone having a change of heart?" Grinning, Maalasi raised his hand, but no one else did. They just stared at him like crazy.

Maalasi lowered his hand and sighed. "Oh my. Looks like we're a bunch of dumb ass heroes."

The Fly self said, "Trust me. We are aware of the power of the Unbound. Release us, and you shall see a power even greater than what you are seeing now."

Part 22

The Annihilators were slow, slow machines. Even in cloaked mode, the Corsair quickly left the Unbound fleet behind, undetected.

"The slowness of the huge ships will buy us time, but only for a short while. We still do not have time to waste," said the Fly self. The purple gate appeared, and the Corsair slipped through it.

When it appeared, two ships were waiting for them. The Fly assured them that the two ships were Beast, and the crystalline splotches on their sides told them that the ships were Firelance clones.

"Now your computers must be ready for a download," said the Fly. The lights inside the Corsair darkened as the main computers temporarily overloaded from a massed influx of data. The lights recovered to their steady glow and the computers resumed normal functioning.

"You now have the data to mimic a White Beast ship," the Fly said. Maalasi checked the computers. "You're right!" he affirmed.

"Now transform," the Fly said. The Corsair turned into a White Beast variant of an Ion Array frigate. "Pulsating electro-magnetic fields around the ship will serve as a barrier to prevent Starfarer psionic powers from detecting us. Now follow the other ships."

The transformed Corsair turned to follow the Firelances. Ahead of them was the dim dying sun of Mohilim, its feeble red light struggling to shine through the nebulae of dark matter that orbit the star. Its eruptive flares burn through the ionized gases trapped in the magnetic fields that surround the star, creating fiery auroras that raged through space thousands of times larger than entire worlds.

Seejuk stared at the scene ahead of him in awe. He uttered a prayer to the highest God of all gods, whom even the great Sajuuk was a mere servant, thankful for the beauty he saw and the wonder of natural creation. No Kushan, except for Giirsa here, and Kuo'ran somewhere out there, have ever seen the awe of such a sight, a star on the very edge of the Galaxy, the edge between the lightspace of the living and the darkspace that was the Void.

"There!" Zhura shouted, pointing the screen. "I can see them. The Nemesis fleet!" Indeed it was. Even at immense distances the Nemesis dreadnaughts can be seen with their distinct shapes. Based from their previous observation, the Nemesis dreadnaughts were bigger than an entire Turanic Outpost, except that these ships actually move on their own power. Zhura wondered if they would be caught again. But this time, they have taken precautions, and they were not alone. In vast linear formations, Nemesis fighters and frigates surrounded the large ships in protective screens. Zhura wondered if her father was still there, alive and healthy, and hoped for the farthest chance he can still be rescued.

"The ships are mobilizing," Seejuk observed. "They know a big battle will be coming."

"We do not have much time to waste," the Fly said. The three frigates, the Corsair and the two escorting Beast frigates, passed innocently through patrols of Nemesis ships. The sleek forms of the Nemesis fighters was something Giirsa had grown to hate, the image of Kuo'ran in the moment of her madness had burned deep in his mind.

"Over there," Zhura cried out, pointing to a new series of ships. They were like giant flowers, heat and light collectors with symmetrical panels that extend into space for miles. Like living creatures, monster ships draw matter using focused fields of gravity into their hungry maws, extended tentacles manipulating the gravity fields like vanes guiding the winds. "Energy and resource collectors of some kind," Seejuk said. "These things must have gathered a lot."

"There I see it now," Zhura cried out again, much to the distraction of Maalasi who was piloting the ship. "Must be the White Beast battle fleet!"

There were rows and rows of the Taiidan style Heavy Corvettes, covered in pale white, one of the Beast's most effective strike formations, supplemented by Kushan style HCs and Multigun Corvettes of both Kushan and Taiidan styles. There were pale white colored Brigands, then rows and rows of White Acolytes. These were no longer the Somtaaw type Acolyte, as the White Beast had long acquired the ability to clone Super Acolytes. The White Acolytes had been an effective dogfighter against the variety of colored Super Acolytes of the Unbound. They could also see rows and rows of Beast Interceptors, basically based on two kinds, a type based on the Turanic Bandit and the other, on the Taiidan Triikor. But the White Beast enhancements gave their own Bandit and Triikor clones a superior level of protection and regeneration over their originals, with a greater punch from energy cannons.

There were Beast ion frigates, both of the Kushan Firelance, the Taiidan Sajuuk-Cor and the Turanic Assassin variety. There was little Assault frigates however. But even the combined ion array frigates were outnumbered by huge numbers of Hive Frigates, cloned from the Somtaaw design and probably improved in some way.

Space bustled with activity. Seejuk noted the absence of resourcers based on the Somtaaw Worker and the Taiidan Resourcer class. Instead, the White Beast had resorted to using its own unique designs that must have been more efficient for it. They appeared like giant insects, or giant versions of the Fly self, buzzing around asteroids. There was something about the shimmering "wings" they use to propel themselves through space, as if the fields they create push directly against the space-time fabric. Huge grub like ships closely followed these giant Flies, and the Grubs, which reminded Seejuk of Kadeshi Pods, must be resource controllers and processors.

Something huge loomed ahead of them. Seejuk remembered this one. He had seen it fire some sort of super siege cannon against the Unbound Annihilator back at the Turan sector, the giant vessel they call the Deliverer. It was a grotesque ship, a monster with a huge mouth, with tentacles around it to draw its prey. But the Deliverer does not use its mouth to eat; it uses it to fire that super siege cannon inside it. Its surface was mottled with white, crystalline patches that cover huge areas with a hexagonal matrice.

The Corsair and its two escorts passed through the formations of fighters and the Deliverer. It seemed as they went further ahead, the clouds of dark matter only grew thicker, as if their very destination must be hiding in the thickest of the clouds.

Indeed it must be. The ships travelled through increasingly thicker clouds, and the space around them became darker with every passing moment. Soon they could not see much light from the sun or the few stars near the system. The only lights were those from the escorting frigates, and the luminescent organs of the Fly and Grub selves, like deep undersea creatures searching for food.

There finally it loomed, like a small planet covered with a glowing crystalline surface that stood out from the darkness. It appeared not like pictures of the Naggarak, which was a huge mothership--this, the central vessel of the White Beast, was much much bigger, a virtual living moon.

"Welcome to the Core Self," the Fly self said. "I assume that this ship could land on a planet surface?"

"Yes we do," Seejuk replied.

"The internal cavity had been pressurized with the proper atmosphere of your breathing requirements," the Fly said. "First we must fly hover through the openings and prepare for landing. We must proceed quickly".

"Okay, guys. This is amazing. For a small moon, it is generating artificial gravity equivalent to a habitable planet. My sensors are indicating that the core has cavities that contain a breathable atmosphere." Maalasi said. He pointed to the large cracks in the surface, like bottomless canyons where deep inside, something seethed. The canyons would have been dark, but the crystalline patches glowed, serving as markers for any craft that flew through them. They could see the Fly and Grub selves fly into and out of the canyons.

"I bet that's where home is. Or the Hive, whatever you call it. Here we go, right into the bug nest," Maalasi said. "Or perhaps, into the depths of hell."

The ship disengaged its mimic form, and hit its retros. The Corsair descended into the canyons, the ship deftly avoiding the sharp spikes that lined the canyon's walls.

"Excellent piloting skill. I didn't know you had it in you," Seejuk complemented Maalasi.

Maalasi replied. "In my younger days, I used to be a race pilot and engineer. Then I became older, had a family, and became a salesman. But I still have my skills."

Somewhere inside, the Fly told them to stop. "It is close by. The Core Self. Prepare for landing. Prepare to receive, the Core Self."

The Corsair sailed into the final cavity, the largest of them all. The Corsair fired its retros for the final time, and its docking legs deployed for landing. The Corsair landed on solid ground with a thud.

"We brought along space suits just in case, but my sensors are indicating a breathable atmosphere with the correct pressure," Maalasi said.

"The Collective Selves have prepared the environment especially for you all," said the Fly self.

"I probably bet you're happy now," Seejuk said to the Fly self.

"It has been a wish of mine to physically rejoin the Collective Selves. This is what you Flesh entities call home, and that is what the concept means to me. But we do not have time to waste as the peril grows near."

They prepared to disembark from the Corsair, except for Maalasi who remained in the ship to keep tabs on the sensors and the computing systems. Maalasi immediately made scans, intent to analyze the advanced nanobot and droid technology the White Beast uses. As the hatch open, a cool wind blew in.

"Breathable, but kind of stale," Seejuk commented about the atmosphere.

"What's this?" Giirsa exclaimed, watching the large pale crystalline spiders and scorpions creeping near his feet. "Oh by the god Sajuuk!" he lamented, feeling ill at the sight of the articulate multilegged creatures that glow eerily at the dark. As he examined the caverns more, he found the creatures creeping up the walls and ceilings. Several of the creatures perched on top of the crystal spires and shards, staring at the flesh bound visitors with caution and curiosity.

"These are Repair selves. Without them, the Collective Selves cannot repair and regenerate the matrix," the Fly self explained. The Fly fluttered like a luminescent fairy around both Seejuk and Zhura, which both of whom the creature seemed to have gained a fondness of.

Then it finally appeared. A huge matrix of honeycombs that appeared to stretch by the miles, each cell glowing with their own bioluminescence. "The is the Core Self, which all the Collective Selves are linked," said the Fly.

Three figures stood there.

"ZHA!" Seejuk shouted, as one of the girls started running to him.

"I am so glad to see you all," Zha cried as she hugged her dear friend that stood by her for so long.

Giirsa and Zhura ran to the other girl, for they recognized her as Kuo'ran. Giirsa was happy to see her healthy and sane. "I am so glad to see you. You're not crazy anymore, are you?" he asked, as he stroked Kuo'ran's head.

"Oh, it's good to see you all. You've all come to save us," Kuo'ran shouted in glee. "To answer your question, no I'm not crazy anymore. I got my soul back, I think, thanks to the White Beast here. It rescued us from being zombies of that creepy guy X'on."

"I was worried about you," Seejuk said, as he stroked Zha on the head.

"No...I was the one really worried about you, Seejuk. I thought there would be nothing left of you all squeezed between the crossfire of the Unbound and the Nemesis."

Seejuk noticed something about Zha. Her skin was crystalline marked with a hexagonal pattern, and her eyes were a mosaic. Giirsa also quickly let go of Kuo'ran, when he saw the same thing.

"You, you're not Zha," Seejuk dropped his hands in surprise and horror. "Are you?"

"I am her, or as you see, I am a Self now, at least temporarily. Oh I'm sorry," Zha said. "My real body is still there, being repaired from the neurological damage caused by Nemesis. And so is Kuo'ran's. As the Selves will explain, I am loaning this form right now for the duration of the healing process. When our bodies are all healed up, I can return to my original bodies."

