

This crest depicts the Gaftnosh, a mythic dragon with eight heads. This mythic creature was long forgotten, but because a certain Empire chose it for their crest, the Gaftnosh became one of the most well known mythic creatures in the history of mankind.

This is because that Empire was the greatest empire in the history of mankind.

The race that built the empire is called the Abh. They also refer to themselves proudly as “The Kin of the Stars”

In any case, I will only discuss the Gaftnosh in this book; for there exist thousands of texts already on the race.

■ from “Mythic Creatures of Earth” by Roberto Lopez

Crest of the Stars I

-- A Princess of the Empire --

Prelude

It was a clear night sky. It seemed to engulf anyone who looked up at it. A satellite, which the planet Martine did not have until just thirty days ago, flew by slowly between the stars. It was as if it looked down upon the inhabitants of the planet, and reigned over them like a master.

The satellite let out a radiance. Perhaps the moon around the Earth looked similar to it. The speckles of lights that surrounded it were probably Abh warships. Those were what actually reigned over the 10 million inhabitants of Martine.

There were numerous speckles of light. Dozens of them. No matter where you looked in the night sky, at least one of them could be seen. Even now, a group of them could be seen rising out from the dark exotic jungles of Martine, like Martine Fireflies.

There was an especially large collection of speckles around the large sphere of light. If you looked carefully, it becomes apparent that the speckles are going into and coming out of the sphere.

Out of the swarms that soared through the sky, too quickly to be a star, leaving a trail of light, there were even those that were close enough to the surface for its shape to be recognized. It seemed like a dream.

Though he should have felt hatred, Jinto was instead fascinated by it. Lin Jinto was eight years old then. He was ten by the standard calendar of Earth that certain fans of the archaic used. Either way, he was very young. Though it was already past a child's bedtime, he looked up at the night sky intently from the rooftop park of the composite buildings.

A long time before Jinto was born, back when mankind only lived upon the system called the Solar System, an Oort cloud survey ship, dispatched by some nation, discovered a peculiar microscopic particle .3 light years from the sun. Its weight was a thousand times that of the proton. Just that was enough to make it quite a peculiar particle. But there was something about it that was even more peculiar. It released roughly 500 megawatts of energy. No one could tell where that energy came from.

There were those that said it was a white hole. There were also theories that it leads to an alternate dimension, subspace, superspace, or just some other universe. But these were just ideas, not even solid enough to be called theories.

This particle was named the Yuanon, and was researched upon. The research wasn't really to try to discover what the particle was, but instead to try to find methods of using it.

Mankind had already discovered nuclear fusion at that time, and had no shortage of energy. But it's a totally different story in space. Mass becomes a problem with any kind of efficient interstellar travel. So if you wish to travel to another star system during your lifetime, you would have to carry hundreds of times more fuel than anything else. That was a law of physics.

Nuclear fusion starships carrying normal fuel were hardly practical. The ram Bussard type starships with ram scoops also betrayed everyone's hopes. Because of the density of interstellar material, its practical application was deemed impossible. Antimatter fuel was not yet in use, and even if it were in use, it wouldn't solve the problem of mass. But if the Yuanon could be used as a power source for a starship, then the issue would be resolved. You would not need any fuel at all.

So a starship with Yuanon propulsion was designed. Its basic shape was a cylinder. A magnetic trap existed within the cylinder, and it reflected the electrons that a Yuanon radiated. Though part of the electromagnetic wave would be absorbed, the excess energy would be projected into space. Electrically neutral particles would just be absorbed between the cylinder and its surrounding construction.

When you maximum acceleration was desired, you would simply close off an end of the cylinder, and force the energy to propel in one direction. When you didn't wish to accelerate, you would simply open both ends of the cylinder and propel energy equally out of both sides. You would simply adjust the degree to which the two ends are opened to adjust your acceleration.

Though there were many technological and economical barriers to its use, the overpopulation problem and the wars that began because of it backed up the research into Yuanon propulsion.

Surveys of nearby star systems by Nuclear Fusion ships had already been completed. It was discovered that there were few star systems with breathable atmospheres in this galaxy. Not only did the planet have to be at a certain distance from a star of certain size, the initial conditions during the formation of the star system, and the composition of the planet itself were also important. All in all, it means that there were few planets where carbon based life forms could live.

But these were trivial problems to the interstellar colonization project. Mankind discovered terraforming technologies through the pressure of the increasing population, and had practically used it on Venus and Mars. They just had to use this technology on other planets as well. There was no need to worry about philosophical problems dealing with possible life forms on the alien planets.

So the first Yuanon propelled starship was constructed, and dubbed “The Pioneer”. The mission of The Pioneer was to ferry the necessary manpower and material to begin the colony. Once a laser propulsion base was constructed, they would be able to ferry people and material without the use of the precious Yuanon propulsion ships.

Mankind settled for any planet even remotely like their home world. They had increased the span of planets habitable to them through the terraforming of Mars-like or Venus-like planets. They would thicken a thin atmosphere so that it was breathable, or they would solidify part of a high-pressure atmosphere to thin it. Atmospheric manipulation, manipulation of the earth, the plantation of an ecosystem, many steps were taken.

With the expansion of territory, new Yuanons were discovered too, and an interstellar colony ship was created each time. Not only were they constructed within the solar system, they were built on the new colonies as well.

The people of the planet Martine traveled on an Earth manufactured interstellar colony ship, the Leif Eriksson. By that period of time, Yuanon was no longer as rare, so it was used for all aspects of colonization, and not just the initial step of constructing the colony. The Leif Eriksson was even used for the survey and selection of the target planet. In other words, boarding the Leif Eriksson was the equivalent of being told, “Go live somewhere else”.

There was a reason they were kicked out; the passenger and crew of the Leif Eriksson had a peculiar vision. They were obsessed with finding a planet that had an atmosphere plentiful in oxygen. They thought that there had to be an exotic ecosystem in place on some world, so after spending generations wandering between worlds, they found a small blue planet orbiting a G-class star.

The star was named “Hyde” after the first captain of the ship, the habitable planet being named after the captain at the time. There was no sentient life on the planet Martine, but it was plentiful in peculiar animals and plants. The colonists from the Leif Eriksson populated the planet, while being careful not to disturb the ecosystem of the world.

Even after colonization was completed, the Leif Eriksson was left in orbit as a monument. On 57th day of the first season of the 172nd year AL (After Landing), the Leif Eriksson suddenly exploded, leaving a brilliant satellite behind. Though it was a satellite, it didn’t have a hard surface, in fact it wasn’t even composed of Gas. It was an immaterial and peculiar spherical space, the transformed Yuanon that resided within the Leif Eriksson. That was what the unnamed moon of Martine was.

A single spaceship appeared from the wreckage. Though that starship ignored all communication, it circled the planet Martine three times, and returned to the light engulfed spherical space, leaving the population of Martine worried.

Though it was suggested that they should examine the spherical object left behind by the mysterious spaceship, the opportunity for investigating it disappeared even before the government could discuss the budget. On the 81st day of the same month of the same year, a large fleet appeared from the sphere.

This time, they requested to communicate with the planet. Through analysis of the messages from 24 days before, they discovered that the language of Martine was based on English, and set their translators to that language. It was not very difficult for the people of Martine to understand the archaic language, so there were no linguistic problems on their encounter.

They called themselves the Abh. That was the name of their race. Though they had blue hair, they looked just like mankind. In fact they all looked young and beautiful. They stated – We may look a little peculiar, but we are the children of Earth as well. We just tweaked our genes slightly.

The Abh supposedly ruled over 1500 inhabited worlds and more than 20,000 semi-inhabited systems. The ruling body, their nation was officially called “The Empire of Mankind by the Abh”, but it was usually shortened to “The Abh Empire”. The planetary government immediately tried to negotiate an alliance, but High Commander of the fleet Abrial, declined their offer.

Unfortunately – High Commander Abrial said – we can’t do that. Our mission isn’t to make allies for the Empire, but to add another world to the territory of Her Majesty, The Empress.

It was a shock even to those who suspected the Abh of being invaders because of their leading a fleet of warships instead of unmanned starships. They didn’t expect a statement this blunt of their

intentions. Wasn't it normal to begin with quiet negotiation first? Even if it quickly turned into threats and extortions.

It was useless to demand to speak with a diplomat instead of a military officer.

I am – The High Commander began – not only a military officer, but also a diplomat. To tell you the truth, I am also the successor to the throne. My will is the will of the Empire. At least in dealing with you people it is. I understand your worries, so I will explain what it is like to become a subject of the Empire. But we cannot negotiate concerning your rights. They will be those of the subjects of the Empire.

Of course an explanation was necessary. Even the common populace, not just the government, was interested in one. So, an image of the High Commander from the Flagship was broadcast. The common populace saw an image of the invaders for the first time then.

Two sharp ears pointed out of long hair that reached down to his waist. The intricate headpiece looked almost like a crown. They looked more like faeries from a fairy tale than invaders from space. The snow-white face was that of a beautiful young man about 25 years in age. The expression on the beautiful face was empty, as if he considered conquering the Hyde system to be quite a boring duty.

“I will begin my explanation of the relation between the Empire and its subject planets.” The Imperial Prince of the Abh Empire said in a plain voice. A translation to archaic English followed his speech in Baronh, and that was corrected into Modern Martine through automatic translators. “First, your system will become property of a noble. Because of the uniqueness of the system, Her Majesty The Empress herself will become your lord for a period. Of course, Her Majesty has quite a few other business, so a Viceroy will be dispatched to the system.

We consider ruling over a planet to be far from elegance, so as long as the inhabitants of the surface are able to take care of themselves, normally neither the Lord nor the Viceroy will give a care as to how you run your planet. Of course, this will be applied in your case as well.

You shall elect someone to represent yourselves. That person will negotiate with the Empire, or your Lord or your Viceroy as a representative of your planet. We don't care what you name that position. President, Leader, CEO, even Emperor is fine. If you wish to fool yourselves into thinking that you are an independent world, you can even call him Ambassador. But that position will be recorded on the official papers of the Empire as “Planetary Representative”.

Of course, you can select who it is freely. Election, war, volunteers, drawing straws, however you wish. But, the approval of the Lord is required for that person to become your Planetary Representative. Usually it's just a ceremony, but he may veto someone who is outwardly against the Empire.

The Lord does not have a right to tax you. In exchange, he has complete control over your planet's trade with other worlds. Profits from that will support his life. He may even invest money on your planet, or another planet within your system. And he may request that you place a security force, independent of your government, to protect his property. But that would be placed in cooperation with your Lord, and you are free to negotiate with him however you wish.

There are only two points that the Empire forces upon your world. First, we forbid the construction of ships capable of interstellar travel. If you're under the rule of the Empire, I'm sure you will discover the means to faster-than-light travel soon. That is not a problem, but please don't consider using it. We will not allow ships to travel to other systems through normal space either. Once again, your Lord monopolizes trade with other worlds, and the Empire will protect this right. If your Lord allows you, you may construct vessels for intra-system travel. But he probably won't let you arm them.

Secondly, we will place an office for recruitment into the Imperial Star Forces. Though we will draft military personnel there for paperwork and security from your population, they will only be for that purpose. Judging from your population, the number should not surpass a hundred. So long as your own government is in place, we will not take any more than that without their approval. However, we will not allow the government to disallow people to volunteer to join the Star Forces.

Though you are currently subjects of the Empire, if you join the Star Forces, or become vassals for your Lord, you may become citizens of the Empire. In that case, you would lose your relation to the Planetary Government, and be placed under the Imperial government.

That is what it means to become a citizen. Your daily life will be greatly affected. But that is due to the availability of goods from other worlds, and not because of the disappearance of a greedy lord. We don't expect loyalty to the Empire or the Empress, so usually people forget that they are citizens of the Empire once they grow accustomed to the new material wealth.

That ends my explanation.

If you have any further questions, my subordinates will answer them in my place. After that you may decide whether to peacefully accept becoming subjects of the Empire, or to have that role forced upon you at the end of a war. I personally think that the ecosystem on this world is precious, but don't think that that fact will deter me from burning the surface to ashes if necessary. Fortunately, your city is very clearly apparent. So we should be able to destroy it with minimal effect to the surroundings.

Though you are free to trouble my subordinates as you wish with endless questions, there is a limit to their patience, and we can't give you an infinite amount of time either. So we will expect a response from you exactly three days from now."

Though they got the impression that becoming a subject of the Empire wasn't as bad as they thought, the people were furious. Though the tone was respectful, the speech was not worded to please the people at all. The politicians and bureaucrats were absolutely furious. The Abh had called the position that they gained through competition and effort "far from elegance"!

And how would they know if he had spoken the truth? The subjects of the Empire may be suffering from exploitation despite what the High Commander of the Abh said. In fact, it's harder to believe in the words of people who suddenly come and try to conquer you.

Of course the representative of the people, and diplomats flooded the Abh with "endless questions" and gained a great deal of information. But they desperately lacked time to analyze that information. It was impossible to determine what the truth was. A group of experienced lawyers joined in the diplomats and bureaucrats in questioning the Abh, but they were unable to find any contradictory information.

There is an anti-space defense grid on Martine. Since they had come from space, they expected possible invasions from space. Though the possibility of alien invaders was very small, rude and violent brothers may arrive from Earth. But because they had to consider the budget, the defenses were hardly adequate.