Seejuk, Zhura and Giirsa walked over to what seemed like two crystal encasements. There they could see through the thick transparent fiber reinforced casings, the two flesh bodies of Zha and Kuo'ran, both sleeping like babies. Zhura brought a medical scanner with her and scanned the bodies. "Life signs are okay. We got a regular heartbeat, regular pulse, proper body temperature, and brainwaves on an REM dream state."

"Somehow, my mind may be linked from my real body to this Self body," Kuo'ran said. "That may explain the brainwave activity. The whole phenomenon is quite interesting, actually. I can't explain the technology and how they did it, but they did it. This body is amazing. It could live through vacuum, and see a greater range of the spectrum. I can see a bit of heat itself and a bit of the ultraviolet. I can perceive magnetic fields. Since the discovery of my Starfarer senses, I could perceive the psionic and magnetic energies that run throughout the cosmos, as if the stars were alive themselves. But this body, the senses are intense, seeing the universe through different wavelengths, through different fields."

"At least you can still think, Kuo'ran," Giirsa laughed. "Now I know it's you and that you're not crazy. I thought you looked cool in the silver bathing suit the Nemesis gave to you, but you looked even cooler in that creepily glowing thing you are in now."

"Stop kidding, Giirsa! I'm not kidding. I got my own theories here, all derived from first hand experience. This White Beast, this creature, it is evolving to a new pure stellar life form, one that can live purely on vacuum, travel through space without a ship, and subsist on the material resources and energy it can find. This is why the Unbound fears this new creature; the White Beast will evolve to a superior state, a form that is truly unbound to both flesh, planets and even spacecraft."

For a moment, Kuo'ran reflected. "It is ironical indeed, Giirsa, that we travelled so far to search for clues on the origins of sentient life, but instead discovered where life is ultimately evolving."

"You are correct," a voice said. "We are evolving, even at this very moment. We await our final form, and with that, our rebirth." It was the third figure, coming down from the steps.

The face was familiar, and he had seen this picture in the Mule archives and on Zha's command console aboard that ship. "Is that who and what I think it is?" Seejuk asked.

"It is my father, Zerun Khor. Or at least, the White Beast facsimile of him. My real father died, but the Beast cloned his memories and personality into this Self."

"So the White Beast can take all the memories and the personality essence of all the people the Beast had infected, clone and resurrect them into these new forms, these selves," Seejuk observed. He looked around in the vast cavern hall. Each cell in the honeycomb, there were people in them. At least not human or flesh and blood, but each was like Zha, Kuo'ran and Zerun. Seeing all these bodies was like a vast cemetery, where the dead was ready to reawaken.

"We cannot return whom the Beast had so unjustly removed from the stream of life," the Zerun self explained. "But in our own way, we can partly resurrect the essence of all those who were taken by creating them to a new life."

Zhura seemed to be the odd one left. It was her question that remained unanswered. "We have recovered Kuo'ran and Zha, but what about my father? What about my father?"

Zerun turned to Zhura. "Your father is all right at the moment. But he is not in our hands, as he is still with the Nemesis. While we cannot guarantee his safety or rescue, we will seek means for his safe retrieval."

"Please I ask of you, help him," Zhura begged.

"Please, please," the Fly self said. "We do not have time to lose. The Unbound will soon be upon us. We must deal with the nodes."

Maalasi talked through the comlink to Zhura, Seejuk and Giirsa. "Way ahead of you. I have been doing scans, and we have found devices foreign to the Beast matrix. At least foreign to them, since the devices are familiar to us. Raider technology."

Zhura turned to the Zerun self. "Our Raider technology is primitive compared to what I see the White Beast is capable of, why can't you resolve the nodes yourself?"

"It is precisely because it is primitive," the Zerun self explained. "The design makes no sense to us. Its flaws and logical contradictions baffle us. It is a design conceived by the flesh bound, and only understood by the flesh bound."

"A node is nearby," the Zerun self explained. "We can get to it for your examination."

"Okay then, let's get to work," Seejuk said. "We'll need to get our tools first." After a minute, Seejuk, Giirsa and Zhura returned from the ship carrying bags of various equipment.

The node was large black egg as big as two humans. Its surface was a black mirror like metal similar to the coating the Nemesis uses on their ships, except that it was glossy not satin.

"The coating resists our touch," the Zerun self explained. Sparks flew out alarmingly as he held his hand close to the egg's surface.

"Primarily because it was intended to protect against silicate based life forms such as you," Zhura said. She put her hand on its surface and nothing happened. "Obviously it was only meant to be handled by its flesh bound creators." She felt around the egg. "There must be an access panel around here. Found it. Give me some hands."

Seejuk and Giirsa bent over to lift the panel out from the surface of the egg. "Interesting. It's one of the Harkk'hah's commercial designs that the For'lym must have purchased or cloned. The Harkk'hah are the best programmers and computer engineers of all the Raiders, and even the For'lym trust their high caliber equipment. They wanted the best, they got the best. Harkk'hah serial numbers, but with For'lym ownership labels on...you got that Maalasi?"

"Got it," Maalasi said. "The egg is one node of several. I see a vast redundant computing network here, each interfaced to the nervous infrastructure of the White Beast. Okay, I got the operating system right here, and it's also Harkk'hah OS. Should be easy to break. Correction, Zhura, the Harkk'hah are only second best; the Soo'nani will come out with superior computer models."

"I got it too," Zhura said. "I got the interface right now. By the way, Maalasi, this is not the time to sell next year's computer models."

"Whatever, and what makes you think I'm selling new computers, I am merely stating a fact...now, the nodes are designed to induce certain signals against the White Beast's internal network," Maalasi explained. "With the proper signals, it can induce a whole range of stimuli from pain, to sadness, to anger and pleasure. It's no different from a human emotional or hallucigenic inducing implant, except that this is on a giant scale, and tuned to the synapse frequencies used by the White Beast internal network."

Zhura began teaching Seejuk and Giirsa some of the simpler aspects of the navigating through the Harkk'hah designed operating system. So on the two Kushans got the basic idea and were moving through the operating system like pros."

"Any attempt to dislodge, remove, or destroy the nodes will result in intense pain to the White Beast, perhaps death by frying its central nervous system," Maalasi explained. "Each egg draws electrical energy from the White Beast, then stores and amplifies them in to a focused electromagnetic pulse. I saw we must be careful."

"Tough call," Seejuk said.

"Not if we disable the main control application instead," Giirsa said. "If the application is disabled, the nodes can be left for dead. or we may crash the entire network operating system. But there is awfully tight security here. I see firewalls inside firewalls. The application is spread redundantly throughout the nodes, and ditto with the server OS. Pure human paranoid redundancy to the ninth level. Security designed to confuse. Algorithms that made no sense. No wonder the White Beast cannot fathom it. Nonetheless, the Kaalel are the best hackers of Hiigara, and I will break the best the Hakk'hah has to offer. Time to demonstrate what we could do...." Giirsa rolled his sleeves up.

Giirsa's fingers began to aggressively type the keyboard of the portable terminal, like a maestro out to compose his finest music. Then he suddenly stopped, looking baffled.

"It does not look like good news," Seejuk said.

"As usual, Giirsa Kaalel, even in the farthest corner of the galaxy, you are still a load of hot air," Kuo'ran lectured.

"Aw shutup, Kuo'ran! Even if you're in a Beast body, you're still a lecturing bitch. Apparently, not even the power of the White Beast can remove that from you," Giirsa retorted.

"Give me a terminal, and I will show you a S'jet's superior computer expertise!" Kuo'ran boasted.

"Well I think I'm going to pitch in and help hacking," Zha said, taking a spare portable terminal and placing it on her lap. "No use sitting around, waiting for the Unbound to blow me to pieces while you two argue."

Giirsa looked to Zhura. "Maybe you can come over here to my terminal and help me more discern the various indigenous aspects of the Harkk'hah operating system." Zhura rolled her eyes, crawled next to Giirsa, and placed her hands on the same keyboard as his hands. The other hand began pointing at the screen, as she began her explanations.

"Excuse me while I recite a prayer before I hack," Seejuk said.

"Do you think we have made a right choice?" the Fly self communicated to the Zerun self.

"It was a gamble to use these people, but we have no choice," the Zerun self said. "Our fate now rests on their competence...or incompetence..."

"The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and the sky were darkened from the smoke in the Abyss. And out of the smoke, locusts came down upon the earth, and were given power like that of the scorpions of the earth. "

Revelations 9, 1-3

Part 23

The nebula was a battle between the red and orange fires, fueled by hydrogen clouds, and the smothering blackness of the dark matter that floated from the Abyss. Inside it was the dim star of Mohilim, an aging red star that had lived a life of eons in loneliness, no star, no planet to give it companionship, no life form ever arising from it. At the farthest edge of the galactic spiral, the Mohilim star awaited its end, waiting to return its life giving elements back to the cosmos, the only worthwhile event of its obscure existence.

Between the shadows cast by the dark clouds, and the dim flames of the dying nebula, hundreds of black shapes emerged. There were massive spherical shapes with rings and arms, and tails ending in long stalks. Hundreds of small black fighters shadowed them, and larger spiderships and battlespheres followed them.

"We have arrived," said one voice. "...Arrived to the system of the dying star. It will be a place fitting to end the Plague and the Condemned."

"We have no time to lose," said the voice, this one of the Sekmet. "The psionic power of the Plague increases by the second. I can feel its power rising, like a nova ready to burst. It is a strength that the Condemned had cast a blind eye upon, not realizing that their tool will be ultimately stronger than they are."

"If that is so, then the Plague must be our primary objective," said a voice of the Tiamat. "We can eliminate the Condemned after the Plague is destroyed. The Plague must not be allowed to grow stronger than the collective powers of the Unbound."

"We have sight of the Ones that must be destroyed," a voice spoke.

The lines of fighters that stretch from one end of the sky to the other began to accelerate, their bluish ion trails lengthened as they increased to attack speed. The Tiamat crabships and Sekmets battle spheres forged ahead, their Boundless overminds controlling the Black and Fire Acolyte drones.

Obscured from the dark clouds, another armada of black ships emerged. There were huge ships shaped like tripods set on their end, three legs that stretch out into space from a central body, and a huge stalk emerging from the center. Thin yellow lights rippled back and forth the entire length of their body.

"We have contact with the enemy," the tactical office announced. They had been waiting among the dark clouds, hundreds of sleek winged fighters, the Bats, the Skates and the Mantas, hungry to wreak retribution for the fate the Unbound had cast upon them. Like huge roaches, the Nuriya class frigates followed the fighters. Then finally, the Retribution class dreadnaughts brought up the rear.

The winged fighters ignited their boosters, and their red ion trails streaked the black sky. The LED lights from the dashboards reflected off the dark visors of the Starfarer pilots, as their fighters accelerated and scanned for the nearest Unbound targets. "This is Demon Leader. Enemy fighter squadrons, bearing 0124 mark 086, prepare to engage."

All across the star system, the peace from the obscurity and the darkness was broken, as two ancient powers prepared to settle their eternal feud.

Yet another creature waited patiently, like a carnivorous animal hidden in its burrow, ready to jump on its prey. It watched the combatants as they head to each other in a fatal embrace. This is the time, it thought. The circumstances are right. The decision is made.

Death creates life.

Around the aging Mohilim star, like giant flowers the solar wind collectors extended their panels and aimed it at the core of the star. The massive gravwell generators set in orbit by the Creature headed for the collectors and united in their centers, creating a new ship. The collectors fed their energy in the gravwell generators, whose gravity fields were focused by the panels directly into the core of the star.

Massive waves of gravity began to compress the core of the red Mohilim sun. Waves of stellar tsunami rocked its surface. Angered, the dying star released massive flares into the sky.

"The enemy is here," said Zerun, staring at the human crew as they struggled in a race of time, to unlock the nodes that bind the White Beast.

"What is here?" Seejuk cried out, sweat beading in his forehead, as he tried to hack the Raider installed nodes with Giirsa, Kuo'ran, Zha, and Zhura.

It was Maalasi in the comlink. "He must be referring to the Unbound armada. Looks like it had arrived to the system. The ship scanners are detecting the Nemesis also in battle formation, heading to each other. Looks like a big fight ahead in the sky."

"The battle is joined," the Zerun self said. He raised his arms. Outside, formations of white fighters, Acolytes, Triikors, Bandits, Blades, a collection of a myriad designs the White Beast had accumulated from the races of the Inner Spiral, began to accelerate, ion trails heating up. Behind them were various frigates, also collected from the races of the Inner Spiral, the Lightspace. The main bulk of the smaller capital ships were Hive frigates. They opened their back wings, and hundreds of swarm drones filled the space like a storm cloud.

Their orders were simple. They were neither to offensive attack both the Unbound or the Nemesis, but to defend the Mother core vessel; its offspring, the Deliverer, and the orbiting collectors-gravwells, whose fields were being focused into the Mohilim star itself. The Beast ships and fighters were legacies of the Beast selves in their former form, existed long before the White Beast had evolved its own organic designs. They were the first wave of defense, and the White Beast was about to launch its second wave.

Seejuk was distracted from his hacking activities as he saw the walls of the cavern came to life. Hundreds of anthropoid creatures--spiders and scorpions, emerged from the cracks and tunnels of the walls, heading to the surface.

"Do not be alarmed," said the Fly self as it perched on Seejuk's shoulder. "The time of tribulation has come. The Selves are willing to sacrifice themselves to preserve the common good."

From the back of the larger spiders and scorpions---defense Selves---wings sprouted and extended themselves in shimmering arrays of rainbows. They were wings of pure energy, held by force fields. As the Fly had explained before, the wings bend the very fabric of space and time itself, as they flapped through it like a fluid medium. The spiders and scorpions flapped their wings, then hovered, and rose straight to the sky, accelerating ever faster as they broke out through the crevices and canyons, a massive raging swarm heading out to battle the dark shapes in the sky. Then came the third wave, giant crystalline flies and locusts creeping through the cracks. They too extended their shimmering wings of energy and field, and rose in buzzing, raging swarms.

Salim had been the dutiful scholar. His weapons were never guns or lasers, but the tip of his pen. He had seen the Nemesis take his daughter away, a captive and a pawn they used to keep him at his dubious work of rewriting and rehashing Nemesis history in the archaic language of the Raiders. The project was a whim and a pet of the Nemesis Overlord, a somewhat bizarre man with strange thinking patterns.

There was a knock in the door, and he opened it. Instead of expecting armed Nemesis guards, the armed men were in Raider uniforms, packing pistols of Raider design.

"What?" Salim asked.

"Do not question me. Just come with us right now. This is urgent," said the Raider.

Salim dared not to question and quickly followed the armed men. To his surprise they led him to Mahar, Sha of the For'lym, Raider allies to the Nemesis. It was Mahar and the For'lym who lent valuable know how that enabled the Nemesis to capture and bind the White Beast. They led slave gathering raids in the Inner Spiral sectors to supply cheap slave labor for the factories pounding armaments for the Nemesis war machine. They led scouting and information gathering missions in the inner spiral sectors for the Nemesis. They were traitors and conspirators.

From the expression in Mahar's face, Salim knew that his sentiment had changed.

"That madman, X'on, he will lead us to certain destruction," Mahar complained. "This war, this feud, this is not a war of conquest. This is a war of mutual annihilation. We have sent secret communiques with Zuhai of the Harkk'hah for a tactical withdrawal of the situation. By no means our feud with the Harkk'hah has concluded. This is our means to ensure that both of us will live for another day to deal with each other."

"A tactical withdrawal, eh?" Salim smirked. "You are about to turn your back on your ally."

"A smart thing to do given the circumstances," Mahar explained. "The last few battles have left severe attrition on the For'lym fighter forces. If this continues, we are gone. Not to mention the fact that the Nemesis and the Unbound are fighting in a system with an unstable star. Our scanners have detected that the Mohilim sun is capable of going supernova anytime. To die in a useless futile manner is not what I have led my life for, what I have built the For'lym for."

"You are contemplating escape against your former ally," Salim confirmed.

"YES, and you will go with us. We cannot afford to leave any Raider in the hands of the Nemesis. That would betray too much information," Mahar insisted.

"But my daughter....I can't leave her, she's a prisoner and they may do something to her if I escape with you..." Salim argued.

"We have good word that she is no longer on the hands of the Nemesis," Mahar said. "They never told you, but she was on the slave ship that the Du'ran Raiders liberated."

"Really?" For the first time in a long time, Salim felt joy. The news of his daughter's escape was thrilling to hear, even from the mouth of a conspirator like Mahar. "You're sure?"

"I know that you never trust me, Salim of the Flo'karr, but for once, heed my word. We must get out. Either you leave with us alive or we will leave you dead on this spot," Mahar said. "We must leave while the Nemesis is distracted with the battle."

Between escape and death, it was an easy choice for Salim. Mahar led his party in a small shuttle out of the Atonement, in pretext that he was returning back to his command ship. Back in his Lord class carrier however, Mahar ordered that all fighters must stay in standby.

Across the system, Zuhai of the Harkk'hah had the same thoughts. Scanners from his science and EWAC vessels had detected the instability of the Mohilim sun. His fleet had suffered severe attrition from the last few battles. Like the For'lym, the addition of small ion based cannons on the Bandits did not turn out well. The ion cannons depleted way too much energy and required too long a recharge time for the Bandit's limited battery reserves. This gave a severe liability to the beam based Bandits in dogfights and it was most apparent in the battle of the Turan sector, when they both had to battle each other and the regular Bandit and interceptor Raider forces defending the Turan planetoid. If that wasn't enough, the indiscriminate use of the Nova cannon by both the Unbound and the Nemesis destroyed both friend and foe, the shockwaves unleashed killing anything within range of the explosion.

Zuhai had wondered about the consequences of escaping from the Tiamat. Now with the Mohilim sun a supernova candidate, he has his back on the wall. Death seemed certain and he would rather face the consequences with the Tiamat instead of the supernova. Now with the Tiamat pre-occupied in a death struggle with the Nemesis, he saw an opportunity.

"All Harkk'hah forces. Stand down and do not engage without my signal," Zuhai ordered. He stared at the screens where the dark space of the Mohilim system had turned into a nonstop display of fireworks, as ship after ship, in a chaos that one could not tell one side from the other, exploded in an orgy of death and battle. He watched the chaos, and he was thankful of his decision.

Across the system, to the Mother vessel of the White Beast itself, Maalasi faithfully manned the scanners of the Corsair frigate they used to land inside the Mother planetoid.

"Seejuk? Anyone?" Maalasi beeped the comlinks. "We got a situation here. The Mohilim sun just turned unstable. We got to hack the nodes and get the hell out of here as soon as we can. Or we can just get the hell out and forget about this creature."

As if he is not in enough pressure already, Seejuk thought. Good, that will make his day. The Unbound in complete topsy turvy in one end, an ancient crazy whacko race on the other. They're in the surface of a Beast mothership, hacking Turanic Raider nodes on a star system about to go nova on the very end of the Galaxy. Boy, his mother never dreamed that as a job situation for her baby.

"How did the star become unstable?" Seejuk asked.

"I'm afraid, we are responsible for it," the Zerun self said. "We cannot let the Annihilators escape the system. The Unbound and the Nemesis will be taught a lesson. The Cycle of Violence and Death must end here. Our gravwells have focused their fields into the core of the star. Tidal waves will compress it until ultimately it will reach supernova."

"You will kill everyone in the system!" Seejuk objected.

"There is still a chance to escape," Zerun said. "Help us unlock the nodes. If you fail, we will die along with the supernova. If you succeed, we can escape."

"How?" Seejuk asked.

"You will see," Zerun said.

Seejuk stared at Zha. "You know something like this might happen, do you?"

Zha looked back. "I had a feeling but I could not confirm it. They were hiding it from me for fear I may tell you."

"Do not fear. Death begets life," Zerun said. "If we are to die, it will not be in vain. Whatever happens here will preserve the lives of millions more. The ancient cycle of violence must be stopped. We---the Selves have been part of that violence. This is our atonement for the millions of lives we have so unnecessarily taken. This will be our rebirth."

"Rebirth?" Seejuk asked.

"The final evolution of the Selves is about to come," Zerun said, staring the sky.

"I got it, I got it!" Zhura shouted with her hands on the air.

"I got confirmation here," Maalasi said, his eyes on the scanners. "We got a node down finally."

"Pass the codes to us," Giirsa said, and Zhura did it immediately. Soon, Giirsa and Kuo'ran both each had nodes down, and Seejuk soon after.

Back on the atonement, X'on was livid. At the screens, the unyielding struggle between his forces and the Unbound happened in front of his eyes.

"Our instruments have confirmed that the star will go supernova," the Sensors officer said.

X'on could feel the star changing with his Starfarer senses. The gravity fields from the gravwell generators of the White Beast orbiting the star continue to collapse it further. The collectors and gravwells use the very same energy they collect from the star to power the collapsing fields.

Why is the White Beast doing this? X'on thought. Was it because it had a bizarre need for self destruction and to take everyone down with it? That question will never be answered. All attempts to communicate with the Core Self have turned only empty silence. The only alternative is to punish the White Beast for betraying the Nemesis and its alliance.