Though several generations of leaders had passionately argued for it, what actually existed were ten or so anti-space lasers, and twenty or so anti-space torpedoes. They had nothing like a Star Force, and a portion of the defense force was in charge of maintaining it. The launch controls were in an underground control room under the control of a part-time general. The only thing the planetary government had in addition to this was an armed police force for the event of mass riots. They were hardly prepared to face up to the firepower of warships.

But there was still a portion of the council that was for fighting the invaders. That large fleet may be a bluff. Even if we can't beat them in space, we may be able to beat them on the land. It's a matter of honor, we can't surrender without putting a fight, their reasons went on and on.

Of course, the people who thought it unwise fight were just as stubborn, and the debates went on endlessly. Though the debates did start out with debates of philosophy and their thoughts, it degenerated into ad-homonym attacks. But they could not continue it forever; there was a time limit of three days. Though the days in Martine were two hours longer than those of Earth, they had to agree upon a conclusion quickly.

Unfortunately, the council was not used to coming to a conclusion quickly. So they agreed to leave the decision to the chief of the government. The current chief of the Government is Lin Roc. He is Lin Jinto's father. Chief Lin shared his thoughts with few people, and gave out his orders. Though there were ones who disagreed with his decision, he was successful in convincing them to follow his orders.

Chief Lin stood in front of the communications equipment for the Chief with his decision, as the time limit approached.

"So this is where you were." A familiar voice called out from behind. "I was looking for you."

"Oh, yeah." Jinto turned around.

A thin and tall middle-aged man stood there. He is Til Corint, Chief Lin's secretary. He had been Chief Lin's secretary, ever since he became a council member, and had been friends since before Jinto was born. Jinto knew him all his life too. This man raised Jinto as family.

Jinto doesn't know his mother. She was the director of operations at a mine, and died due to an accident before Jinto could even crawl. Rock Lin felt uncomfortable about raising Jinto by himself, and was very busy from politics, so he asked his trusted friend Til Corint, and his wife Lina to raise Jinto. The Corints loved each other, but didn't have a child for some reason, so they gladly accepted Til's request.

Jinto thought he was Til's child until he entered grade school, and even now he felt closer to the secretary rather than his own father. Though the person he loved the most in the world was Lina Corint.

Now, Til's slightly dark and thin face showed a sign of disapproval.

"I'm sorry..." Jinto apologized. He thought he'd get yelled at for going outside on such a dark, and especially dangerous night. "I'll go back to my room."

"That doesn't matter. Come with me" He said strongly as he grabbed Jinto's wrist. Jinto was scared because something seemed the matter with Til.

"Where are we going?"

"The Executive Office."

"The Executive Office?"

Crandon city, the only city and inhabited location on the planet Martine, was made out of three composite buildings. They were called Omni I, Omni II, and Omni III for practicality. Jinto and the Corints all lived in Omni III, and the Executive Office was in Omni I.

"What are we going there for?" Going to the Executive Office meant meeting his father. What could his father want with him during such an emergency? Speaking of emergency, Til Corint must have had better things to do than to pick up an eight-year-old child, at a time like this.

"Just come." Til turned around and walked away."

"Hey wait for me!" Since Til had large strides even for an adult, Jinto had to run to keep up with him. He usually slows down for me; I wonder what's wrong tonight?

"We don't have time, hurry!" The secretary didn't even turn around.

He finally caught up in front of the elevator box. "Are you mad about something? I apologize if you are, so..."

Til didn't respond. He just tapped the wall of the box impatiently with his index and middle fingers until the elevator arrived. The door to the elevator box opened. No one was on it. Jinto had never felt so worried about being alone with Til.

"Nexus Floor" Til said to the computer managing the elevator. When the door closed and the elevator began descending, Jinto couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"Can we win?"

"There's no win or lose. There's not going to be a war." An angry voice replied.

"Then did we surrender?"

Til glared at the little boy. "Yeah, your father decided to surrender. No, that's not it, he sold us."

"Sold? What do you mean sold...?"

"Roc made a deal with them. A dirty deal." Til spit out with fury.

"A deal?"

"Stop repeating me like a parrot!"

"I-I'm sorry." Jinto shied away.

"I was against war too. We couldn't possibly win. But I didn't expect him to make such a deal! Damn that Roc!"

Jinto was sad. He felt pride in the fact that he had two fathers. But, the father who raised him was now cursing at his father by birth. He felt faint. The father who raised him looked at Jinto guiltily. "I'm sorry. It's not your fault."

"What happened? I don't understand at all..."

"I don't blame you." Til rustled the short black hair on his head. "Like I said earlier, Til made a deal. They'll announce exactly what the deal is in less than ten minutes. Once that happens, everyone on Martine will hate him. There will be people who would want to hurt his family because they can't reach him in person. That's why I'm taking you to the Executive Office. The security is tight there."

"I'm going to get lynched by a mob?" Jinto shivered.

"Maybe." Til nodded coldly. "It probably won't go that far. But they'll probably make your life unpleasant. They'll kick you, or throw things at you, or maybe through smoke bombs into your room."

Lina popped in his head when "his room" was mentioned. "Then what about Lina? Lots of people know that I live in Til's house."

"I told her already. Lina's an adult, she can take care of herself."

"Does that mean she's somewhere safe already?" Jinto couldn't believe that Lina would run away herself leaving him behind.

"Yeah" Til read what Jinto was thinking. "She was worried about you. But I told her that I'd look for you."

"Oh." Jinto still felt insecure. There was no guarantee that Til would find him, so wouldn't Lina have looked too? The Lina that Jinto knew would have done so.

The elevator reached the Nexus Floor on the third layer, and the door opened. Both of them stepped out into the floor with a frown, but for different reasons. A great number of elevator tubes that navigated vertically through the composite building lined before them. They were like pillars supporting the roof in an ancient temple. Unmanned Taxi-boxes ran in-between them.

A taxibox detected the elevator door opening, and stopped before them. Til motioned for Jinto to get on. Jinto settled down on his seat, but his feelings would not settle.

“Executive Office. Hurry!” Til ordered the Taxi-box. Then he crossed his arms and sat in silence.

Jinto was concerned as to what the deal was about. It didn’t seem as if he could ask about it, but he gathered up all the courage in his small frame, “What kind of a deal was it? Can you tell me?”

“It’s a secret. I can’t tell the common populace about it until the announcement.”

“Not even me?” He asked nervously.

The secretary sighed. “Oh? Acting like the privileged class already?”

“What do you mean?”

“Turn the Holo on, it’s about to get announced.”

Jinto turned the Hologram on the Taxi-box on as he was told. A holographic man appeared in front of the steering wheel.

“There is no movement amongst the Abh forces yet.” The semi-transparent hologram said. “It seems like there was some negotiation between Chief Lin and the invaders. One source says that we have surrendered to the Empire. I pray from the bottom of my heart that that news is wrong, and that our leader has made the honorable choice. The Executive Office will be making ‘an important announcement’ at 2500 exactly. That’s ninety seconds from now.”

It was a long ninety seconds. It was a ninety second that he prayed would go by quicker, or go on eternally. Jinto stared at the hologram impatiently, and looked at the man next to him occasionally. Til sat immobile as a statue. He didn’t even look at the hologram; he focused on the road ahead of them.

The Taxi-box came out of the composite building, and ran through the Liaison Tubes that ran through the exotic jungles.

It was time.

The hologram had already switched to a different speaker. A handsome speaker appeared, and began speaking.

“I will make the announcement.”

Jinto swallowed hard, and stared straight at the reporter’s mouth.

“Chief Roc Lin of the Hyde System Government, officially surrendered the independence of the Hyde System to The Emperor to be, and High Commander of the enemy fleet His Highness Abrial Nei-Ramsal King of Balke Dusanyu at 2352 today. Starting today, we are a part of ‘The Empire of Mankind by the Abh’.”

Though it was not shown on the Holo, the ruckus of the press that was present could be heard. There was no anger there. It was just disappointment. “Just as I thought...” someone whispered.

It’s not that bad, Jinto thought, and glanced at Til.

“There’s more” Til said.

“But the Chief wishes to leave trade with other worlds in the hands of residents of the Hyde system, so suggested an alternative idea. An idea to make one of the residents of the planet the Lord of the planet.”

“Is that possible!?” A sudden question flew out.

“We are not open for questions yet. Please remain silent.” The speaker said quietly. “But I’ll make an exception. It was possible. In exchange for the codes to nullify the anti-space defense grid, our conquerors agreed to the terms.”

“Then who is the Lord?”

“I said we’re not open for questions yet. At first, we were going to select a Lord through an election. However, nobility is not selected through elections in the Empire. Nobility is an existence unaffected by elections.” The speaker tried to laugh and failed.

Even through the hologram, it was apparent that the atmosphere there was quite dangerous.

“Who is our lord!?” A different voice cried out the same question.

“You all heard the explanation by High Commander Abrial. Even though he is a Lord, he is more like the owner for an interstellar trade corporation. Owners of corporations aren’t elected, and it came so suddenly...”

Jinto understood, but he didn’t want to believe it. “This can’t be true...”

He tried to find respite in Til. But Til kept silent with a stern expression.

On the Holo, the speaker gave up, looked above and said, "Okay. It's as most of you expect, Lin Roc is to become the Lord for our system."

The cry that followed was undoubtedly one of anger.

"Yes. That was the deal." Til said. "Roc gave the invaders our only weapon so that he can become a noble. I had no idea the Abh feared our defense grid so much. We may have given them a good fight."

"But, but..." Jinto tried to protect his father's honor. "He wanted to elect the Lord right? Then..."

"Who knows" Til ground his teeth. "I only heard his idea after the negotiations were over, after the defenses were nullified, and the Lin family became nobles of the Empire. Who knows what he intended at first. He didn't even discuss it with me ahead of time. I suppose a mere secretary didn't need to know. All a secretary can really do is to take his child to a safe place. And I thought he was a friend."

"Oh..." he finally understood the other reason why Til was angry. He felt as if Roc had betrayed him.

"Everyone please calm down!" The speaker cried out desperately on the Holo. "Please think about it rationally. This is what is best for us. Chief Lin will give the greatest consideration to our planet's government. He won't interfere with our government so long as it abides by the laws of the Empire. It's something we can't expect from a noble by birth. We will be able to get the greatest degree of freedom imaginable among the worlds of the Empire."

"Lies!"

"We can't trust you!"

There were questions amongst the outcries of anger. "And, where is Chief Lin, no, the Lord?"

"Yeah! Where is he!?"

"Umm..." The speaker unexpectedly remained silent. "Lin Roc headed towards the flagship of the Abh fleet so that he may go to the Capitol of the Empire for the formal ceremony. He boarded an Abh shuttle in the French plains, he's on their ship by now."

"He ran away!"

"So that's why he delayed the announcement!"

"Will he come back?"

"He will come back, surrounded by Imperial soldiers."

"No. He can't come back even if he wanted to. Do you really think that the Empire will make him a noble that easily? He's been fooled too. Serves him right."

"Everyone!" The speaker desperately tried to get their attention. "Please understand, the Chief's decision was an effort to do what's best for all of the citizens, and it was not just to benefit himself..."

Jinto turned the Hologram off, unable to bear anymore.

"So that's the story." Til said. "You're the successor to the Lord. Oh I'm sorry I shouldn't be speaking to you like this. You are our prince after all. Please forgive me for my impudence Your Majesty. Please do not be angered."

Jinto tried to take it as a joke, but his face was not a joking face.

"That's not fair Til..." Jinto began sobbing. "It's not fair for you to say that."

"I know" Til still stared straight forward, "I'm being unfair to you. But I need time to deal with my emotions. Damn it, I'm doing the best I can to not be angry, but... damn it".

The Taxi-box entered the Nexus floor of Omni I. They were almost at the Elevator to the Executive Office.

"Please tell me one thing..."

"What?" Til turned around.

"When you told Lina to run away..." He didn't want to ask the rest. But he had to ask. "Did you tell her about the deal?"

"... No. It was still a secret to the common populace."

His moment of hesitation gave the lie away.

"Oh..." Jinto heard the world he was familiar with, the world he loved shatter into pieces.

1. Delktu Spaceport

The ruckus hit his ears the instant he walked out of the Launch Elevator. Jinto stood straight and looked around the terminal.

– Was it always like this?

Jinto recalled his memories. It was his second time in the Spaceport. The first time was seven years ago, when he came from the planet Martine, pronounced Martinyu in Baronh. But his memories from the first visit were hazy.

– I should have passed by here tagging behind the stewardess from the passenger ship...

Centered around the Launch Tube to the surface, there were numerous other transportation tubes spread around the circular port. It was a scene that reminded him of the Nexus Floor from the Composite Buildings of his home world. The only difference is that this was an infinitely large banquet hall.

There were many chairs and tables placed around, and people and automatic vending machines ran around between them. Of course there were people seated, and eating food and drinking beverages that they bought from a passing by automatic vending machine. They were all conversing in a large variety of languages.

The announcement broadcast raised its volume trying to compete with the background music.

“The passenger vessel Lengaf Glosso headed for the Estet Dukedom is scheduled to launch at 1730. If you have not finished your boarding procedures yet, please go to the 17th transportation tube immediately...”

The people of Delktu were very good at killing time. Or was this normal among the Empire? A passenger from behind walked by Jinto purposefully. Jinto realized that he was blocking the way, and began walking. His luggage followed him.