"Electrify the nodes now!" X'on ordered. A signal flashed from the Atonement dreadnaught to the nodes inside the White Beast mother ship.

Seejuk saw the Zerun self suddenly stumbled. He turned and watched Zha as her back was arched, her eyes glassy in terror, her mouth silent but gaping to scream. She stretched her hand out to him, then collapsed.

"Kuo'ran, Kuo'ran," Giirsa screamed as he stared at Kuo'ran's limp and fallen figure. "What happened?"

"The nodes have activated," Maalasi confirmed from his scanner readings. "They sent a massive EMP pulse across the network that jarred, maybe even killed some of the Selves within the collective matrix. We're lucky we shut off some of the nodes or the casualties among the Selves would be much higher. But we need to shut the rest off, or they will continue to strike until no one is left."

Zerun was the first to get up, but both Kuo'ran and Zha stayed unconscious. Seejuk told Zhura and Giirsa to keep breaking the nodes, as he propped both the bodies of Kuo'ran and Zha against the wall. He almost forgot that these were not their real bodies at all, but the temporary shells lent by the White Beast to hold their consciousness. That was why the EMP node attack had badly affected them but not the flesh bound humans.

"Their consciousness must be restored to their original bodies, or they will not survive the next node electrocution attack," the Zerun self warned. "Put their new bodies next to their original bodies. Their flesh bound bodies have not completely recovered from the neurological effects of the Nemesis mind link system, but we must take the risk."

Like mummies, both Kuo'ran's and Zha's real flesh bodies had been covered with a crystalline web by the maintenance arachnids. Seejuk laid their new unconscious crystalline bodies next to their old ones.

"What next?" Seejuk asked.

"The transfer must begin," the Zerun self said. The Fly self hovered over their bodies, and a strange glow emanated from the crystalline bodies.

In her real flesh body, Zha's eyelids flickered. A moan came from Kuo'ran's real body. Seejuk watched with anxiety. "Was that the transfer? Just like that," he asked. "Are they okay?"

"They will still feel ill, but we have repaired enough of the neural systems for them to function normally in time," the Zerun self said.

"I got two more nodes down," Zhura said. "I got three," Giirsa declared.

Aboard the atonement, the tactical officer reported to X'on. "Someone is tampering with our nodes. We are losing every sectoral node to a hacking attack."

"Hacking attack? How is that possible?" X'on was livid in rage. "Scan the Mother planetoid for any ship that landed inside!"

"Scanning sir...confirmed, we got a possible Raider frigate inside the planetoid," said the sensors officer. "It is too deep to be surgically removed with ion beam or missile fire, sir!"

"Too deep? Too deep? Use the Nova cannons and just blow the mother vessel with it!" X'on ordered.

"But sir," the tactical officer objected. "We are under attack by The Tiamat crabships. We need the cannon to repulse the attacks."

X'on grit his teeth in impatience. The officer was right; he can't have all. But he wanted to destroy all. He must destroy all.

Outside, the battle has become more desperate. The swarms of strike craft proved to be inefficient to end the battle decisively and quickly. The battle evolved---or degraded---into an exchange of nova cannons from the dreadnaughts. Indeed the Unbound preferred it that way. Faced with relentless swarms from the White Beast, the Unbound took the shotgun approach. The Annihilators lined up their Nova cannons, and blasted huge holes against the Beast vessel and anthropoid swarms desperately defending the mother ship. The shockwaves from the nova shell explosions indiscriminately destroyed any craft smaller than a destroyer regardless of the side they belonged to. The blasts cleared huge chunks out of the defensive swarms, and the Zerun self felt the immediate loss of thousands of heroic Selves reverberating through the collective matrix.

"Woe, woe..." cried the Fly self, realizing the sacrifice of thousands of its companions.

The cavern shook and crystal shards broke off. Maintenance anthropoids fell off the walls as the mother vessel as a whole shuddered from shockwave after shockwave. But Giirsa and Zhura maintained their concentration on their terminals despite the quakes, minds focused on the war of bits and bytes inside the machines instead of the galactic war around them. Seejuk dragged both the human bodies of Zha and Kuo'ran to a safer place to avoid falling debris.

"Massive vessels coming to our direction," Maalasi warned through the comlinks, eyes transfixed on the Corsair's scanners. "They must be the planet annihilators. Whatever we're doing here, we better get it finished soon."

Nova ball shells headed from the Retribution class dreadnaughts headed to the Unbound fleet. Wave after wave wreaked havoc, crabships, battlespheres and spiderships disintegrating from the spatial tsunamis. The formation of Annihilators--each bigger than whole motherships--powered their rear linear generators. The pulses were then turned around and around in their central spheres, gathering energy and velocity till the nova balls shot out from the maw of the spheres.

The balls rushed to the center of the Nemesis formations. The explosions sent massive brilliant shockwaves--circles extending out radiating from the epicenters like ripples in the surface of the space time fabric. Like tsunamis in the middle of a powerful typhoon, the waves ripped through the formations of ships, blowing them away like houses of sticks and cards against gale force winds. The cries of death of the souls of hundreds flew with the debris of what used to be their ships. When the storms ended the frigates and fighters were literally swept away--much like what the Nemesis had also done to the Unbound--leaving several large dreadnaughts in flames or shattered pieces.

A few of the collectors/gravwells were destroyed, but not enough to stop the supernova process. The two sides were too busy destroying each other to take notice of the devices that will ultimately destroy them both.

The Atonement shook as the spatial shockwaves buffeted even this giant ship. Pieces of it broke off, and the entire length of it was aflame.

X'on had fell off balanced when the ship shook. As he recovered his footing, there was blood streaming down his head. A sore spot in his skull marked where flying debris must have hit him. But he was oblivious to his own personal pain. What hurt he more was to see his flagship, the pride of his fleet, in tatters. There were fire and wreckage all over the decks, full of the dying and the wounded, their bodies staining the walls with the red of their blood. For the first time, he felt his dreams, the dreams of vengeance and justice his people had sought for eons starting to slip away.

He could imagine now the voices of the Tiamat taunted him as they prepare for the total annihilation of his race. He turned his head on the screens, where the officers still bravely manned the control decks and repaired frantically what was broken.

There he saw the Deliverer, the White Beast nova cannon dreadnaught, emerged from the dark clouds. Its great maw energized, a massive white nova ball emerged out of it, heading full speed against a formation of the Unbound. The shockwaves tore at an Annihilator, damaging it severely, while a Spidership and a Battlesphere crumbled against the spatial tsunami.

Part 24

Seejuk tapped slightly Zha's cheek. Slowly her eyes opened. "What happened?" She cried out.

"The nodes got to your Beast form. You're back in your real body now," Seejuk explained. "The whole process is truly incredible."

"Wow," Zha exclaimed. "Being in the Beast form was a magical experience. Your senses were heightened and you can see through more of the spectrum s. My head hurts."

"Take it easy," Seejuk warned. "We need to get the two of you back in the ship." Just then, the moans and groans came from the waking Kuo'ran. Kuo'ran asked the same questions as Zha did, and Seejuk merely repeated the answer.

Zha looked to her side, where her Beast body lay. Nearby lay Kuo'ran's Beast body. Further on, she saw Zerun, and cried out, "Father!"

"It is good to see that you are all right," the Zerun self said. "Do not worry about the Self forms. They remain alive. While your true consciousness has returned to your original bodies, a facsimile of your personalities and memories remain copied inside these bodies, just as I am but a facsimile, a copy of your real father."

Zha and Kuo'ran examined their fingers, arms and legs, noting they still wore the same tightly hugging silvery one piece Nemesis flight suit. The suit left them nearly naked, and they quickly began to feel cold, a sensation they never felt with the Beast bodies. As they shivered, they watched in amazement, but with a little horror, as their own Beast bodies--the Zha and Kuo'ran Selves---stood up. It was like watching a mirror, except the reflection was in 3d physical form and had a cool bluish white skin color. The duplicate Selves were like zombies, but as they stood, they let out a curious smile at Zha and Kuo'ran.

"Does she still look great, hihi!" Kuo'ran let out a rare joke as she pointed in self admiration to her Beast twin.

But the smile in Zha's face was wiped out as she saw her father's Beast clone suddenly grimaced in deep pain. So too did the two Beast twins, as if all the Beast selves were telepathically interlinked to feel the pain of each other.

"EMP attack through the nodes!" warned Maalasi, dutifully manning the scanners aboard the Corsair frigate. "Someone got to kill the nodes soon!"

"Working, working..." said Giirsa, eyes glued to the screen.

"I got another one down now...we will have all the nodes down soon!" proclaimed Zhura.

Zha weakly tried to get up. "You shouldn't exert yourself, Zha," Seejuk warned. "Your physical condition is still very weak. We need to bring you and Kuo'ran back to the ship."

"No, please, let me talk to my father's image," Zha insisted. "Please I need your help."

"All right, all right..." Seejuk said, lifting Zha's body in both arms and carried them to where the Zerun self once stood, now on his knees as his body convulsed in seizures.

"Father!" Zha cried out.

"I am all right my child," the Zerun self said. "Despite the pain the nodes are causing. The damage would have been greater if all the nodes are still activated."

"The Mohilim star is near critical point!" Maalasi warned. "Annihilators are on course to this planetoid! I should have remembered to write my will with all this excitement!"

"We got one more down now! Only one left," Giirsa announced.

"Down! It's down, all nodes are down!" Zhura finally announced.

A tentative expression of relief appeared in Zerun's eyes. The two Beast clones of Zha and Kuo'ran stood and walked over to the Zerun self, where they both helped him to stand.

"Our pains and tribulations are not over yet. With the release of the nodes, our final transmutation can begin," Zerun announced.

"Transmutation?" Seejuk asked.

"The final stage of our evolution," the Fly self said. "It is sad so many Selves have died before they reach this stage." The Fly self flew over to Zerun's shoulder where it perched.

All their bodies began to glow, first the Zerun self, then the Zha and Kuo'ran self. The Fly self settled on top of an unbroken crystal shard, where its body began to glow and grow.

Aboard the burning Atonement, the Sensors officer still faithfully manned his console. "Overlord, we have a sharp spike in Mega-psi readings!"

"Where is it coming from?" X'on ordered.

"It's from the White Beast core vessel, your Holiness. 3 million megapsi! 4 million megapsi! It's sharply escalating!"

"Why?" X'on asked.

"We don't know. The White Beast selves have not communicated with us, and we have lost all contact with the nodes. The nodes had sensors that would have provided us with internal scans of the White Beast core. Now we got 8 million megapsi! 10 million!"

Suddenly dark hooded images appeared on the bridge of the Atonement. Holograms, images of the Forbidden ones of the Unbound, the Wheel of Fate.

"Now look at what you have done, Condemned one," said the voice of the Tiamat. "You have tampered with the greatest force of the Universe---unbridled, accelerated, intelligently guided Evolution."

"The creature that is the pale Plague, the one you call the White Beast, is evolving once more," said another voice. "You have unleashed something greater than all of us! You have unleashed the key to the destruction of both our kinds, both Starfarer and the Unbound."

"I do not understand, Forbidden ones," said X'on.

"You are too consumed with our ancient feud, your people's need for futile revenge against the Unbound and the Boundless," said a voice. "You failed to see what is happening near you, and the ultimate current of the Universe around you."

"We the Unbound, have become a static, dying race. Despite our power, we are no longer capable of the greatest force the Universe has ever known---to evolve to something greater. This is the reason for our ultimate demise," said the voice.

Another voice continued. "It is partly for this reason, we the Unbound came into war with your kind, the Starfarers. The other reason of course, being your atrocities against all lesser species and your nature to consume and destroy every resource in your path like a plague in the Universe and its natural order, your nature and intention to function outside, to go beyond the great Cycle of Life, Creation, Death and Destruction. Yet by going beyond this cycle, you have also condemned yourselves of your proper evolutionary path."

"But the Plague matrix has the internal wisdom to understand the power of this Cycle. It has condensed the Evolutionary Cycle of a thousand star revolutions into a single second. Now it is beyond us and it has become beyond your control and power."

X'on watched the screens as the Annihilators battle the Deliverer. Despite the Deliverer being alone against a score of Annihilators, it demonstrated a prodigious repair rate and a faster recharge rate of its main Nova class cannon. The White Beast continued to pump out a relentless stream of anthropoid fighters that continue to swarm against the Unbound formations.

"20 million megapsi and rising," the sensors officer said. "The Mohilim sun is also increasingly unstable."

"At this moment, the Plague's gravity wells are compressing the star into a super nova. Our Annihilators only destroy life, but not entire stars. This is the power of the Creature you have unleashed, Condemned One," said the voice.

"The generators are too many in orbit, too well defended to be destroyed in time, too hidden among the dark clouds to be found. We must concentrate destroying the Plague core itself. This is why I come before you--for a moment we must combine our resources together to destroy the Core. This is our way to stop the Plague evolution and to stop the destruction of this star."

X'on smiled. "I had never thought that the Unbound, the great Tiamat, the Wheel themselves, would grovel and beg. The White Beast has outsmarted you. It has lured you into a trap you cannot get out of. You know you cannot make your gigantic Annihilators to jump in time against the super nova. You only have the time and energy to save yourselves and what remains of your fleet."

"As for the evolution of the White Beast, it is not my concern, nor my fear, unless it has decided to attack my race. But I sense that it is not of this nature. Its evolution threatens you, the Unbound, not us. You are wrong to say we do not evolve. We, the Starfarers, will learn and evolve at our own rate. That is the power of being bound to the Flesh, of still being able to be born, live and die, to consume food with our mouths, move with our legs, watch the worlds

with our eyes. This is the power that you the Unbound no longer have. We are still a young race. It is you, the Unbound, the Tiamat, that fear the change in the natural order, that finally in the advent of a superior species, that you will finally become---nothing!"

The dark hooded figures are quiet. "You will ultimately regret your actions, Condemned one," a voice said. Then the hooded figures faded into the nothingness.

"Somehow suddenly I don't think I regret it," X'on said to himself. He turned to the bridge and made his announcement.

"We have lost this war, but it is not in vain. The Unbound has lost as well--we have both lost. This is now the time that we must preserve what we have. I am ordering a full retreat. Tactical! Engineering! Power up the jump drives as soon as possible and get us out of here!"

"Right away, your Holiness," said an officer. "The ship is damaged, but we already in the process of repairing our critical systems."

"Hurry as we do not have much time," X'on ordered. "Tactical, give the screens. Track the White Beast and the Annihilators."

The screens appeared again in midair, and it showed the Deliverer in a final struggle against the Annihilators. The superior numbers of the Annihilators were finally overwhelming even the capabilities of the Deliverer. The White Beast super dreadnaught appears to be in flames as shockwaves from the nova cannon blasts continue to rend and ripped the very structure.

Not far away, Zuhai watched the battle aboard his Ikan flagship,, his Harkk'hah Raider formations never budged from their positions.

"Star will go super nova any moment," his sensors officer warned.

"Do we have any fighters still patrol?" Zuhai asked.

"No," said the tactical officer. "All strike ships are docked in the carriers."

"Then jump us out of this cursed system," Zuhai ordered.

At the opposite end of the system, Mahar's formations were ready to jump. "They are on their own now, the Nemesis and the White Beast," Mahar said. "It is over for them."

"I sense that this is far from over," Salim said, standing next to Mahar on the bridge of the carrier flagship. "Just a new beginning of some sorts. It is time for us to go home. I need to see my daughter."

"I gather we have learned enough of the Nemesis," Mahar said. Watching the shockwaves of the multiple nova shell blasts, he was glad his forces were not in the middle of this. He has not seen a battle more destructive than this, not even during the height of the Taidan rebellion or the Beast wars.

"I gather we have enough to fill a few good books," Salim replied.

"Our feud with the Harkk'hah is not over, but we will resolve it in some other less destructive manner," Mahar said. He ordered his formations to begin their tactical retreat and to jump out of the system.

Aboard the Atonement, X'on watched as his smaller vessels began jumping out. Survivors among his fighter formations were quickly docking into the carriers and dreadnaughts, and already a number of his dreadnaughts have begun the jump process. The Atonement has begun to move away from the system. He noticed that the Unbound were no longer attacking Nemesis forces. The Unbound have decided to concentrate against the Beast core vessel in a desperate attempt to stop the star from going nova and preventing the Core's final transmutation, whatever that will be. By ignoring his forces, his fleet would be able to conduct repairs and finally make their escape.

"Mega-psi readings have gone beyond the scale," the sensors officer said. "What is this immense power?"

"What?" X'on asked. He can feel that sheer power emanating from the Beast Core directly with his Starfarer sense. All of them could feel the obvious. Whatever was happening, he didn't want to be there when it happened.

"Get the jump drives online and get us out of here as soon as you can!" X'on ordered.

"Right away, we're still working on the repairs," the engineering officer responded.

Deep in the caverns in the White Beast planetoid core, Seejuk watched the strange serene expression that came over Zerun's face, the Zha and Kuoran Beast clones. He watched the walls and caverns, all lighting up.

:"We got immense energy readings here all over," Maalasi warned. "It's the entire Core Matrix. The entire thing is raising its energy levels. I hope it's not going to explode."

On the farther side of the caverns lay huge honeycomb matrices, in it were hexagonal shaped cells. There was a sense of horror in Seejuk as he watched things moving inside the cells. Slowly arms broke the cell covers, and figures arose from them, figures like the Zerun, Zha and Kuo'ran clones. They were all human shaped, but with the pale bluish white crystalline bodies made of the White Beast matrix flesh. Each had distinct faces.

"What is this, Father?" the real flesh bound Zha asked.

"My flesh bound child," the Zerun self replied. "Each is like me and your clone. Each is a clone of the personalities, the people the Beast once infected and assimilated into its flesh long ago. The many millions it had killed in that great and terrible war."

"This is our atonement, my child, our atonement to you all who are fleshbound. We can never bring back the lives we have taken, never bring them back to their original forms as we have did to you and Kuo'ran. But instead, we will give their personalities a chance to live a new life. It is through the assimilation of their personalities that we have evolved. We learned life and humanity from them. Because of them, the Core matrix learned to value life and individuality. The Collective Selves, which we have become a harmony of individuality and collectivity, is a result of them of all we have learned from the flesh bound humanity. We are a part of them as they are a part of us. It is only fitting that they are the focal point of the final transmutation."

"This is all nice and cool to look at," Maalasi warned, "but we better go quickly as the star will blow soon."

"But there is one thing I do not understand," Seejuk asked. "You are finally evolving to something I don't know yet, and at the same, you are about to destroy yourselves with your supernova. What was the point of evolving when you are about to be destroyed?"

"What we are evolving into cannot be destroyed by the supernova," the Zerun self said.

Seejuk then noticed something in the backs of the clones. Like tiny wings, outgrowths begun to bud from their backs.

"Our transmutation is final," the Zerun self declared.

All of sudden, the buds in Zerun's back blew forth into four giant shimmering wings, like rainbows in a raging fire. The wings grew as they shimmered, a spectrum of colors in four burning wings that stretch with no seeming boundary. As his wings flared, there were two outgrowths on the back of the Zha and Kuo'ran clones too. Then they

too flared and raged, each with four immense shimmering wings, flickering rainbows in lace. They were like wings the Fly self and all the flying anthropod fighters have, wings not of matter but of pure psionic fields and energy that bend the space time fabric.

All the other clones too, sprouted their wings from the buds in the backs. Soon the cavern was full and bright from the light of the wings.

"Beautiful and spectacular," Maalasi commented on the comlinks, "but I got all news for you. The Deliverer vessel has just been destroyed. The Annihilators have concentrated fire on the Core vessel itself. Man, I still got a wife and some kids, and I really appreciate it if we better hurry to get our asses out of here."

Nova balls exploded outside of the Core planetoid. Shockwaves rend the surface, blowing away the hardy anthropods that tend to the surface of the Mother vessel. Massive crystal shards broke from the waves, smashing the ground. Anthropoids blew away helplessly, and some of the arachnids and scorpions smash into the walls of crystal, their bodies cracking as their legs flew with the gale.

Inside the caverns shook as the walls cracked. Zha could see from her father clone's eyes what he was about to do. She stretched her hand, and he took it. "Father..."

"I am not your real father, but I am happy and honored that you called me such," the Zerun self. "I am happy and I know your real father would feel the same way, to have seen you grown to be such a beautiful and brave person. I will always cherish the short time I have known you, my flesh bound child, and I will remember you in my memories and through your clone counterpart. Fare well, my Zha."

Zerun's burning wings of rainbow have spread farther and higher. Then Zha watched his body elevated a few feet from the ground. Zerun's eyes have transfixed into the ceilings and the sky, and he rose then glided effortlessly towards the crevices and canyons that lead to the surface. As he flew, he accelerated then zoomed into the canyons heading upward.

Immediately, the wings of the other clones spread and flared. One after another, each clone rose, wings spreading, raging, flapping, figures rising, then gliding, then rocketing into the canyons and crevices that head to the surface, like a mighty host of angels.

The Zha clone looked at Zha herself with an impish smile. Then she raised her hand and made an OK symbol with her fingers. Her wings flared and raged in a spectrum of colors as they lifted her body and she too zoomed upward to join the great flying multitude.