The gravity here is maintained such that it is the same as the surface gravity on the planet Delktu. The hundred or so passengers on the Launch tube with him melted into the ruckus, and Jinto became alone. Of course, he was alone within the Launch tube, too. The people of Delktu were all very social, but not one of them tried to converse with him.

A laughing group of three people saw Jinto, and ducked away immediately. Wherever Jinto passed, a nervous tension passed.

– You’d have to be a really strange person to want to converse with a grounder dressed like me.

The pants he wore below were normal, but the cloak he wore! Why did he have to walk around dressed like this – it made no sense. There was no collar to his cloak, and the shoulder part stuck out like an upside down triangle. A belt at his waist tied it, and then it spread all the way down to his feet. It was pure white in color, with thick green at the sleeves and tips.

The Thought Crystal (Datkyul) he had on the Wrist Computer (Kryuno) he had was a green signifying nobility. He also had an elaborate headpiece (Alpha) on. It was a design befitting Jinto’s nobility – it was but Jinto couldn’t tell the difference. The Crest Institute of the Empire guaranteed it, so it was probably fine.

It was a typical Imperial noble’s dress.

Today was the first time Jinto had dressed up as a noble. It didn’t look as bad as he thought it would in the mirror. Though the shoulder looked too wide for the average Abh, but it was probably barely within the acceptable range.

However, it was not commonplace for an Imperial noble to be alone in a public spaceport; and it was clearly evident from his brown hair that Jinto was not an Abh.

“To the passengers of the ‘Salef Nyzel’ Thank you for traveling with us. Welcome to the Volash Earldom! The first Launch Tube shuttle to the surface will be departing in three minutes. If you wish to board the shuttle to planet Gyuksas...” The broadcasts were always repeated, first in the language of Delktu, and then in Baronh.

A group that seemed to have just come from the passenger ship ‘Salef Nyzel’ could be seen, but they didn’t seem to be in a rush to get on the launch tube. They seemed to be starting the first banquet on Delktu on this spaceport in a geo-synchronous orbit around Delktu. They had bought food and drinks from the vending machines and were spreading them out over a table. Passengers about to depart the system were enjoying themselves over drinks as well.

I wonder how many passengers miss their ship because they’re too drunk. Jinto thought. Can’t blame them. Most of them were immigrants, and this would be the only trip through space in their life, they would want to celebrate it.

“Hey Lin-Jinto!”

Jinto thought it was his imagination. Unlike with Martine, in Delktu the last name was said first, so Lin Jinto had to be his name. Jinto looked for the person that the voice belonged to with little expectation. If it wasn't my imagination, then I must have misheard him, or it must have been someone with the same name. But when he saw a young man monopolizing a table for four, an unexpected smile visited his face.

“Ku Doulin!” He shouted his friend's name and half ran to the table. “What are you doing at a place like this!”

“What am I doing? You moron, I'm here to see you off of course.”

“Really? Thanks.”

“Or is the prince too good to be seen off by a pauper?”

Jinto laughed. “I said thanks you idiot. Do you not know what thanks means?”

“Your accent sucks you fake immigrant. You never did get a chance to correct it to the end. But sit, I've been waiting for you forever. Weren't you leaving at 1800? I came too early because I was afraid I'd miss you.”

“You should've told me. I would've met up with you somewhere.” Jinto sat down and looked around with hope.

“Oh” Doulin made a guilty face, “I'm the only one seeing you off. The rest aren't coming.”

“Oh...” He tried to hide his disappointment, but he wasn't very successful.

“I was really worried too. I was afraid you'd ignore me even if I called your name.”

“What are you talking about?” Jinto argued back peacefully. “We played Minteu together! I wouldn't ignore you.”

“There were no other players as bad as you.” Doulin suddenly made a dark face after that joking comment. “Please don't be angry at the others. We were all surprised. We knew you went to an Abh school but we had no idea as to your status...”

“It's okay.” Jinto replied. “I feel bad for not telling you guys about it. But would you have let me join if I told you that I was a noble?”

“No.” Doulin shook his head. “I don't think we would have.”

“See.”

Minteu is one of the most popular sports in Delktu society, and is played between two teams of ten. There were professional Minteu teams, and there were Minteu clubs in schools, cities, even corporations. [Translator's note: imagine baseball] Jinto learned the game in the Minteu club at his school, when he discovered his talent for the game; he joined the Minteu club of his area. There he made many friends including Ku Doulin.

But Jinto had one little secret. He pretended to be a normal immigrant. Three days ago, he confessed the fact that he had to leave Delktu, and that he was an Imperial noble to his friends. The mood after that was as if Jinto had confessed that he was a murderer. They probably would never forget it. Jinto ran out of there before they had a chance to respond.

“No one knows how they should deal with nobles. I mean, we'd never even met gentry let alone nobles.”

“I understand. I don't know how I should act either.”

“That's a problem” Doulin agreed, “But that noble garment looks good on you.”

“Stop saying things you don't mean. This is just,” Jinto flicked the cloak with his finger. “It's like a costume from a historical play.”

“I feel great, not ever day that a poor subject from the surface gets to talk to a noble as equals.” Doulin looked around, “Oh I'm standing out, I'm standing out.”

“Stop it.” Jinto was tired of it. “I know what I look like, I don't look like an Abh.”

Doulin ignored that comment. “Are you going home now?”

“Huh?” Jinto blinked. He then realized that though he told them that he was leaving Delktu, he forgot to tell them where he was going. “No, I'm going to Lakfakalle.”

“The Capitol?”

“Yeah. Studying some more. This time in the Administrative Flyer Training School.”

“What's that?” Doulin asked stunned.

“It's a school that trains secretaries for the army.” Jinto explained. They're called Administrative Flyers. I took an exam to enter in the Star Forces Recruitment Office two months ago, and signed up for the school.”

“You’re going to join the military?” His friend asked with his eyes wide open in surprise.

“Yeah.”

“But you have your territory. Why bother...”

“It’s my duty. You can’t just be born to a noble family to inherit your title. You have to work for the Star Forces as a Flyer for at least 10 years. An exception was made for my father because of his age, but that’s not going to happen for me.”

“So being a noble’s tough in its own way.”

“Yeah, looks like the higher your status the greater your duty in the Empire. I’ve taken a liking to it. It makes a lot more sense than the other way around. But... It’s three years as a trainee for the military, and ten years as a Flyer, a total of thirteen years of military life.”

“But you’re going home right?”

“Someday. After all – it is my territory.” It felt strange to call his home world his territory.

“Not that, I mean now. You hadn’t been back in a long time.” Doulin pulled his shoulders back.

“Yeah.” Jinto hadn’t stepped on the planet Martinyu in seven years. I was no longer even confident if he could speak the language of Martine properly. The only thing that tied Jinto to his home was a monthly letter from his father. According to that Til Corint had become a key leader for the Anti-Imperial movement. Jinto had no idea how his wife, Lina was doing.

“But, I can’t really go home right now.” Jinto shook his head. “That place isn’t really my home world anymore. The story of the founding of the Hyde Earldom isn’t a story of heroics but a criminal record. The people of Martinyu all despise my father and I.”

“I see” Doulin showed sympathy on his face. Though they were descendants of immigrants, the people of Delktu had a deep love of their homes. Being exiled from their home world was what they feared the most. “Do you still want to become a Lord then?”

“Not at all.” He said unexpectedly. “I thought about abandoning my family status numerous times. I thought about just becoming a citizen of Delktu. I couldn’t become a citizen of Martinyu even if I wanted to at this point.

“Why didn’t you do so?”

“My father convinced me. It’s like this...”

What the former Chief of the Hyde System Government – the Current Lin Syuunu Roc The Earl of Hyde Roshu told his son was the following.

The planet Martinyu has a precious resource: an ecosystem that evolved independently of Earth. Though mankind has created various strange creatures, any genetic manipulation that mankind could do is petty in the face of the evolution that nature creates over times. The newly created Earldom of Hyde is a very plentiful nation.

But, the ecosystem can only become wealth when there is trade with other worlds. What would happen if that trade was in the hands of an Imperial noble? They would take away all the good parts. The people would only have the leftovers. Therefore, a member of the Hyde System populace has to become the Lord and manage the trade...

“I can understand that.” Doulin said.

“Yeah kinda. So that’s why I’m still a noble, but I’ve been feeling troubled lately...”

“About?”

“I mean, it’s impossible to remain a citizen of the Hyde System while simultaneously being an Abh noble. I no longer have any rights as a citizen of the Hyde System. It’ll be fine so long as my Dad’s around, he doesn’t have rights as a citizen of Hyde either, but he thinks that he’s working for the benefit of Hyde. I plan on doing the same, but what about after me? My son or daughter will be genetically manipulated, into a blue haired and beautiful Abh. I have to do so. They’ll be Abh culturally too. Can they really become a free citizen of Hyde then?”

“You think too much.” Doulin looked disgusted. “Forget about the people that hate you. It’s basically the family business, so just think about whether you want to continue it or not. Though I would never imagine passing a business of that size to someone else.”

Family business. I see, you can think of it that way. Jinto felt saved. Jinto is an only child, so if he didn’t become the next Earl, the newly born Lin Family would end after one generation without being able to build a history. But so what? Who would grieve over it?

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

“I’m always right.” Doulin suddenly pointed at something with his fingernail. “Look. It’s my first time up at the spaceport. Our planet’s rather beautiful from up here isn’t it?”

Jinto noticed that the planet Delktu was shown on the floor. There was an area exactly matching that of the table showing the cloud covered planetary surface. The Launch tube connecting the surface to the spaceport dwindled into a string, and was absorbed by the white brilliant clouds reflecting the lights of the star Volash.

"Yeah. It is." Jinto was slightly surprised as he realized that he had never seen his true home world of Martinyu from above.

"How long were you here? Around five years was it?"

"Seven years." Jinto raised his face. "The invasion of the Hyde System was on the 945th year of the Imperial Calendar (Luekos).

"Did you come immediately after invasion?"

"Yeah. They threw me into a shuttle when I didn't have a clue what was going on, and I was taken into a passenger ship in orbit. I understand what an animal getting taken to the zoo feels like now."

"But someone accompanied you right?" Doulin bought coffee (Surugu) from a passing vending machine, and handed one to Jinto. "Here it's on me."

"Thanks"

"You're welcome. Man it feels good to give charity to a young noble.

Jinto smiled, "Concerning companions, I had none. At least not from Martinyu."

"What? But that's too much. You were around 10 or so back then right?"

"Yeah. I was ten."

"Who would send a ten year old kid alone to a system dozens of light years away?"

"Yeah. So one of the stewardesses on the passenger ship took care of me. My dad probably asked her to. She brought food to my cabin, and helped me out a lot."

"Wow, that was nice." Doulin looked a little envious, "A luxurious space cruise then."

"Not at all." He wrinkled his face recalling memories of then. "I couldn't talk to her. There weren't any translators that could understand the language of my home world. She tried to talk to me with a translator with ancient English but..."

"Wait, what's ancient English?"

"The language in my home world is derived from ancient English. But I never learned ancient English, and the language of Martinyu is really different from it. I understood nothing."

"Same deal with Baronh then." Just like most inhabitants of Delktu, Doulin doesn't understand any Baronh.

"So that's the story. Besides, I didn't feel like talking. I was in a little shell on the ship. I never left the cabin."

"Was that stewardess an Abh?"

"No, but I think she was a citizen of the Empire. Her hair was black. She was probably from some planet somewhere. But it didn't matter to me back then. She was just one of the invaders."

"Hehe, you may have gotten friendly if it was an Abh."

"Why?"

"Because I hear the Abh are all really good looking. Even a little kid would want to be nicer to a pretty woman."

"You've gotta be kidding." He was a little angry. "Right now I feel bad about what I did to that person. She even came out of the ship and did the paper work for me to enter the school. But I don't even know her name. She probably introduced herself to me, but it was buried within Baronh and ancient English and all sorts of weird languages."

"I see. But who cares? That stewardess is probably really old by now. Grounders age unlike the Abh."

"Is that the only way you can think? I feel grateful towards her as a person..."

"Don't worry about it." Doulin calmed him. "I'm always only concerned about chasing skirts."

"Totally." Jinto agreed completely. "You're the kind of guy who becomes convinced that a random stranger you passed by in a crowd is your soul mate. No matter how trivial the relationship, you become convinced that it's something deeper."

"First of all, it's not any random stranger, she has to be cute. Secondly, I don't think of them as my soul mate, I just want them to become my lover for a night."

"Ha!" Jinto clapped his hands. "And what's your success rate?"

"It's a lot higher than what you think it is."

"Really? I've only seen you with a girl once. Even then, I heard later that she was your sister."

“Then what do you think my success rate is?”

“Zero.”

“See. Even once is infinitely greater than zero.”

“What!?” Jinto backed away from him. “You’re into that stuff?”

“Stop it. I’m saying that I did it with a girl other than my sister.”

“Once?”

“More!” Doulin got angry. “It’s just that I didn’t happen to meet you.”

“Oh really? Then I’ll let you keep believing that’s the case.”

“Okay. Are you unable to face up to reality? You’re going to deny what the truth is? Are you somehow inconvenienced if I’m popular with the ladies?” Doulin suddenly seemed to realize something. “What!? You were into that kind of stuff!?”

“Stop it.” Jinto took it lightly since he knew he was only getting back at him. “I’m completely heterosexual. No matter how starved I am, I will remain that way. I won’t try to find relief in you.”