It was the Kuo'ran clone that finally spoke. She watched the real Kuo'ran's eyes. "You have wanted to be free and to fly, at least a deep part of you. Now I will be that part of you that will live this dream. Remember me as I will

remember you as we will always be one." She waved at Kuo'ran who waved back. Then her wings flared and raged just like the Zha and the Zerun clones', and she lifted and rocketed to join the mighty host.

"Touching, touching, I am going to weep all day..." Maalasi whined from the Corsair ship. "But if you all don't get back soon, I will be leaving you. The Soonani Transport Services is about to depart, calling all passengers RIGHT NOW!"

They all ran back to the Corsair, Seejuk carrying the weak Zha and Giirsa carrying Kuo'ran. "Finally! All of you. Strap your seatbelts all passengers and get ready for a wild ride," shouted Maalasi. "Engines green light! Retros on! Turbos go!"

More spatial tsunamis rocked the dying Core, its walls cracking, the caverns collapsing. Boulders made of broken crystal shards smash against the thick armor of the Corsair frigate but the ship held on course. "I wish this thing could fly faster like a fighter. We might not have enough time to escape the supernova."

Aboard the Atonement, the Sensors officer reported. "We have a massive burst of psionic energy from the core vessel! We got numerous targets heading out."

"On screens!" X'on ordered. The screens were filled with ghostlike figures with immense shimmering rainbow wings that were like raging fires on their backs, flying out in a great multitude from the core vessel. As they flew, collective ripples from each and every wing cutting through the space time fabric created an immense spatial tidal wave that spread before them. The immense tsunami tore at the attacking Tiamat and Sekmet fighters and ships like fragile structures made of sticks, and larger ships crumbled at its wake. The ghostly throng of millions spread far into space.

It was satisfying for X'on to watch the Unbound crumble before his eyes, even if he wasn't the one to do it. The very least he could leave knowing of his contribution to this.

"Jump engines are operational," the engineering officer declared.

"Jump now!" X'on ordered. An immense slipgate appeared before them, and the Atonement was the last of the surviving dreadnaughts to escape in what history will record as the cataclysmic Battle of Mohilim.

Even the word of the imminent supernova explosion got to the Unbound, and surviving ships---the Tiamat Spiderships, Crabships, Sekmet Battlespheres and Tactical Spheroids---formed their own slipgates, and each quickly disappearing before them.

But the Annihilators remained. Too big to escape too soon, they require far too great a power to form a slipgate of suitable size and far too much time to charge that power. Their only hope was the timely destruction of the Core, but even that may be too late. Their fate sealed, they focused their anger at the Beast Core, the mother planetoid.

With the Corsair at top speed, Zha watched from the windows as multiple nova shell explosions rocked the White Beast planetoid with one tidal shockwave after another. She would never thought the time would come she would shed a tear as the spatial tsunamis tore the Beast mother vessel from one pole to the other, until finally the entire besieged planetoid crumbled with a final explosion from the core.

"Supernova explosion is imminent," Maalasi warned from the pilot console. "I don't think we can get into a jump mode in time..."

The aging red Mohilim star gave its last breath, its burning, raging surface collapsing into its heavily gravity compressed core, collapsing into a near brown hole state, before the sheer accumulative energy from the nuclear fusion of larger nuclei--in one sudden moment---surpassed even the immense crushing gravitational forces. Then as suddenly as the star imploded, it swelled, then exploded, rings of nuclear matter raged outward, walls of plasma disintegrating everything in their path. First to go against the irresistible winds of plasma and fusion matter were the orbiting gravity wells and energy collectors that the White Beast had deployed in close orbit around the star, the very ships that through their focused fields, caused the supernova explosion in the first place. The last surviving Unbound and Nemesis capital ships had quickly jumped out of harm's way, but it was too late for the Annihilators. Not even ships of their immense moon sizes could resist the sheer power of the waves and they were quickly reduced to atoms. Only for a moment their giant silhouettes were visible but in a fraction of a second, the very atoms of their composition disintegrated and joined the gale like waves as they roared further outward.

"We're goners! We're goners!" Maalasi whined.

The speed of the Corsair frigate could not escape the incoming waves. The slipgate started to appear but the space-time fabric was so unstable it could not fully form. Suddenly the ship rocked and shocked. Maalasi thought this was it, this was the end. The shock wave caught up with them. But as he looked through the ship's windows, the ship began to move at immense speeds, like some powerful stardrives were powering it. The ship's frame began to shake from the stress of the speed, but like all Raider crafts, the chassis was built super sturdy above all considerations.

Zha and Seejuk looked outside through the port holes and windows of the frigate. Something---or someone had attached themselves to the frigate and was pushing it under immense speeds. There were three figures that had clutched the craft, and Zha knew through her senses who they were. On one end it was the Zerun self, then the Zha clone on the port side and the finally the Kuo'ran clone on the starboard side. As she peeped through, the Zha clone waved back at her. Their psionic wings extended to immense spans, several times the length of the frigate itself. As the supernova shockwave rolled, the angels spread their wing spans further, and accelerated to near light speeds, as they stayed ahead of the wave's crest, going faster and finally breaking relativistic space barriers into hyperspace. A few more angels approached and clutched the Corsair to help the three clones moving the ship. The frigate began to fly as fast as the great host of angels that soared ahead of the supernova wave crest, then broke the relativity barrier into hyperspace. The stars in the background suddenly turned into bands of spectrum; time had a strange sensation of being slow. It was like they were being plunged deep into a dark tunnel, hurtling out of control by forces they cannot control or understand. At the end of the tunnel there was a light, and the ship plunged through it. As suddenly as they plunged through hyperspace, they emerged into normal space.

The ship was smoking, and the seams of its skin may have melted and welded into a solid carapace. The antennae and any protrusion have been torn off. Zha looked around the ports and watched the sensors. The winged clones, the flying Selves, the mighty host of angels, they were all gone, like they never existed. Space was tranquil. It was quiet. There was only the Raider frigate, and the people onboard was the only life they could see for millions of miles. It was like a long dream they have awakened from. At a distance there was a brilliant flash of light, and white rings of burning gases spread quickly out from the epicenter. The outer shell and rings of the supernova ignited the nebula and the black clouds of dark matter. This caused an even greater conflagration, a nuclear fire burning out of control, consuming the clouds of dark matter like a hungry monster.

The Mohilim system, an obscure star system with an aging red star, was a lonely beacon of light surrounded by black nebulas of dark matter, the wastelands of the universe. Now the Mohilim supernova was the spark that ignited a nuclear wildfire that consumed the dark matter, converting it through nuclear reaction into ordinary matter. Where there was darkness once, there was now light. Out of the flames came brilliant nebulas of hydrogen and helium, the primordial matter that would give birth to new stars. From the core of the Mohilim star came heavier elements, the matter that would form planets and worlds, water and rock, and with them the organic compounds that would eventually give life. The nuclear reactions from the shockwaves and the burning dark matter formed more of the heavier elements. Eventually the gaseous matter would settle into a giant nebula, a rich garden of resources where potential baby stars would grow. Millions of years from now, the baby stars would further settle into a star cluster rich in planetary systems, and with each system, planets that could harbor life. It was the beginning of a new life-giving oasis, at the edge of the galactic spiral, at the horizon of the Abyss. Seejuk remembered what the Zerun clone had said. Death begets life. The White Beast was dead, and from it, came new life. That was the final transmutation, the last evolution, the end of one cycle and the beginning of a new one.

Part 25— Epilogue

Her father had a dream one time. Like all things, the one constant was change. Like all things, he said the Raiders had to change.

For thousands of years, the Raiders were nomads. They were pirates. They were mercenaries. They started from a core of liberated slaves, then added with other disenfranchised, dislocated races. But as their population becomes larger, as each House becomes more powerful, their enigmatic, nomadic ways had come to a pass. They settled into territories, marked by outposts and planetoid bases that laid the infrastructure for a more sophisticated society. As their society progressed, so did their technology, and with both, the demands for a greater economy.

That was what her father said. The Houses have become small kingdoms. Eventually, they must seek other means to finance their living beyond piracy, smuggling, organized crime, and mercenary activity. The Res'coom reverted to deep space mining and salvage. The For'lym moved to a lucrative business of merchant escort, toll collecting and territorial licensing. The Harkk'hah went into pilot and systems training, as well as systems development and software development. The great ability of their pilots, navigators, system administrators as well as their ability to create vast informational networks made the Harkk'hah one of the most powerful Houses in the Raider sphere, to rival even the For'lym itself. The great recorders of Raider history, the Flo'karr turned to the entertainment media and software development, but also serve as valuable spies with their vast web of internal connections. The Soo'nan went into engineering, building ships, bases and designing new weapons. Some stayed with their traditional disciplines, the Hu'nan as smugglers, and the Du'ran as assault mercenaries. As guilds and specialties formed, the vaunted Raider society has become predictably increasingly complex.

For the small House of Khor in its own small corner of the Spiral, Zerun said there must be a change. In his earlier days, like many of the Raiders, Zerun Khor was a mercenary chieftain in the employ of the last Taidan emperor. There were things that he had done that he was not proud of, and he never told them to his daughter. When the last emperor fell, Zerun saw the need for a change. He saw what the Flo'karr has built with the Turan planetoid; a center for free commerce; a place of meeting and gather; an oasis of food and refreshment in deep space; a port for the trade, construction, repair and maintenance of ships and goods; a base for toll collecting and licensing over the territory of space it claimed and protected. When the Imperialist loyalties became vassals to the Raiders, the plans were put on hold. But he talked of them to his daughter. A life of war, he said, was not a life he wanted for his daughter. What he had established, what he had gained through the blood of war, must be preserved through the sanctity of peace. She could tell, towards his final days, that he had become weary of war.

He would never live to see his dream though, and the House of Khor was nearly destroyed in the Beast war. Now it was time for her to make his dream come true.

The last expedition was, relatively, a good haul for the Mule. It was the first since they have returned home. They have found a former battlespace, a graveyard full of wrecks, and now the halls and docks of the carriers were just filled with scrap. Two armed merchant ships purchased from the Hu'nan assisted in the salvage collection. With four Assassin class frigates as escort, the Mule and the two merchant ships materialized in Khor territorial space.

Ahead of them was the old makeshift base temporarily leased from the Taiidani. The Somtaaw had been mining an asteroid swarm temporarily passing through the Khor space. Mining these asteroids would have been a deadly job for the antiquated and clumsy Res'coom Gatherer class miners, or even for the traditional Taiidani Harvester class resource collectors. It was a job better suited for the agile and efficient Worker class resource collectors of the Somtaaw kiith of Hiigara, for a lucrative commission. It was better than just letting the asteroids pass through, with no income for both parties. It was a clever deal masterminded by Seejuk Liirhra, her self appointed business manager and executive officer.