“I don’t mind.” Doulin returned a strange gaze. “You should have just told me if you liked me. Oh yeah, you still have time. Why don’t we discover our love for each other just this once before our farewell...”

“In this crowd?”

“Other people are not a barrier in the face of love.”

“You’re rather persistent. Could it be you’re actually batting for the other team?”

“No way.” Doulin stopped kidding around. “If you are a complete heterosexual, I’m a fervent member of the radically heterosexuals.”

“I know.” Jinto finished what was left of his coffee, and tossed the cup into the garbage chute at the center of the table.

“Thanks for that.”

“Don’t thank me over just a cup of coffee Mr. Nobility.” Doulin said. He then glanced right quickly and patted Jinto’s hand.

“What?”

“Look at that.”

Jinto looked at what attracted Doulin’s gaze. His eyes met with those of a middle-aged woman sitting at the table next to them. She seemed incredibly interested in the combination of Jinto’s brown hair and noble dress. What would a real Abh noble – Jinto thought – do in a situation like this? Would they shout out “How dare you!”, or would they quietly ignore it? Or would they execute her silently?

But what Jinto did was smile invitingly. The middle-aged woman turned away as if she saw something she wasn’t supposed to. Jinto sighed.

“That lady’s got the hots for you. I’m envious, you old lady killer you. Only if your face was on my head...”

“That’s not it. It was just that a grounder dressed as an Imperial noble is as rare as a dog that can write.”

“But you are pretty good looking. For a grounder that is.”

“I guess.” Jinto agreed humbly.

“Hey, I’ve only seen them in holos, but are Abhs really that beautiful?” Doulin asked.

“I dunno.” Jinto shrugged. “I haven’t met them before either.”

“But you went to an Abh school didn’t you?”

“Huh?” Jinto realized that his friend was confused, “Oh yeah, I never mentioned my school to you guys. Listen, there were no Abh in the Abh Language and Culture school that I went to. It’s just a facility that educated people who wished to become citizens, most of the teachers are former citizens. The founder and the current principal are both backers; in other words, former citizens of the Empire, current subjects of the Volash Earldom. It’s not like the Empire or the Volash Earldom was involved with it. It was a private school run by the Volash Planetary Government’s Educational Board.”

“Oh I see. I totally thought it was run by the Empire.”

“The Abh wouldn’t invest money on a school on a planet.”

“Now that you mention it you’re right.” Doulin cocked his head, “Huh? But then why did you come to Delktu? Why didn’t you just go straight to a school for the Abh? There’s nothing to gain through learning the language of Delktu.”

“There aren’t any primary schools for the Abh. There’s no use in a little kid who doesn’t even understand Baronh entering an institute of higher education unless he’s a genius.”

"Then how do the Abh learn to read and write?"

"Their parents teach them." Jinto regurgitated the information he learned in school. Since Abh society is a society based on nobility, they place importance in family tradition. In order to raise their children as members of their family, the parents have to teach their children from a young age. It's unthinkable to allow your child to spend most of their time with a stranger before their personality had hardened – is this idea.

When the child is young, the Abh focus on teaching their child. A noble with territory hires viceroys; gentry take time off their work, and work towards growing a suitable successor. They had robotic teachers to teach knowledge that the parents may have forgotten, and they have trips for their children to experience life in a group.

"In that case, I received a really twisted education." Jinto said. "Though my dad is the Earl of Hyde, he can't teach me like an Abh at all. He wanted me to learn at least the language and common sense, so he tossed me into the closest school for citizen wannabes he could find."

"It took seven years to learn just that?" Doulin giggled. "I always thought you were smart, but I guess I was wrong."

"I had to learn stuff someone my age would know, and I was desperately trying to learn the language of Delktu for the first six months. I mean, the students there were mostly people of Delktu."

"Of course. Only total bumpkins to come to a place like Volash for schooling."

"Say that after you visit my home world once. Even Delktu's greatest buildings are piddly small compared to Martinyu's composite buildings." Jinto said protecting his home world.

"Even this Launch Tube?" Doulin said so full of confidence that it was annoying.

He hit a weak spot. According to the latest information, because of the anti-Abh feelings, they haven't even begun constructing the launch tube, something that could be found on any inhabited planet in the Empire. In order to board a spaceship, you still had to ride an expensive and dangerous shuttle. Though there didn't seem to be many people interested in space travel.

"This tube's just really big." Was all Jinto could say.

"I suppose." Doulin didn't reply, and pointed to the right again. "Hey, that lady's staring at you again."

"It's because of this hair." Jinto brushed his brown hair. The hair of the Abh is usually bluish. As short a word as bluish is, there were many shades, and they considered anything between green and purple to be blue. But brown hair was impossible.

"It's simple. You should've dyed it."

"I thought about it..."

"Then why not?"

"For one thing, I was scared of making the impression that I was a real Abh. Though I am legally an Abh, my genes are still that of a grounder."

"I see." Doulin leaned on the table, and made a serious face. "Back to the story from earlier. If you're going to quit being a noble, I'll lend you a hand. Since this'll be your last chance."

"It's not my last chance." Jinto contradicted. "I can abandon the title of nobility anytime."

"Why can't you do it now? Because you'll lose your allowance?"

"That's one thing"

"I can help you find a job."

"You're still a student too." Jinto said disgusted.

"Even students have some connections. I know a business owner who sympathizes with bad students. In short, he's my uncle. Besides you're smart, so you might be able to get a scholarship from the government."

"It's okay. Thanks though." Jinto said. "I want to take a look at the world of the Abh. The way the people who invaded and rule over us live."

"That may be good in its own way." Doulin said as if he though Jinto was too curious for his own good.

"Besides..." Jinto continued. "You're the only person who came to see me off."

"That's..." his friend suddenly trailed off.

"All those people who were friendly with me when I was just Lin Jinto, abandoned me once they learned that there was something in-between my first and last names. You were the only one who would forgive me for my status. If I were to live as a subject, I want to live on Delktu, but I still need time for them to cool down."

“I guess it was a good opportunity to learn who your true friends were.” Doulin smiled weakly.

“Yeah I know.” Jinto agreed full of thanks. “When I come back, I may ask you for your help.”

“Sure. Leave it to me.” Doulin bared his chest. “I plan on starting a business once I’m out in the world. I’ll exploit you as a meager worker if you come back. I’ll even use you to advertise that our company uses former Imperial nobles.”

“That’ll be nice.”

“Doulin looked at the giant clock on the roof and said, “Oh look at the time. Are you sure you shouldn’t start boarding? Which ship are you going on?”

“An Imperial warship.”

“Huh?”

“New students into the Trainee program have the privilege of riding an Imperial warship. I thought over it, and I decided that if I’m going to become a Flyer, I might as well experience what it’s like to be on a warship. So I used that privilege.”

“But, a warship is going to dock with this space port?”

“Who knows? They’re supposed to come pick me up at 1800. The reason I’m dressed like this...” Jinto pointed at his cloak. “Is because it’ll be easier to spot me this way. What a primitive idea for a race that has interstellar travel.”

“An Abh soldier is coming her?”

“I don’t know if it’ll be Abh or not, but a soldier from the Star Forces will come here, soon.”

“I see. Then I’d better leave now.”

“Huh, why?” Jinto said in surprise, “You don’t want to see me get taken away?”

“No thanks.” Doulin rose up. “I’d probably well up with tears in feelings of pity for you.”

Jinto stood up too. “Yeah right, you’re the most cold hearted swindle in all of Delktu.”

“You’re too kind, I’m getting embarrassed.” Doulin stuck his hand out. Jinto grabbed that hand with both of his.

“What was your official name again?” Doulin asked.

“Lin Syuunu Rock The Earl to be of Hyde Jinto, I think.”

“It’s your own name, and you’re not sure?” Doulin replied.

“I’m not used to it. It feels like someone else’s name.”

“I see. Then, Lin something Jinto, remember my name Ku Doulin. It’s a lot easier to remember than Lin something Jinto.”

“Yeah. I won’t forget. Same for you, don’t worry about the something, but please don’t forget the name Lin Jinto.”

“Don’t worry Lin Syuunu Roc The Earl to be of Hyde Jinto.” Doulin said showing off his memory. Jinto returned a smile, and released his hand.

“Well then, good luck.”

“You too. Make sure that you build a huge corporation so that I won’t be troubled for a job no matter when I come back.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Doulin replied back. Jinto looked at him until his back disappeared on the other side of the doors to the Launch tube, but he never turned back. The middle-aged lady caught his eye again as he sat back down. She was no longer staring at Jinto. She turned her non-hesitant gaze in the opposite direction.

Jinto turned to look at what she was staring at, and a slight figure entered his vision. It walked towards him spreading a wave of anxiety greater than that of when Jinto arrived.

Black and Red – it was an Imperial Star Force uniform.

2. Flyer Trainee (Benee Rodayal)

The laws of the Empire define what an “Abh” is very clearly. Simply, Royalty, Nobility, and Gentry are all “Abh”. According to this definition, Jinto is without a doubt an Abh since he is the son of an Earl. But the word “Abh” had another meaning: the meaning of the Abh as a race. Though, people who are legally “Abh”, usually genetically manipulate their descendents to become “Abh” so it’s not usually a problem. The unfortunate exception is Jinto.

This was not a small gap to fill. The difference between the Abh and grounders was not one of race or culture, but a biological one. Though they were not of Homo sapiens, it is certain that the Abh are children of Earth. They did not evolve to become who they were; they are thought to have been created.

The fact that they still manipulate genes is proof of that. They manipulate the genes of almost every child born to them. 27000 genes are required to be standardized, and if there are differences in the genetic sequences of their children, they are corrected. Though it is claimed that it is only done to prevent genetic diseases and to unite the Abh as a race genetically, there are different ways of interpreting it.

Something like the way poems and paintings have specific requirements to them – in other words, art is better if it is created with a few criteria. Yes, there is an idea that to the Abh, their children are like an artwork for them to create; that they manipulate their children’s genes out of an artistic desire, rather than necessity.

Though their taste in art is hardly bad. Their concept of beauty is one held common by many worlds, and they hardly ever stray from it. So the Abh were all frustratingly beautiful.

The soldier coming towards him was definitely a masterpiece of Abh genetic art.

Though the soldier wore a simple military headpiece. The dark blue hair was long and flowed behind trailing it. The pale wheat colored face was perfectly egg-shaped. Dark black pupils rested in startlingly beautiful eyes, and those eyes looked straightforward at him. The shoulders drew a beautiful and elegant line. The small nose was well defined. The lips were full but slender.

The deep scarlet belt showed that the soldier was a Flyer.

And as for age...

It was a daunting task to try to judge the age of an Abh from its appearance. This was because they had a unique way of aging. They aged just like their ancestors until the age of fifteen. But their appearance ages only ten more years during the next twenty-five. After that period, they don’t grow any older until their death. The Abh called the first fifteen years “growth” and the next twenty, when their appearance stabilized, “maturation”.

The Abh never aged. But that does not mean that they’re immortal. Artificially created nerves can seriously distort a person’s consciousness, so they make do with the same nerves as those of their ancestors. Once their brain cells all died, even an Abh cannot avoid death.

The Abh, out of their pride, have implanted a genetic sequence that halts their breathing before they lose their mind. Even an Abh can die from age. Though the end of their life comes after 200 to 250 years of life.

All this means that an Abh that looked to be in their mid twenties could be 40 years old, or 200. But in the case of this Flyer, age could be estimated without too much error. The flyer looked to be at the end of the period of growth, perhaps the beginning of the period of maturation, about the same age as Jinto.

The matter of fact was, Jinto was still not sure as to this Flyer’s gender. His instincts told him that the Flyer was female, but he was not confident about it. There were Abh men who were beautiful enough to pass as a woman even at the age of 200. At this age, it was very difficult to tell whether they were a beautiful male or a beautiful female.

The Flyer approached, opening a path with sheer presence, even as Jinto pondered these questions. The Flyer’s walk was elegant. The head hardly moved. She or he walked as if skating on ice.

Jinto took a glance at the rank insignia on the chest of the Star Forces uniform. He had some knowledge about rank insignia. It was an upside down isosceles triangle with slightly curved sides. There was a silver Gaftnosh, the crest of the Imperial family as well as the crest of the Empire, within the silver center of the insignia. The back to the Gaftnosh was pink, signifying that the Flyer was a Flyer of the piloting branch. There were no other stars or lines.

It was the insignia of a Flyer Trainee (Benee Rodayal). Although dressed as a Flyer, he or she wasn’t a Flyer yet, just a trainee. Graduates of the Trainee Program are supposed to train on a ship or base for six months as a Flyer trainee.

Simultaneously, he noticed a slight curvature of the chest around where the insignia was, and Jinto was finally able to take confidence in the fact that the Flyer trainee was a girl.

I know that she's here to pick me up, so I could walk towards her too. Jinto thought, but he couldn't move out of a strange sense of intimidation.

Eventually, the Flyer trainee stopped right in front of him. "Are you His Grace, Lin Syuunu Roc The Successor to the Earl of Hyde Jinto?" Jinto hesitated after hearing his long-winded name said so quickly. All he could do was nod.

Her right hand rose up. Jinto felt threatened, and he backed a step away intuitively. But the index and middle finger of the hand the Flyer trainee raised touched her headpiece. It was an Abh salute.

"I have come for you from the Cruiser (Lesui) Gosroth. You shall come with me." The voice was clearly that of a young girl, but her strong tone was perhaps more suitable for a young boy.

After saluting, the Flyer trainee turned around and began walking away, without making sure that Jinto was following. Jinto felt anger. He didn't have high expectations. Though no prejudices were associated with the word "grunder" in the dictionary, he pieced together from his textbooks that the Abh looked down on them quietly. So he was braced for some disrespect. He was used to getting "special treatment" anyways. But all people are born equal. He didn't want to live a life of being the target of racism and scorn.

This female Flyer trainee was probably upset about having to go pick up a mere grunder that had cheated his way into becoming nobility. No, no one on the cruiser wanted to do it, so they forced the lowest ranked trainee to do it. That has to be it – Jinto thought.

I have to correct her. First impressions are critical with relationships. It was something Jinto had learned from his years on Delktu. Let's begin with the courtesy of introducing yourself.

"Hey you!" Jinto called at the Flyer trainee.

"What?" The girl turned around.

"You know my name right?"

"Are you not His Grace Lin Syuunu Roc The Successor to the Earl of Hyde Jinto?" Those jet-black pupils stare back with bewilderment.

His determination began to shake looking at her face. It didn't seem as if she was looking down upon him or thinking ill of him.

"Yes, I am that Lin shortened Jinto, but I don't know your name. I don't know what you Abhs do, but it's discomfoting to me."

She opened her eyes out in surprise. Was it rude to ask for someone's name in Abh society? Jinto worried. Though he learned about Abh culture, he learned it from a former citizen in school. His education may not have been complete. But her next reaction betrayed all of Jinto's expectations.

The trainee showed a wide smile on her face, and bared his chest. Her dark blue hair fluttered in waves, and the functional crystals (Kos Kisegall) at the tip of her Data links (Kiseg) shook like earrings. "Just call me Lafiel!"

She's just naming herself – Jinto thought in suspicion – she doesn't have to be so excited about it. It was as if she was declaring victory in a war.

"But" Lafiel continued. "I would also like to call you Jinto. Is that alright?"

When he saw the face Lafiel had when she asked so, the doubt within him melted like snow. The expression on her beautiful face was respect, the expression that one has when they're scared to hear a response.

"O-Of course" Jinto nodded passionately. "I'd be grateful if you would do so!"

"Then Jinto" Lafiel said. "Let us go."

"Yeah" He followed Lafiel obediently this time.

"Jinto" said Lafiel. "I would like to ask you something as well."

"What?"

"When I saluted earlier, you backed away. What was that?"

I thought you were going to hit me. That was something he could never say, so Jinto made something up on the spot. "Oh, that's a way of greeting people on my home world. I just did it out of habit."

"I see." Lafiel said trustingly. "How peculiar the greeting of your homeworld is. It seemed as if you were trying to prevent getting punched."

"All cultures seem peculiar until you get used to it." Jinto explained guiltily.

"I see." She said. "I grew up surrounded by Abh, so I am not well aware of other cultures."

"Yeah"

“But Jinto, you are Abh as well, so I believe you should try to become accustomed to the ways of the Kin of the Stars (Karsal Gryulak).”

Jinto groaned silently. “Kin of the Stars” – The Abh call themselves that occasionally. They seem to like that name. But – Jinto thought – Should you really be proud of being related to a gigantic ball of gas that does little more than nuclear fusion? Besides, what’s the star’s take on this relationship? Has anyone bothered to check?

But all he said was,

“Easy to say, but it’s hard to get out of the habits you grew up with.”

“That may be so.”

“It’s going to be tough for me from now on.” Jinto sighed trying to get some sympathy.

Secretly, he felt great. His first encounter with an Abh went far better than he could have hoped. They were calling each other by their first names! With a girl about his own age no less. If there was a man who would not be pleased with that, he should check up on the possibility of a neurological disorder.

The two of them stood side by side in front of the door to the 26th transportation tube (Droplia). Lafiel opened the door by quickly accessing her wrist computer (Kryuno). Though there were enough seats for a hundred people on the one to the surface, there were no seats at all on this one. It was cramped inside, and there was just barely enough room to pack in ten people.

“Hey” Jinto tried to strike up a conversation. “What was that cruiser called?”

“Gosroth”

“Yeah, the Gosroth, which fleet does it belong to?”

“It is part of a training fleet.”

“Then there must be a lot of Flyer trainees like yourself.”

“Do you not have common sense?” Lafiel said critically.

“Of course not, it was all I could do to learn the language. Military stuff was hardly at the top of my priority.”

“Oh yes.” Lafiel’s face faltered slightly. “You shall forgive me.” Was that supposed to be an apology? Jinto asked himself.

The tube stopped after rising two floors. Jinto followed Lafiel and got off.

“Training ships are in the Training fleet.” Lafiel explained as they walked. “But, these are for students in training to board, not for Flyer trainees like myself. Training fleets have one other function. Ships that are getting broken in are assigned to them. Gosroth was just finished three months ago, and the crew is currently practicing flying her.

“What?” Worry struck him suddenly.

“Do not be worried.” Lafiel said without an expression. “It’s just an expression. Other than myself, they are all very experienced, they’re getting used to the ship as well. It will not break apart just because you came on board.”

“I wasn’t worried.” Jinto lied again.

None of the normal passengers could be seen on that level. They were all staff members in uniform. The walls closed in around the tube, and it felt like a cylindrical hallway. Two crewmen stood in attention at a stairs heading outwards. Most crewmen are not Abh. Most crewmen are recruited from grounders.

The crewmen saluted, and said “Flyer Trainee, we have to confirm your wrist computer (Kryuno) as per regulations.”

Lafiel stuck her left hand with the wrist computer out. The crewmen placed a rectangular piece of equipment on the wrist computer (Kryuno) and confirmed the readings. “Everything is fine Trainee. Your wrist computer as well please. Your Grace.”

“Oh, okay.” Jinto stuck his left hand out too.

The crewmen glanced at Jinto’s face while confirming his identity, as if wondering why he was a nobleman despite the fact that they were all grounders.

“Thank you, Your Grace. Please go on now.” The crewmen gave their permission.

“Thank you.” Lafiel said, and motioned for Jinto to follow.

Once the two got on, the hallway began moving. It wasn’t a long distance. Jinto shuddered when he saw “Imperial Star Forces Section” on the wall. He had come from a world where a military was something one read about in the history books. Finally he was going to get involved with that unknown thing, that relic from the past. There was a door at the end of the walkway. The door opened smoothly

when the two approached. The spaceship was right beyond the door. The black colored hull filled Jinto's view.

"This is the cruiser Gosroth?" Jinto asked, quite seriously.

"You can't be serious." Lafiel looked at him critically.

"Remember Lafiel, I know nothing." Jinto said quickly.

"There is a limit to that."

"Oh yeah, the passenger ship I boarded once in the past was a little bigger."

"I don't know what class of ship that was, but it was not "a little" bigger. This is a shuttle from the Gosroth, intended for fifty people to board. It ferries the crew when the ship can't dock, or it's used to ferry people between ships. Though the only passenger today is you."

"What an honor" he suddenly realized something troubling then – who's going to fly it then? Lafiel!?

Jinto had an idea as to what kind of people flew spaceships, and girls his age were not one of them. But he had a feeling that asking her so would not only place their newly formed friendship in danger, but Jinto himself as well.

"Well, which one will you board?" She asked.

"Where? There's only one..."

"The copilot seat is empty. Would you like to sit there, or would you like to sit in the cabin in the back?"

"Do you have a cute stewardess?" Jinto joked.

"We don't have a cute stewardess." Lafiel said seriously, "but we have a beautiful pilot. Well?"

It seems she means herself when she says 'Beautiful Pilot'. I'm glad I didn't ask – Jinto mumbled to himself silently. Lafiel would surely have been insulted if he asked where the pilot was.

"Of course the copilot's seat" Jinto gave up, and entrusted his life in her hands.

3. Daughter of Love (Fryum Neg)

“What does the spatial sense feel like?” Jinto asked Lafiel from the copilot’s seat.

“That’s hard to say.” Lafiel was pulling her data link out and connecting it to the back of her seat.

“But is it true that you can sense everything around the spaceship?”

“Yes. Once I do this, I can feel what the ship feels.” She showed a puzzled color in her jet-black pupils, and said “Is a spatial sense really that interesting?”

“Of course it is” Jinto relaxed. “I’ve never met a person with a spatial sense before.” The spatial sense is a sense distinct to the Abh.

There is a spatial sensory organ on the forehead of an Abh. Their headpiece usually hides it, so to a grounder they hardly ever see pictures of it, let alone the real thing. Of course, Jinto had never seen one either. There are roughly 100 million light emitting particles in the area of the headpiece that connects to the sensory organ. It sends all of the information gathered by the ship’s sensory grid into the navigational lobe of the brain through the spatial sensory organ. This navigational lobe is something else that only the Abh have.

When not connected to a ship, the headpiece acts as a sensor for the person’s immediate surroundings, and detects everything that goes on immediately around the wearer. The headpiece not only identifies a person to his or her family, but is also a tool absolutely necessary to all Abh.

Jinto realized he misunderstood something. When they first met, he thought she was about to leave alone without caring if he followed. But Lafiel could see Jinto clearly through her spatial sense (Froklaj)

“Oh...” Lafiel thought for a moment, “but I can not explain it. I can not imagine what life without the spatial sense is like.”

“I suppose. And are you calculating our flight path?”

“Calculate the flight path?” Lafiel looked surprised. “No, I’m not.”

“Then you’re just reading the values.” It seems like he overestimated the navigational lobe of the Abh, he was slightly disappointed.

“What values?”

“Then how are you going to set our flight path?”

“I just do. It’s like intuition.”

“Intuition!?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “When you throw an object, you aim it with intuition. We calculate it subconsciously, and intuit the best flight path and thrust. What’s so strange about it?”

“It’s really strange. Don’t you ever miss the flight path?”

“It’s something children do occasionally. Don’t worry.”

“Oh...” He was worried.

Jinto looked around the cockpit. I thought that the cockpit of a spaceship would have a lot more stuff than this.

The cockpit was spherical, with just the ground level. There were just two displays in front of the two chairs, and it had neither the controls nor displays that Jinto would have expected. Just smooth milky white walls. There was the standard for the cruiser Gosroth depicting a winged dragon behind them. It was the same thing Lafiel had on the upper part of the left arm of her uniform.

The controls are on the seat. There was a control panel on the right hand bar of the seats, and there were buttons on that. But it was impossible that those controlled the ship.

– So this is the control glove (Guhek).

Jinto looked at a glove like object on the left arm stand of the seats. It was long enough to come up to a person’s elbow, and there was a small window open revealing the controls of the wrist computer. Though it was mostly a dark composite cloth, there were many metallic parts. The parts surrounding the finger were almost completely covered by metallic components.

The Abh used this, and voice commands to fly their ships. The control panel on the right was merely for support. Though he did learn of the control glove (Guhek) at the Abh Language and Culture school on Delktu, Jinto still could not believe that it was possible to fly a ship using just your fingers.

“Umm” Jinto asked Lafiel as she put the control glove on. Don’t you ever try to pick something up with your left hand when you have that on?”

“I forget about my left hand while flying this ship.” Lafiel responded.

“But it’s not practical for piloting a ship, just moving your fingers.”

“Why?” Lafiel questioned. “Is there a better way?”

“I think there is. The intra-system vessels that us grounders use are...”

Jinto almost said “normal”, but decided that he should choose his words more carefully. “...built with a control system that was based upon a different sets of ideas.”

“But this is better.” The Flyer trainee pointed at her left hand.

“But” Jinto continued. “It has to be hard learning how to move your hand. Don’t you ever forget how to do it?”

“Do you think about which muscles to move when you walk?”

“No”

“You usually don’t even think about the fact that you’re walking do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“See? It’s the same with flying a ship. I just think about what I want to do with the ship, then my fingers move on their own. It becomes harder to fly the ship if I think about it. That’s the way it is.”

“I see, you must have received a lot of training.” Jinto was impressed.

“I have been doing so since I was a child. It is hardly training.”

“I see.” Jinto was filled with a sense of inferiority, and simultaneously felt very happy about his correct judgment in deciding to not ask her if there was another pilot.

“Shall we depart?” Lafiel asked.

“Yeah go ahead, whenever you’re ready.”

The screen turned bright, and the curvy Baronh writing began to flow across the screen.

“Can you read it this quickly?” Jinto said while staring at his screen. The green letters that flew across the screen at incredible speed seemed to be flickering to Jinto, and he could make out none of it. It wasn’t just out of not being used to it either.

“I can’t” Lafiel said quickly taking her eyes off the screen.

“Then” Jinto pointed at the screen, “what is this for?”

“The thought crystal is checking up on the ship. If anything comes up, it’ll be displayed in red.”

“Then there’s no need for displaying it on the screen.”

“Some people think so” Lafiel agreed. “But, there is no harm in displaying it. Besides, this fits the role better.”

“You’re right.” Eventually the writings on the screen disappeared, leaving a “No Problems” blinking.

“See, now it is complete.”

“It’s simple.”

“Yes, the thanks to the thought crystal doing all of the work for us.”

“But machines may make mistakes...”

“People can make mistakes as well.” Lafiel said trying to comfort him.

“What a comforting declaration.”

“You worry too much. We are just flying over there. Our machines will not break down so easily.”

“I guess so.” Jinto said carefully. “But how far away is over there?”