In a farther orbit lay the massive gridwork for a new Raider Outpost. The Soonani had objected to building the base so close to Somtaaw operations, sensing it would betray Soonani stealth technology to the Somtaaw. The Somtaaw on the other hand, made the same objection, that Soonani engineers are too close to the Somtaaw mining operations and can easily spy on their prized mining technology. Whatever. She was the paying customer, and they better live with it. Keep her fingers crossed, for the truth was, she had people spying on both.

Coming out from hyperspace, Soo'nani Bludgeon class tugs grappled and moved huge girders to the building site. The Bludgeons were quite a contrast to the Somtaaw Minion class heavy tugs. For one thing, the Bludgeons made the Minions look light and small. If Bludgeons were ever involved in a war, a single tug could ram a heavy cruiser right through. But the Soo'nan prized these expensive powerful tugs to ever see the frontline. The sight of these powerful tugs, were however, a major blow to the egos of the Minion crews in the vicinity towing crystals off the passing asteroid swarm.

All along the construction site, there were corvette sized ships with large manipulative arms. They somewhat resembled Taiidani Tiirshak salvage corvettes, but were in reality, Soo'nan Builder class corvettes. They exhibit extremely good agility as they hover between the girders and the scaffolds, welding things with their finely precise arms. It would not take long for the Soo'nan to finish the site. The Outpost had a modular, section by section construction. The sections themselves were constructed in the Soo'nan shipyards, then the Bludgeons towed them to the build site, where the Builders assemble them.

From the bridge of the Mule, Zha noted the appearance of an extremely large warship. "You didn't tell me that the Marauder was here, Seejuk," she quipped.

"I didn't know either, honest," Seejuk replied. "A Raider dreadnaught prototype in vicinity of a Somtaaw mining operation would give the Somtaaw the fits. But I can think of a couple of logical reasons why it's here. One, they're using the ship as a base for the building operations. The ship has tender equipment. Second, as a defense for the build site, possibly to scare off Somtaaw scouts from getting too close to the Outpost. But again, there can be other reasons which we will find out soon enough. Note that the Somtaaw got gravwells and Hive frigs along a perimeter in their mining area."

Zha laughed. The thought of pairing the Somtaaw and the Soonan within visual sight of each other was hilarious and mischievous.

The Mule circled around the construction site as the merchant ships docked into the makeshift base. Zha felt proud as she inspected the gridwork on her scanners. Finally, the House of Khor has regained its Outpost. It will no longer be an outcast House. An Outpost establishes permanence, presence and prestige.

It was the dream coming true. The joy would have been more complete, if her father ever saw this.

The Mule headed back to the makeshift base, where it would unload its cargo and passengers. For Zha, it was good to be back once again. Down the plank, she saw someone familiar. Of course, she would naturally expect him since the Marauder was here. This time however, he had a woman and some children with him.

"Oh well, Maalasi, it's sure nice to see you here," Zha greeted him.

"They have put me back into production again, and has assigned me to head your building project," Maalasi said. "But excuse my rudeness, I wish to introduce you to my wife and my little ones."

"Your family?"

"Yes," Maalasi replied. "The construction will take a bit of time, but the debugging and sorting out issues will take even longer, along with the training of crews and all sorts of little niggly details I am paid and contracted to handle that you do not need to know about. All part of our aftermarket support. Because of the time needed, I need my family to be near."

"Of course, we do not have any objections with regards to your family's stay," Seejuk said, nudging Zha on the shoulder. "Indeed, we are happy that you brought them along. It would be nice to see some children in the vicinity for a while."

"I do have another detail that my superiors want to deal with you about. It is with regards to the Marauder," Maalasi said with a tinge of reluctance. "Although it was a dreadnaught-heavy cruiser prototype, we never meant it to enter battle. However, coming along with your expedition to the Mohilim system had caused extensive damage to the ship due to the battles needed to support your carrier. They have decided to bill you for the extensive damage and repairs done on the ship."

"WHAT?" Zha shouted. "Are you out of your mind?"

"However, there is a compromise. Our House intends to build a new generation tender ship and given the demand is nonexistent for a Raider battleship," Maalasi explained. "We are willing to sell the Marauder to you at greatly discounted prices."

"WHAT?" Zha shouted. "Look if I end up with your old ship, I use up one slot of the three slots I have that the House Treaty allowed for major capital ships. The Mule is already taking up one slot and I want to reserve my allocation for carriers only."

"That is not a problem," Maalasi replied. "The Marauder has long been classified by the House as a tender ship, not a battleship. Which means it is a support and repair ship, not a warship. You can have the Marauder and still have your two allocation slots left."

"That's quite interesting, Maalasi," Seejuk said. "That throws a new light on things."

"But the money..." Zha interjected.

"We have an excellent schedule of payments we can offer to you," Maalasi said. "You can start paying us next year. However, if you wish to take possession of the Marauder immediately you are welcome to, but I wish to lend the ship to assist in the Outpost construction."

"Zha, considering your Raider rivals have picked up Taidan Qwaar Jets and keeping them in violation of the Treaty, having a Raider dreadnaught can be quite an effective deterrent tool," Seejuk explained.

"You think so?" Zha said. "The Raiders have long preferred to use fast alpha strikes with massed strike craft or frigates from carriers, which is one reason the dreadnaught idea never took off among the Houses. But if the price is good enough, and I think we need to cut down the price even more, I think we can use another defensive ship. Seejuk, Maalasi, meet me in my offices..."

* * *

He had stayed in the Khor base for a while along with Kuo'ran, and they have both wrapped up their studies. They had a wonderful adventure that was more than what they bargained for, and in addition, they would bring back a wealth of data on galactic history and the Outer sector races back to Hiigara. The new Hiigarans are the babies of the great Spiral, a galaxy teeming with ancient races. The Hiigarans are armed only with a vague recollection of their glorious past from ancient myths. Now the work was over.

Now it was time to say good bye.

A Sombaaw Processor ship, escorted by Dervishes and Hive frigates, had come within orbit of the Khor base, and will dock as soon as the Mule unloaded her goods. The Processor ship will take both him and Kuo'ran, along with mined

resources, to a rendezvous with an Explorer class vessel, possibly the Kun-Laan, not far from the Khor sector space. The Explorer class vessel is on a return journey to Hiigara.

For Giirsa, there was a part of him that would never let go. He waited in the corridor for Zhura, the Raider scholar, who had volunteered to help him in his research, who had shown an aura of mystery, a keen intelligence and a striking icy courage in their adventure to the Mohilim star. That and her physical appearance, he felt deep inside him, this was one woman he would miss. He had only one opportunity left.

She was there to meet him, in her robes and tablet, with her long raven hair, deep inquisitive eyes, tight lean figure and pouty, lusty lips. Her eyes were sad with the knowledge that he had to return to Hiigara. They had worked so closely, yet everything had been intellectual, and they had never gathered enough courage to overcome their racial and social barriers. They had together faced the worst of the Unbound and the Nemesis, but not their own personal feelings. As she stared at him and into his eyes, she swallowed a lump in her throat.

"There is something I need to tell you..." Giirsa whispered, his head bending down over hers, his eyes probing her eyes and telegraphing his intentions. Her head did not back off as his lips came closer to hers, and soon the two lips were together, their tongues in an embrace. He embraced her hard, his arms around her back, and her arms behind him.

"Well, well, well, leave you together and see what happens?" There was Kuo'ran, leaning against the wall at the end of the corridor, playing with her fingernails. She was back to her old bitchy self, long robes, twin ponytails and those ugly large spectacles. For a moment a while back, there was hope for this girl, when her hair was all down, wearing that silvery tight one piece suit, without those glasses, she appeared like the beautiful woman she was supposed to be. He guessed that there are things that can evolve, like the White Beast, and there are things that will always stay the same, like Kuo'ran the Academy bitch.

"You know that Gaalel Kiithsa are not supposed to be mixing with unauthorized females of other Kiithid, much less that of an alien race and a former enemy..." Kuo'ran reminded him. "I wonder what your father will say if he learns about this. Or if the rest of Hiigara were to know."

"Are you proposing a blackmail? eh Kuo'ran? I never thought that a Sjet would stoop this low..." Giirsa replied.

"Who sez anything about a blackmail? My dear Giirsa, you have deeply insulted the bloodline of Sjet. I don't really need your money. I just have a loud mouth, you know," Kuo'ran remarked.

"So what does it take to shut your mouth," Giirsa uttered.

"I want equal credit, equal share, equal bylines on all the findings in all your reports and documents. We will make our presentation together in the Academy..." Kuo'ran demanded. "To be fair, I will do so with my reports and documents. This expedition is a fair and equal deal for the two of us."

"Okay I will agree, we have equal credit on everything, but you must help me in one other thing," Giirsa answered.

"And what is that?"

"Help me make an excuse to come back to the Raider sectors," Giirsa said.

Kuo'ran looked at Zhura then back to Giirsa. "I can see what your excuse is," Kuo'ran grinned "Okay, I will help you find an excuse to get back here."

"But Giirsa..." Zhura stared at his eyes.

"We will find a way to see each other again, don't worry," he said.

"I better get on my way," Kuo'ran said. "Got bags to do. Hmm, my glasses are so foggy from the heat. I could not see anything. I didn't see anything like two lovebirds on the corridor. I better get going." She tiptoed quickly out of there.

When all was clear, Giirsa stared deep into Zhura's eyes once again. "Now where were we..."

* * *

They were never seen again. Well, the Tiamat have always been enigmatic. They only appear when they have a sinister purpose. But for the Nemesis, scouts sent to the Mohilim area revealed nothing, not even their Moonships where their population base were supposed to be. Nobody in the known space had ever seen the angels released from the core of the White Beast, other than the five passengers of the Corsair. Kuo'ran Sjet and Giirsa Kaalel would describe them in their books, but these sightings quickly turned to an urban legend. Pilots and passengers of ships cruising the Outer Rim sectors, would, time and time again, report sightings of angels, and some photographs were even taken, but all were dismissed as popular myth.

Angels are among the myths and legends of so many ancient races in the known galaxy, but they remain simply just that. Angels simply could not exist.

In the Khor sector, in an asteroid, a figure bathed in a soft bioluminescence, peered over the rim of a crater, watching the construction of the new Outpost. Besides him was a girl, also a crystalline figure in bioluminescence, observing the activities.

She had done well, the Zerun self thought. He would have been proud. The Zha self was proud too, for what her flesh counterpart had done. With a thought, the Zerun self signaled to the Zha self that they must go. Their rainbow wings of psionic energy extended to their full span, but with cloaking fields, they could not be detected by the Somtaaw Workers mining nearby. With only a thought of effort, the angels disappeared into the cosmos.

Zha felt something and looked out to see through the windows, but there was nothing. There were other matters to attend to. She waved good bye to Giirsa and Kuo'ran as they entered the Processor ship, and Kuo'ran waved back enthusiastically.

Far in the new Great Nebula of Mohilim, the gases have started to condense. Clumps of heavier elements---carbon, iron, silicon, nitrogen, oxygen---have formed into compounds, and they in turn formed into ice, rocks and boulders. There was a pinkish orange glare throughout the space, as many clouds that continued their nuclear fire provide the dominating sole source of light in the new nebula. Somewhere inside, there was a movement, something sucking, drawing things into its maw using its tentacles like a giant protozoan. A crystalline Fly scout searched for new resources, flapping its shimmering wings, with an angel following it. Nearby tentacles of pure psionic energy gather food to the maw of the anemone like resource collector. Once satiated, the giant anemone slowly turned back to its controller, a larger five armed creature shaped like a starfish. When the controller was done, it too, would return back to its mother...

[end]

[credits roll]

[ending music theme]

Taiidan Intelligence Agency Report

To: Taiidan Republican Senate

CLASSIFIED

Status: Declassified under Senate Bill 1047-OBC

Freedom of Information Act

Strategic Assessment of the Turanic Raiders Military Forces and Tactical Resources

III A. Fighters

The basic Raider fighter is a versatile modular design called the Bandit. While it is a design that is considerable dated compared to the latest Republican and Hiigaran fighters, the basic Bandit is a reliable sturdy craft with a large fuel capacity, excellent armor, and a large engine bay that enables powerful engines to be installed. It's basic weakness seems to be a small weapons bay that limits the size and firepower of the armament compared to the latest Triikor Mark II fighters. The Raiders are more technologically conservative than most space faring races, taking a longer time to adopt new designs. But once the new design has earned the trust of its pilots, they are far less likely to relinquish the design for a new one. Because of this character, the basic Bandit is a highly trusted design that is expected to be in service for the Raiders a long time.

The Raiders prefer a modular evolutionary approach to their fighter development and it is no surprise that the Bandit has been the focus of new previously unreported variants. While originally a pirate and mercenary race, recent wars have forced the Raiders to evaluate their simple-minded hide, hit and run tactics to more complex strategies. This in turn forces the development of more specialized ships to back up the required increase tactical depth.

For this a new modified Bandit chassis has been developed, tentatively designated "Bandit-B" for the purposes of this report. Bandit-B is basically the same Bandit chassis fitted with more powerful engines, enhanced electronics and a chin extension to allow larger armaments and weapon ports. This chin extension is the sole exterior visual identification of this new fighter over the standard Bandit. Bandit-B is not really a single new fighter class but the core chassis of a whole family of new specialized fighters as listed below:

Class names used for the ship types below may be changed with actual verification and new reports.

A. Bandit-Scout. Intelligence sources tentatively identify this as the Vagabond class, and this is the Bandit B chassis fitted with scanners. Some reports say that the scanner equipment was a virtual copy of the equipment used in Sontar Recon scouts, which lends credence to the reports that the Raiders captured one of these Recon scouts and duplicated its scanning array.

B. Stealth Bandit. Tentatively called the Demon class, this Bandit B chassis is fitted with cloaking equipment.

C. Mimic Bandit. Tentatively called the Joker class, this is similar to B. but fitted with mimic equipment instead.

D. Bandit Bomber. Sources identify this as the Outlaw class and this may pose as one of the greatest threats yet. Essentially this is the Bandit B equipped with plasma bomb weapons. Due to the exterior similarity of this fighter bomber to other Bandit fighters, it is difficult to single out the Outlaws from other Bandits by interceptors and strike craft defenses. Thus this makes successful interception of this type to be difficult, and yet this bomber, with equal to better firepower to our Kaark attack bombers, represent a significant threat to our capital and non combatant ship assets.

E. Missile Bandit. Tentatively called the Scimitar class, this is the Bandit B loaded with missiles in addition to its basic mass driver armament. It is basically the equivalent of the Sontaaw Acolyte in capability. It may carry cloak or mimic equipment.

Possible Developments. There had been reports that the Raiders have been working on incorporating micro ion beam technology into their Bandits. Such developments are regarded as serious threats to the balance of power in the Outer Rim sectors.

IIIb. Corvettes.

The Raiders use a trusted corvette chassis which we shall designate for the purposes of this report as the B chassis. This chassis is highly modular with plenty of large compartments to fit huge engines and various weapons. It is also well armored and has great range due to its large fuel capacity. Fuel tanks are self sealing and well protected. Several variations have been reported. Of this, the Thief salvage chassis and the well known Brigand missile corvette has been the most commonly sighted and encountered. But there are other variants as well.

A. The Thief Corvette has been a staple of the Raider forces as far as we can remember. But just before the Beast wars, new developments of this staple have been encountered. The first variant is one loaded with mimic technology. This ship, which we will refer to as the Deceptor class, may be responsible to a whole series of unexplained disappearances of ships in the Rim areas.

B. Equally troubling is a new possible variant of the Thief, which we will refer to as the Ghost class, which uses cloaking technology. The ship could approach its target undetected, decloak, then attack its target, damaging it before salvaging.

C. Boarding Corvette. There have been some reports that a variant of the Thief Corvette has extra compartments used for an assault party. This however has been rarely seen in action even during the last Imperial era.

D. A dangerous development is the Buccaneer class, which the B chassis loaded with plasma bomb weapons. We expect to see the Buccaneer, which may have a superior cost factor over the Brigand missile corvette, to be increasingly used along with Brigand formations.

E. Recently sighted, the Boomer class is the B chassis loaded with mine laying equipment.

F. A report insists the existence of a special spy or EWAC's type corvette, possibly known as the Big Eye class. Essentially, this is the same B chassis where the compartments are filled with surveillance electronics.

G. The Vigilante class corvette is a Raider attempt to create a repair corvette of their own using the B chassis.

IIIc. Frigates

The Raiders have a basic frigate hull that can be described as well armored and spacious. This frigate hull, called the F chassis for purposes of this report, has been the foundation for several variants including the famous Dagger and Assassin class Ion Array Frigates that have been the trademark of Raider forces. However, the other variants do not use the famed array panels for obvious reasons.

- A. The Payback class may be an attempt to copy the Kudaark class Assault Frigates. This indicates an attempt to redress the critical problem the Raiders have with their frigates, which is poor strike craft defenses and bad coverage. These problems are actually typical of ion beam frigates.
- B. Missile Frigates. The success of missile weapons demonstrated by the Brigand led to an inspiration to use missile racks with frigate designs. There are two sightings of Missile Frigates that indicate while externally they appear the same, there are actually three kinds of missile frigates.
 - 1.) The Intruder class. This is a pure missile ship, uses mainly the medium B type strike missiles that can be used both against capital ships and slower strike craft like corvettes, or the C type missiles optimized against fighters. It can be equipped with cloaking or mimic equipment. The Intruder appears increasingly popular and may be a standard fixture with Raider forces along with the Assassin.
 - 2.) The Ambusher class. Appearing as an improvement over the Intruder class but at a higher cost, this is fitted with auxilliary turret defense equipment and uses the large long range A type strike missiles optimized against capital ships. Will use the B and C type missiles if stocked.
 - 3.) The Corsair class. This is fitted either with stealth and/or mimic equipment, and uses cruise missile torpedoes against unsuspecting targets. The Corsair may represent a major threat against transport and large capital ship assets given that the design is optimized for convoy attacks.
- C. Boarding frigates. Identified as the Cutlass frigate, this frigate carries an assault boarding party is used to take over large ships. The Cutlass can be considered a major piracy threat.
- D. EWACS and Science frigates. These frigates use extended panels of a different design from the Assassin to extend their monitoring and sensor range. Little is known about these ships, but some have been reported shadowing convoys or examining various stellar phenomena. One suggested class name includes "Seeker".
- E. Repair frigate. Recently it was shown that the Raiders have access to Taiidan repair technology and that a project to create a supply or repair frigate is underway using the F hull.

IIId. Large Capital Ships.

The Raiders are unique among the race for not fielding destroyers, cruisers and dreadnaughts in an active scale. It has been speculated and rumored that Raider guilds have brandished prototypes of destroyers, cruisers and dreadnaughts, but were almost never fielded into active service.

It has been speculated why the Raiders don't use destroyers, cruisers or dreadnaughts. The most apparent reason is that they prefer to use fast alpha strikes using massed strike craft as opposed to large capital ships, or the sheer firepower of their feared ion array frigates. Large ships also carry a high cost, and the Raiders are remarkably a stingy people. But a new reason for the unpopularity of large capital ships other than carriers lies with a remarkable Treaty

made by Raider nobility houses that exclusively limits the numbers of large type capital ships per house. This is used to maintain a balance of power among the different Houses. The outcome of such a treaty was that the House rules tend to prefer filling the slot allocation with carriers rather than destroyers or cruisers. Due to the lack of large fleet vessels, carriers have to be well armed against both large ship and strike craft attack, leading to the hybrid assault carrier class that the Raiders have innovated---the famed Lord class carriers.

It is said that each Lord ship has been subject to numerous modifications that no Lord ship is exactly alike to each other. One ship, the Arak-Na, also known as the Mule, has been fitted with Support Modules, mini ion beam turrets, and ion array panels to augment the power of its main ion cannons. It also is reported to use cloak generators with tethered cables that derive power directly from the ship. This enables the Mule to stay indefinitely cloaked, a factor that enables the ship to shadow the Kadeshi armada during the Crusade wars. Fortunately this enhanced Lord ship is regarded as a non hostile, friendly ship, and sometimes an ally to Republican worlds, and is often allowed port access by Republican bases for maintenance, trade and resupply. However, other Lord ships, with perhaps more hostile intent, are being watched closely if they would incorporate modifications that enhance their threat factor to Republican trade routes.

Perhaps more troubling are reports that Raiders have commandeered large capital ships from their former Imperialist vassals, who apparently have outlived their usefulness to them. The most dangerous of these vessels are Qwaar Jet heavy cruisers, which could greatly increase the firepower of any Raider strike fleet.

IV. Specialty Ships

It has been observed that various Raider houses have their own specialty ships unique to that House. For example, the Res'coom use an antiquated deep space miner, while the Hu'ran have a specialized armored transport used for blockade running and smuggling. One of the most unique vessels, recently sighted is the Bludgeon class heavy tug, used by an engineering guild to build Outposts. The tug has no armament, but it is heavily armored and reinforced. While it is almost never seen in combat, the Somtaaw has demonstrated that ramming tugs can be quite a threat in battle, so the presence of a Bludgeon in a battle situation poses an extreme threat to large capital ships.