“That is a meaningless question. They are moving as well. It is roughly 5 Sedagh.”

Though the Abh uses the CGS units from Earth, they seem to feel a need to translate it into their own language. Five sedagh is roughly the equivalent of 5000 kilometers. From here to there – in other words from the spaceport to the cruiser was at least 5000 kilometers of vacuum. To the Kin of the Stars it may not even be a walk, but Jinto thought that it would do no harm to be just a little more distrustful of the universe.

When the trainee moved her left and slightly, the “No Problems” sign disappeared, and the face of a spaceport worker appeared on the screen.

“Operator” Lafiel called out

“This is the primary operating tower for the planet Delktu spaceport.” The worker replied.

“This is a shuttle from the cruiser Gosroth, the military ID number of its pilot is 01-00-0937684. Requesting depressurization in the second military airlock.”

“Understood, Gosroth shuttle. Depressurizing immediately.”

Though it was getting depressurized, it was impossible to tell what was going on outside from the cockpit.

“Can we see what’s going on outside?” Jinto asked. He wanted her to display a view of the outside on the screen. It was his second time on a small ship, but he remembered very little from his last trip, so it might as well have been his first time. Though he was worried, he was also very curious.

“You wish to see it?”

“Yeah. I don’t have a spatial sense.”

“I see” for a second he saw pity on Lafiel’s face. “Okay.”

The wall, with the exception of the screen and standard became transparent. Of course it wasn’t actually transparent, it processed the view of the outside and displayed it holographically. Jinto was let down with the depressurization. This area was kept meticulously clean, and he could not even see the dust rise up. He couldn’t see any sign of the airlock depressurizing at all.

After a minute, the operator signaled that the airlock was depressurized.

“Requesting that the gate to the second military airlock be opened.” Lafiel requested.

“Understood, Gosroth shuttle.”

This time it was quite a view. The wall slid to the sides, revealing a sea of stars.

“Complete opening of the gates confirmed. Requesting permission to embark.”

“Permission granted for embarkation. Gosroth shuttle, would you like an electromagnetic launch assist?”

“No thank you. We will embark with low temperature thrust.” She replied, and then teased Jinto. “You would probably go dizzy if we made an electromagnetic launch.”

I probably would, Jinto agreed.

“Understood. Gosroth shuttle, we wish you a safe journey back. Planet Delktu space port primary operations tower out.”

“My thanks. Gosroth shuttle out.”

Once the operator disappeared from the screen, Lafiel made her left hand dance in the air. There was a brief tremor, and the shuttle rose. Jinto was afraid that it might hit the ceiling. The fact that Lafiel had her eyes closed and was focusing on her spatial sense was also chilling. Of course it was all unneeded. The shuttle was moving forward while moving upwards, and escaped into the sea of stars moments with a precise timing that let it just miss the ceiling.

He felt his body float up. They had left the perimeter of the artificial gravity generated on the orbital facility. But he didn’t float up thanks to his seatbelt. [Translator: Always wear your seatbelt. Does the body good.] His seat made a quarter turn. He could see the orbital facility horizontally beneath his feet. The surface of the planet Delktu spread before him.

“You’re incredible.” Jinto was impressed from the bottom of his heart.

“About what?”

“You seem very used to this.”

“You must be kidding.” Lafiel pouted. “For the Abh, even a child can pilot a ship like this.”

“I suppose so.” His feeling of inferiority returned. “But you’re really young, though it is rude to ask a lady her age.”

“Are you trying to say that I am like a child?” the young Abh lady returned a stern look.

“Not at all!” Really, is there anything in this universe easier to do than to upset this lady? Jinto sighed in his mind, and shook his hand. “Umm, what I mean is, it’s hard to judge how old you are, so I wanted to make sure...”

“I see.” The young trainee was no longer distempered, “Your estimate is correct. I turned sixteen this year. I am quite young.”

So she’s a year younger than me.

“But what is rude?” Lafiel said.

“Huh?”

“You said it was rude to ask a lady her age. Why is it rude to ask a lady her age?”

Jinto blinked. Why is it rude?

“It’s probably because women want to be seen as being young. At least the women on Delktu and Martinyu did.”

“I see. Why is it so?”

“Who knows, I don’t exactly know all that much about a woman’s mind. Try asking a grounder woman.” Jinto saw that Lafiel was still dissatisfied with his response, so he tried to change the topic. “Are Flyer trainees all as young as you?”

“Not at all.” Lafiel answered proudly. She gave an impression of being extremely young. “The exam to join the trainee program is not very difficult. If you can’t pass by the time you’re 18, you should give up trying to live a normal life in society. But not many people can register to study there at the age of thirteen. I have a right to be proud don’t I?”

“Yeah” Jinto felt a childish need to compete. “I have something to brag about too. I managed to enter the Administrative Trainee program at the age of 17 after learning two foreign languages.”

“Yes, that’s incredible.” Lafiel was honestly impressed.

Suddenly a loud beep sounded.

“What is it!?” It sounded like an alarm to Jinto’s ears.

“We entered a region where we are free to accelerate” Lafiel moved the control glove unfazed.

“Oh” Jinto tried to hide his embarrassment. “How long will it take?”

“This ship doesn’t have any gravity control, so it depends on how much acceleration you can handle.”

“I grew up on a planet.” Jinto bragged. Supposedly the Abh’s standard gravity is half that of Delktu. “If you can bear it, then I can bear it.”

“Okay. Then it won’t take seven minutes.”

“Wow, that’s pretty quick.”

“It’s right there.”

“I see” He should probably get used to measurements in space soon.

The seat elongated so that they could lay back. The direction of acceleration changed frequently due to attitude control thrusters, and he felt dizzy. But it was only for a short period of time.

“Let us go.” The instant Lafiel said so, Jinto was pushed back into the chair.

“Wh-What is this!?” His chest felt as if it was about to collapse from the unexpected acceleration.

“It’s the acceleration” Lafiel said plainly. “You are not going to say that you do not know what acceleration is are you?”

“I know! I know. But I didn’t think it would be this fast...” It was hard to speak. He could feel his arteries collapsing and his limbs turning numb. He could probably bear it for a minute, but seven is too much. “A-Are you okay!?”

“Yes. Our ancestors did not have any gravity control, so they were made to survive in high acceleration and in zero gravity. I have their genes for it as well. The bone structure and cardiovascular systems is key. It is like this...” He didn’t feel like listening to a detailed explanation. “Please, Lafiel, could you turn the acceleration down a bit!”

“It will take more time.”

“Is there a problem with that!?”

“Not really. There is plenty of extra time in the ship’s schedule. It has to be that way during the breaking in voyage. Unexpected things may happen.”

“That’s great. So please...”

“I suppose so.”

The acceleration stopped.

“We have to change course. Will you be okay if I tone down the acceleration a touch?”

Jinto shook his head. “No, a little more please, so that it’s easier to bear.”

“Okay.” Lafiel’s fingers danced in the air. The acceleration began again. It was still harsher than the gravity on Martine, but it wasn’t unbearable. He could probably walk around in it.

“How’s this?”

“It’s good.”

“But it will take some time.”

“That’s too bad.” Jinto replied. “But I’m not in a hurry. How much acceleration is this?”

“Four standard gravities (Demonn) it’s the standard acceleration for when we have grounders aboard. If it’s a longer voyage, we drop it down to two standard gravities, that’s usually the gravity on most planets.”

“You should have warned me, that it would be harsh for grounders.” Jinto said spitefully.

“I thought you were stronger than that.” Lafiel said innocently.

“Thanks for overestimating my abilities.”

“Besides, you are not a grounder, you are an Abh.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t feel that way. I’m completely a grounder genetically. You know that.” His genes were not going to change even if he was an Abh by law. To put it simply, a fish isn’t going to fly just because you deem it a bird by law.

“Genes set aside.” Lafiel said. “You should think of yourself as an Abh. An Imperial noble should not panic over rapid acceleration.”

"I will take your advice to heart." Jinto replied dejectedly. The feeling that he was not suited to become an Imperial noble just turned into a firm belief. Perhaps he should ask to turn back immediately and ask Doulin for help in finding a job.

But he couldn't ask to turn back.

Eventually a few seconds of zero gravity and attitude control happened, and the shuttle began to decelerate. The planet Delktu floated above him like a sphere of blue and white. Jinto felt as if he was falling.

"Hey" Jinto asked. "What is your status?"

"Why do you ask so?" Lafiel said as if censuring him.

"Umm..." Jinto panicked. It seemed as if she thought he was trying to show off his status as a noble. "I was just wondering why you joined the Star Forces at your age. I thought maybe you wanted to get your duty done with as quickly as possible just like me. Should I not have asked?"

"That's okay. But I'd rather not answer. We are not allowed to show our personal status on our uniform until we become a Head Flyer."

"You mean status doesn't matter in the Star Forces?"

"Yes. This is all that matters in the military." Lafiel pointed at the rank insignia on her right elbow.

"Okay. But, I just wanted to know why you joined the force. Whether it was duty or whether you wanted to."

"It's partially duty." Lafiel admitted.

"I thought so." Gentry are not forced to join the military. To then, joining the training program is not a duty but a privilege. Jinto was now sure that Lafiel was a daughter of nobility. "I thought that might be the case."

"What?"

"Oh, umm..." Jinto shut his mouth. He had guessed that she was born to a high status, but he decided that he should stay quiet about how his reason for guessing so was his first impression – that she seemed arrogant even when quiet, and even more arrogant when she wasn't.

"But it was not just duty." Thankfully Lafiel didn't follow up on it.

"Then, why?"

"I wanted to become self reliant as soon as possible."

"Oh, I see." Once you became a Flyer, you would be seen as an adult regardless of age. "But did you really have to be in such a hurry? It can be fun being a child."

Lafiel thought for a moment, but then suddenly said "Do you not have a birth secret?" a puzzling question.

"Birth secret?" Jinto asked bewildered. "No, I don't. Though my mother died when I was young..."

"Mother? Were you not the son of your father? Is His Grace the Earl of Hyde not your father?"

"Yes, he's my father. Oh, I see..." Jinto remembered what Abh families were like. The Abh do not marry. Those who love each other do live together in Abh society. Sometimes it does not last long enough to be called marriage, and sometimes they are together "until death do us part". But that was not a law, but one form of life.

It burned passionately, and died out without leaving a trace – that seemed to be the stereotypical Abh love. To the Abh who are in an eternal state of youth a marriage, based upon the idea that they would grow old together, was something hard to accept. So it was normal that they only have one parent, and they have no idea of having two. Of course, sometimes the parent is male and sometimes female. This is where phrases like "A Father's Daughter" (Fryum Lolan) or "Mother's Son" (Fryuk Salan) gain their meaning. They respectively mean "Woman who has a male parent" and "Man who has a female parent".

"You've heard about the concept of marriage right?" Jinto said.

"Yes, I have. Oh yes, I had forgotten. You grew up on a planet."

"Yes. I was born to a marriage. While I'm my father's son, I'm my mother's son as well."

"I see." Lafiel looked puzzled. "What is it like to have two parents? Were you sad when your mother died?"

"Well" Jinto looked into his memories even while being surprised at the direct question. What he pictured was not the holographic pictures he had of his mother, but the face of Lina Corint. "I was sad."

"Forgive me. I asked something of no consequence." Lafiel looked away.

"No, it's okay. I was really small, so I don't remember it very clearly."

“But...” Lafiel said, “then you can’t have a birth secret can you?”

“Huh? Why?”

“If your genetic donors are both in your household, then you cannot have a birth secret.”

“That’s not always the case.” Jinto pondered as to how he should correct Lafiel’s misconception.

“I don’t know what the case is on other worlds, but sometimes you become a parent without wishing so on Martine and Delktu. I hear there were cases when you couldn’t become a parent even if you wanted to in the past. There are birth secrets in those cases. Though there are other factors involved.”

“What do you mean?” Lafiel asked puzzled.

“Why don’t you look into it on your own some day. It’s really complicated. What about birth secrets again? How does it relate to your joining the force?”

“I had a birth secret. I didn’t know whether I was a daughter of love (Fryum Neg). That is worrisome is it not?”

“Daughter of love...?” Was it a religious concept? Though the Abhs supposedly did not have a religion. “What is it?”

“You do not know?” Lafiel seemed surprised.

“The education I received seemed to be lacking...” Jinto explained.

Though it was an Abh Language and Culture school, its classes were centered on the language. There were only a few brief lessons as to how an Imperial citizen should act, etiquette basically. There was no explanation on real Abh culture.

Though he asked the teachers, and looked in books, he did not learn of any real details. There were information on government structures and laws from official documents, but information on Abh daily life was very spastic. Jinto had no idea, which sources to believe, and which to disbelieve.

It was half the Abh’s fault. Though they did not try to hide their own culture, they were hardly passionate about explaining it to others. Since the teachers were only those who worked for an Abh for a time, they only took a glance at Abh life from the outside. All the books he could find were written by former citizens too. There was even one book by someone who had never left Delktu, which was irresponsibly filled with misinformation. The Abh hardly ever told grounders about themselves.

“...so, I’m not even clear on what your family structures are like. It’s well known that the Abh don’t marry, but I don’t know how you make children in that case.” Jinto looked at Lafiel’s face cautiously, afraid that he had touched upon a sensitive topic. But Lafiel didn’t seem to mind.

“I see. You know nothing of our birth then, Jinto?”

“Yes, umm...” Jinto searched for the right words red faced. Oh no, isn’t this basically the ‘where do babies come from?’ question? And I thought I had gone past that a long time ago too. And to have to ask a girl even younger than I am. “I know that you don’t use biological insemination.”

“Sometimes we do.”

“Really? What about the genetic quality check?”

“The fertilized ovum is removed. Usually it is moved to an artificial womb, but sometimes a female raises it in her own womb for the experience.”

“I see” He learned one secret of Abh society. There was a strong rumor on Delktu that Abh women didn’t have wombs.

“But it is normal to fertilize the egg in an artificial womb.”

“Oh” Jinto relaxed his shoulders. “Now do you understand why I can’t pretend that I’m an Abh? Your entire race is like a birth secret, I tried my best to investigate, but most of the information was crazy. Stuff like making your child a clone of yourself, or to use genetic information from a total stranger, or to take genetic information from someone of the same gender, or to take it from a relative. I wonder how they come up with that stuff...”

“We do it all.” Lafiel said.

“Wha?” Jinto’s jaw dropped.

“Sometimes people make a clone of themselves, or a slightly altered clone, and sometimes people use a stranger’s genetic information. Everyone’s free to do what they wish.”

“Really?” Jinto was confused. “But don’t you value your family line? That sounds like you completely ignore bloodlines.”

“What’s important in a family are the traditions, not the genetic material.”

“But...”

“You make your child’s genes and raise them. That’s how you become a parent.”

"Oh, I see." Jinto agreed after pondering the question for a few moments. It was not hard to understand that the Abh, who uses genetic manipulation on a daily basis, places little value on bloodlines.

"But it is normal to use mix your genetic material with those of a loved ones to create your child."

"That's comforting to know." Jinto said in comfort.

"Of course sometimes that loved one may be of the same gender, or a relative, or numerous in number. I hear that a grounder tends to get disturbed when they learn so." Lafiel looked at Jinto's face curiously.

"That's true." Jinto confessed. "I'm disturbed right now."

"How strange, we are not the only ones with the capability for genetic engineering."

"I don't know what the case is on other worlds," Jinto said "but manipulating a person's genes is not considered to be something good on the worlds that I know."

"I hear that is the case." Lafiel glared at Jinto for a second. "Just so that you know, I'm not calm either. Now that I think about it, this is not a conversation to have when you're alone in a room with someone else."

"Sorry." So Abhs feel the same way too, Jinto tried to regain his cool.

"But in any case, 'I wish for your genetic information' is one of the most serious confessions of love there is." She said rather dreamily.

"I see." It was something close to a proposal to the marriageless Abh.

"Children born from this confession of love is..."

"I know!" Jinto had a revelation. "A daughter of love right?"

"Yes. Son of love (Fryuk Neg) if it's a boy."

The short period of tense but interesting conversation seemed to be over. Jinto relaxed.

"But why don't you ask your parents then?" Jinto panicked after asked. "Could it be your parent..."

"Hmm?" Those jet-black pupils looked his way. "Oh, my father is alive. He'll probably be kicking for another two centuries. Is that what you were worried about?"

"Yeah." He worried too much. "Then why don't you ask him?"

"Do you think the thought had never occurred to me?"

"No..."

"My father would not tell me." Lafiel said. "He has this stupid idea that having a birth secret better develops a person's personality."

"You couldn't look it up?"

"You can look up your genetic information freely once you become an adult. But you need your parent's permission until then."

"Ah." He finally understood it all. She wished to become an adult as quickly as possible to learn where her genes came from.

"I'm suspicious of the reason he kept it a secret. I sometimes wonder if he created the birth secret just so that he could tease me."

"Why?"

"How can I forget, when I was a child I constantly asked him who my genetic donor was because I wanted to hear that I was a daughter of love. He was very hesitant to tell me, but he finally agreed to let me meet my genetic donor. Guess what he did."

"He didn't bring her?"

"No, it's worse. He lied to me. He carried Holia over and told me to greet the source of half of me!"

"Who's Holia?"

"Our pet cat!" Lafiel spit out in disgust.

Jinto burst out laughing. "You didn't believe him did you, Lafiel?"

"It's not impossible." Lafiel glared at Jinto's smile.

"O-Oh." Lafiel's large and high placed eyes were not unlike those of a cat.

"You even do things like that?"

"It is forbidden by law. It is wrong."

"I'm glad that I finally found a value that we hold in common."

"You are Abh as well."

"Oh yes." Jinto did not argue. "But didn't you realize that it was a lie?"

"I was eight! I didn't know about laws then."

“I suppose so.”

“I cried all night long. Though Holia was a good cat, I could not bear that she was the source for half of me.”

“I understand... kinda.”

“What really irked me was that my father was the kind of pervert who would mate with a cat.” Lafiel began swinging her right arm around. Jinto looked at Lafiel’s left hand with a worry that could not be placed into words. But the left hand in the control glove was completely immobile, and Jinto made a sigh of relief.

“I remembered that Holia was just a kitten when she joined our family. I finally realized that after crying all night long.”

“A happy ending then.”

“It was not happy at all. I thought I was the child of a cat for a period! I worried that maybe I would grow paws, or maybe my nails would become retractable, or maybe my pupils would change colors. I never experienced a more frightening experience than when I stared at the mirror with all those doubts.”

“But you don’t think so any more right?”

“No.” Lafiel nodded. “But I won’t forget about those frightening days. I wanted to become a Flyer as soon as possible to get away from that father.”

“Do you not like your father?” Jinto had to ask, though he wondered whether it was acceptable to ask someone you had just met that question.

“I do not dislike him.” She wrinkled her beautiful face. “I hate to admit it, but I love him and hold him I pride. It’s just that being in his presence irritates me sometimes.”

Jinto recalled his father’s, the Earl of Hyde’s face. A face he had not seen for seven years outside of the occasional mail. On the other end of those seven years was a memory of feeling betrayed. It was hard to say that he felt love. He didn’t hate him. No, there was no emotion present. Or perhaps somewhere deep inside, he was hesitant to attach an emotion to his father.

“Every family has its own story.” Jinto said. “But anyways, you’ve been speaking in the past tense, did he tell you?”

“Yes.” Her mood turned around, and she said happily, “It was someone I knew well, and a female I admired. I was a daughter of love.”

“I’m glad.” Jinto thought so from the bottom of his heart.

4. The Cruiser Gosroth

“Jinto look below you.” Lafiel said suddenly.

It has been awhile since the few seconds of zero gravity and attitude control.

Pausing their discussion on Minteu – which Lafiel unfortunately didn't seem very interested in – he twisted his neck over the seat and looked at the floor. An artificial object floated amongst the warm stars.

The cross-section was a flattened hexagon. There were multiple circular openings across it. Because of the angle it was tilted at, he could tell that they were looking at something tower like from below, or perhaps above.

“Is that the Cruiser Gosroth?” Jinto asked.

“Yes. It is slightly larger than this shuttle is it not?” Lafiel said sarcastically.

“Yeah” Jinto replied, but to tell the truth he had a hard time visualizing it. It looked gigantic one second, and the next it looked even smaller than the shuttle, as impossible as it may be.

The cruiser Gosroth increased in size as Jinto stared at it. The acceleration stopped, and zero gravity hit the shuttle again, simultaneously the seats returned to normal. They passed the cruiser. Their relative speed was low. He could see the gigantic tower approaching slowly.

Jinto's gaze moved from the floor to the wall and eventually to the ceiling. The part he had been looking down at earlier was now far above him, Jinto felt as if he was falling rapidly. If a bird were to throw itself off a cliff, this would probably be similar to the last thing it sees. The tower was unending.

“Wow, it's incredible.” Jinto commented. Its presence became even more dominating when he thought that this was constructed for war. The ship before him made it clearly obvious that it was a weapon made for destruction. Until then the only weapons Jinto had seen were stun guns that the police on Delktu had. It seemed stupid in comparison. This was completely different.

“You just now realize?” Lafiel said mockingly.

“I couldn't tell from far away. You could tell because you have the spatial sense.” Jinto noticed Lafiel's expression at that point and laughed gently. “Could you please stop staring at me full of pity? I never minded not having a spatial sense before, and I plan on continuing to live without it.”

“Oh yes.” Lafiel looked away quickly. “I shall specially give you an opportunity to observe the ship carefully.”

“That would be great.”

Eventually they passed by the Imperial insignia. It was based on the same concepts as the rank insignias, but the background and Gaftnosh were both gold, and the rest black. Of course, they were incomparable in size. It seemed like they could play a game of Minteu on the insignia on the cruiser.

They finally reached the head of the ship. The ship slid to their side with a few movements of Lafiel's hand. The large ship passed over Jinto's head. It appeared on the other side. The cruiser began descending on them. It was a sight that broadcast a loud roar of engines.

“The Gosroth is one of the Empire's newest ships.” Lafiel explained. “It is 12.82 Uethdagh long.”

“That's it?” It was rather small.

“It is small compared to ships-of-the-line and transports. The ship you were on should have been larger as well. But, there are no ships with as much firepower in all of the empire, and probably all of mankind as well.”

“Probably.” He responded sincerely.

The shuttle turned around and circled around the cruiser a few more times.

“Have you had enough?” Lafiel asked.

“Yeah, plenty.”

Lafiel moved the fingers on her left hand, and the face of a male Flyer appeared in the middle of the starry sky. “This is shuttle one. Pilot's Military ID number is 01-00-0934684. Mission number 0522-01. Requesting permission to board.”

“Understood” The Flyer replied. “Prepare to let us take control. Stop fooling out there pilot. Did you notice something wrong with the ship's outer hull?”

“I wished to have His Grace the Successor to the Earl of Hyde see the difference between this ship and the cruiser.” Lafiel responded looking at Jinto's face.

“What do you mean? Oh well, it doesn't matter. Establish a data link with us.”

“Understood.” Lafiel moved her finger, and said to Jinto “I really don't want to rely on the thought crystal, but it's a military regulation.”

The Flyer on the cruiser interrupted with a “Data link established” before Jinto could chime in a “The Star Forces isn't stupid enough to give a trainee an opportunity to destroy their ships.”

“Confirmed on this side. Requesting end of transmission.”

“Transmission complete.”

The Flyer disappeared from the screen, and instead various numbers, letters, and graphs began flowing across it.

“Now there’s nothing for me to do.” Lafiel said dissatisfied.

“Thank you.” Jinto thanked her.

“It was my duty.”

“Hey, speaking of duty...” Jinto asked. “What do you do when you don’t need to fly a shuttle? Aren’t you bored?”

“What?” Lafiel spoke. “Trainees are here to learn.”

“I know that but?”

“We do whatever a Piloting Flyer does. Of course they’re simple jobs that trainees could do, but I am rather busy.”

“Oh really.”

“You will be busy too once you become a trainee.”

“But I’m in the Administrative sector.”

“I heard that people in the Administrative sector are busy too. They have full days doing inventory of food and equipment.”

“What a wonderful job.” Jinto said sarcastically.

The outer hull of the cruiser approached them head on. A hole began to open in it. A moment of slight changes in gravity due to the attitude control. He felt sick. Before he realized that the hole had moved behind them, the cockpit made a quarter turn and the hole was below them. The shuttle landed gently, pulled down by the artificial gravity on the cruiser.

In the last instant, the lower attitude thrusters made a burst, and the shuttle landed gently on the shuttle bay floor. The bay doors closed above them, and the lights came on.

“Pressurizing” The Flyer from before appeared on the screen.

“We will stand by until pressurization is complete.” Lafiel answered.

A white mist came in from all directions. The flow of mist tangled with each other, and swirled around in complex patterns. Eventually the mist faded away and the room cleared.

“Pressurization complete. Please stay as you are.” The Flyer instructed.

“Understood.”

“Stay as we are?” Jinto looked at Lafiel’s face, wondering if something had gone wrong.

“Do you always have to wait?”

“No, today is an exception.”

“Then, why...”

“It takes time to prepare the welcoming ceremony in the shuttle bay (Batom Saihos).” Lafiel said as she took the control glove off and disconnected her data links.

“Batom Saihos?” He remembered hearing that word. But it was supposed to be a ceremony for welcoming important people onto a ship. “For who?”

“If you really need to ask, you’re as dense as a frozen vegetable.” Lafiel said.

“No, sorry.” Of course it’s for Jinto. He knew that. But he didn’t know that he was important enough to have one. “But that’s a ceremony for people with a rank of kilocommander or higher.”

“It’s a ceremony for people with the title of his Grace. Are you not His Grace The Successor to the Earl of Hyde?”

“Now that you mention it, you’re right. Did they really do that just for me?”

“It makes you a lord. Jinto, Lord are quite exceptional even in the empire.

The population of the Abh was roughly 35 million. Most were gentry, and there were about 200,000 nobles. Out of this, those who ruled over an inhabited planet were lords, and there were 1600 such families. Even with the families, there were less than 25000 such. Additionally, there were roughly 3.5 billion citizens, and roughly 900 billion subjects of the Empire on various planets. These numbers display exactly how exceptional lords are.

The Family of the Earl of Hyde was in a preciously small group. Even if the story of the founding was one to be despised.

“But, I’ve always disliked ceremonies and tradition...”

“It’s not that special.” Lafiel replied. “The captain introduces herself and introduces you to the senior officers. That’s it.”

“To you it may not be all that but...”

“The door opened to the left behind them. The automatons (Onuhokia) laid a red carpet, and six Flyers appeared from behind it.

The female Flyer leading them had a single winged headpiece covering light blue shoulder length hair. The single wing, curved back along the hair so that it doesn't obstruct pressure suit helmets, was the sign of a ship captain. At her waist, she wore a belt that actually signified that she was a captain, and hung a command rod.

“Shuttle bay welcoming ceremony prepared.” A voice only transmission sounded. “Please ask His Grace the Successor to the Earl of Hyde to board our ship.”

“Understood.” Lafiel said, and looked at Jinto

“Okay” Jinto took his seatbelt off and stood up. “You're coming too right?”

Lafiel shook her head. “What good would my going do?”

“Oh” Jinto was disappointed. “Can I meet you later?”

“The living space is limited, so we will probably meet.”

It was not the answer Jinto wanted, but he would have to be satisfied with it. “Then, by. Thanks for bring me all the way here.”

“It was fun for me as well.”

“I'm glad.”

Out of the six Flyers who lined up for the shuttle bay welcoming ceremony, the four on the right side had pink rank insignia, signifying their designation to the Piloting branch. The Captain stood on the far left of the four, to her left was the green of the Engineering branch, and the far left was the white of the Administrative branch.

What am I supposed to do now?

Jinto regretted not asking Lafiel. Unfortunately, the Abh Language and Culture school he attended did not cover what a Lord at a shuttle bay welcoming ceremony should do.

He decided to start by standing up straight. The crewmember that stood slightly apart blew the whistle. At the signal, the six Flyers all saluted. Jinto held back his right hand as it instinctively tried to salute. Trying to follow Abh etiquette, he just stood standing up straight, with his feet lined up uncomfortably, and stared down.

“We are honored by your presence, Your Grace.” The captain said. Her eyes were the color of a creamy gold, with her pupils standing out in their blackness. “I am the Captain of the cruiser Gosroth, Hectocommander Lexshue.”

Oh, so it is normal for Abh to introduce themselves the first time they meet someone.

Jinto bowed once more, “I am Lin Syuunu Roc the Successor to the Earl of Hyde Jinto. I thank you for taking me to the capitol, Captain.”

Jinto was satisfied that he was able to say something that sounded good. He was especially pleased that he didn't say his own name wrong.

“Leave it to us. I would also like to introduce my subordinates if you would allow?”

The hectocommander motioned towards her five subordinates.

He thought that the Abh lacked individuality in exchange for their beauty because Lexshue looked somewhat like Lafiel, but that was not the case. The other Flyers looked very distinct from each other while all being beautiful.

The first was the director. The one in charge of the main engines, all mechanical equipment, and equipment checkup, is Engineering Decacommander Gyumlia. Her eyes and hair were a bright emerald contrasting her slightly dark skin.

The next was the clerk. Just like the director is in charge of taking care of machines, he was in charge of taking care of people. His name was Administrative decacommander Dysh. There was a soft color in his red eyes.

The second in command, and head navigator was Decacommander Lelia. He had light blue hair, and had deep features in his face. He seemed easygoing and easily approached.

The head arms officer was Forward Flyer Saryush. He had eyes as sharp as a knife.

Finally, there was the Head communications officer Forward Flyer Yunselia. She had a color of hair that could only be described as blue, and had a relaxing atmosphere about her.

They were all Abh, and looked to be in their mid-twenties, in other words their age was indeterminate.

“We will depart immediately.” Lexshue said after the introductions were over. “We would be even more honored if you would come to the bridge with us.”

“I’d be glad to.” Jinto answered, and then glanced back at the shuttle behind him. Lafiel still had not come out.

“We’ll have a crewmen bring your luggage to your room later.” Lexshue said, misunderstanding why he looked back.

“Y-Yes, thank you.”

“Then, please come this way.” Lexshue motioned for him to follow.

Lexshue would be considered a stunningly beautiful woman on Delktu. Though her golden eyes were peculiar, they enhanced her attractiveness without taking away from them at all. It’s not that Jinto wasn’t used to women, he had learned some things about dealing with them on Delktu. But he was not used to beautiful older women, especially if she was the head of a warship.

It seemed that the spot next to the captain (Salel) was implied to be his, so he walked shoulder to shoulder with her. It was discomfoting. What was even more discomfoting was that the five high ranked Flyers followed them like vassals. Though the gravity was the Abh standard gravity half of what Jinto was used to, his feet felt leaden.

The bridge was shaped like a semi-circle. Considering that the walls curved slightly as they moved up, they were probably inside a sphere. There were two levels on the bridge, and the outer rim was a level lower.

“Captain and His Grace the Successor to the Earl of Hyde on the bridge!” the security crewmen on the bridge reported. Jinto followed the Captain to the raised semi-circle at the center. Nine Flyers stood up and greeted Jinto and the Captain with a salute.

“Please, this way.” Hectocommander Lexshue offered a seat temporarily placed there.

“Thank you.” Jinto replied, and sat down. Once the Captain sat down, the Flyers did as well. The four high-ranking Flyers entered the bridge as well and went to their respective stations. The twelve of them sat at their stations facing the captain, surrounding her. The other two, Director Gyumlia and Clerk Dysh sat at the front with their backs to the captain.

“Show a display of the outside.” The walls turned into the starry sky with the Captain’s order. Since all of the Flyers, including the Captain, had datalinks, this was probably for Jinto who did not have a spatial sense.

“Prepare to depart” The Hectocommander’s voice rang through the bridge. Jinto could not bear to watch the Flyers work from above, so shrank himself into his seat. He felt like a prankster who had wandered into the wrong place.

“No problems with all systems.” Engineering Decacommander Gyumlia reported.

“No problems with ship environment.” Administrative Decacommander Dysh.

“Ready to operate ship.” Forward Flyer Saryush put the control glove on.

“We have permission to go through the Volash Earldom’s Sord. Permission received to pass between 1527:12 and 1527:18 ship time.”

“Preparations for departure complete.” Second in command Lelia reported.

“Good.” The Captain nodded, “accelerate at six standard gravities, head towards the Volash gate.”

“Coming about to 17-62-55.” Forward Flyer Saryush said.

“Understood.” Lexshue replied shortly.

Thanks to the artificial gravity, he didn’t feel any of the vibration due to attitude control. But, the stars in the sky shook violently, showing that the giant ship had turned about.

When Jinto poked his head out, he could see a tiny Delktu.

“We have turned about.”

“Raise Anchors! (Daisele)

The cruiser vibrated gently with the Captain’s order. Water flowed into the antimatter reactors. Anti-protons are shot into the water. The matter and antimatter that meet devours each other, leaving only energy. Any matter that failed to meet antimatter, received that energy and flew into the vacuum, the reaction of it moving the giant ship. That was what the vibration was from.

“Are you bored?” Lexshue said to him considerably.

“Not at all.” Jinto said very honestly. “I have never seen any of this before, it’s all very interesting.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yes.” Jinto thought for a moment, and asked a harmless question. “I believe you introduced Forward Flyer Saryush as the head arms officer, but he seems to be in charge of flying the ship as well. Do arms officers also pilot the ships?”

“Yes. It is the arms officer’s job to fly the ship in normal space. For a cruiser, combat and piloting are closely tied together.”

“I see. Umm, I have another question...”

“What is it?”

“I thought a clerk took care of the paperwork on the ship, but he seems to have duties on the bridge as well.”

“Yes that’s right. He watches to see if gravity control is functioning normally, or if there are any pressure leaks on the ship. Of course, they’re usually only on the bridge during departures and battle. They usually do the paperwork in the clerk room at any other time.”

“What is that work in the clerk room?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re interested since it is Your Grace’s future as well. You should probably ask Dysh yourself...”

Jinto realized that this Flyer was a very kind woman after continuing this uncomfortable conversation with Lexshue. There was some barrier, she never stopped acting courteous to him, and Jinto did not have the courtesy to speak disrespectfully to her. But, Jinto understood that Hectocommander Lexshue honestly tried her best to answer his questions. Sometimes he felt as if he was being treated like a child, but he didn’t mind that. Jinto did lack in experience.

Eventually Decacommander Lelia reported. “Three minutes until we pass the Sord.”

“Sorry to interrupt but...” the Captain excused herself “Activate space-time bubble.” She ordered.

“No problems with space-time bubble generator.” Engineering Decacommander Gyumlia reported.

“Activation of space-time bubble confirmed.”

The Volash Sord could be seen right in front of them. It was the second state of Yuanon. The Abh called the first state of Yuanon, what was in the propulsion systems of the Leif Eriksson, “a closed gate” (Sord Leza); and they called the second state of Yuanon, where it became a bright sphere about one sedagh in diameter “an open gate” (Sord Glakka) or simply sord.

“One minute until we pass the sord.”

“Begin count down thirty seconds before we pass.”

“Understood.”

By the time the countdown began, all of the stars before them had been absorbed in the brilliant light of the sord.

“... 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, passing.”

It’s not that there’s an impact when you pass a sord. But the scenery outside changed radically. There was no brilliant light, or a starry sky, all that remained was a gray sky.

The secret to faster-than-light travel is in Planar Space (Faz), a universe with a different set of physical laws than normal space (Daz). Just like the name suggests, it was a universe composed of two dimensions of space and one dimension of time. The interstellar ships of the Abh cross it while surrounded by a strange universe called the space-time bubble. The space-time bubble is a small chunk of normal space, and exists in planar space the way a six-dimensional body exists microscopically within four-dimensional space.

Right now, the cruiser Gosroth existed in a universe all its own. All that was in this universe other than the cruiser would be a few particles of space dust. In that state, they would be left in the dark, no matter what catastrophe visited itself upon normal space. Jinto shivered.

“Confirm position.” The Captain ordered, and turned towards Jinto. Do you know that we are unaware of our current position?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you move into planar space from normal space,” Hectocommander Lexshue began a basic lecture on the theory of planar space travel. “and vice versa, we are only able to tell our probable position. Are you aware of the concept of probability?”

“Is it an euphemism for made up?” Jinto replied slightly proud of himself.

“More or less.” The Captain nodded. “The inside and outside of a sord, normal space and planar space, are each respectively connected. But we don’t know the exact locations. The sord usually exists in an incomplete spiral in planar space, but we don’t know which part of that curve we will appear in.

“Position confirmed.” The head navigator reported at that moment. “117.92 from the right extreme.” A projection of planar space appeared on the floor. There was a blue dot within the spiral of the sord; it was the current position of the cruiser Gosroth.

“Go to fully mobile state after a 280 degree turn.” The captain ordered, and then said to Jinto “Do you know what mobile states and immobile states are?”

“Yes, somewhat.” Jinto said. Even if he was in the administrative branch, that much information was necessary for entering the trainee program. Of course, he had no clue as to what the actual mathematics involved were.

To any observer in planar space, a space-time bubble looks like a single particle. A strange particle whose mass decreases steadily. This particle is able to take two states: the mobile state and the immobile state.

Imagine a ball spinning on the ground to understand this. If it spins perpendicularly to the ground, then that ball stays in place. If it is spinning along the ground, then it rolls away. When the spin is perpendicular to planar space, that is the immobile state, and when it spins along planar space, it is in the mobile state. There is no state to compare a diagonal axis of rotation to.

When a ship is in a mobile state, its direction of rotation can be decided upon freely. It is also possible to switch between the two states instantly, and that is how a ship’s velocity is adjusted.

One thing you should never forget is that whether you’re mobile or immobile, the bubble is constantly spinning, in other words energy is always being spent.

“It is the navigator’s job to pilot the ship from here on out.” Lexshue whispered, and ordered Lelia. “Destination Sfgnoff gate, calculate flight path.” Almost instantly, a blue line appeared near the distorted spiral.

Lelia glanced at the Captain and reported “Calculated.”

“Understood.” Hectocommander Lexshue nodded. “I’ll leave the rest up to you Lelia. Put us on the flight path.”

“Understood Captain. I’ll take care of it.”

The blue dot showing their current position began to move towards open space from its place in the distorted spiral. A green dot appeared on the spiral, and began to move. The other green dot passed by the blue dot and headed along the line. It was a ship headed towards the Volash Earldom. Eventually, the blue ship reached the line, and began moving along it.

“We are on the flight path Captain.” Lelia reported.

“Good. Relieve all ready status. Switch to first shift.” The Hectocommander disconnected her data link while announcing so. Various Flyers on the bridge stood up. Only three remained sitting.

Lexshue stood to return the salute of all of the Flyers who left the bridge. Jinto jittered around on his chair all the while, not knowing what he should do.

“Your Grace.” The Captain said after sitting down again. “The rest of the voyage is quite boring even if it is your first time here. The Flyers on duty just sit around in a dark mood, checking to make sure that there are no problems with the equipment they are in charge of. I’ll have someone take you to your room.”

“Captain,” Jinto said determined “I’d like to speak with you some more if it’s alright with you.”

“My pleasure Your Grace. I will be quite bored as well until my shift is over. But concerning what?”

“Are you aware of how the Hyde Earldom family came to power?”

“Yes, the conquering of your Earldom was news.” Apparently words like “conquer” or “invade” had no negative connotation to her. They didn’t seem to hold any negative connotation to all Abh.

“Then as you can understand, I don’t know how nobility is supposed to act.”

“Is that so?” She said unexpectedly.

“Yes, I keep wondering what I should do. I never learned such things.”

“You had not spoken to the Earl of Volash’s family?”

“No.” The Earl of Volash had never shown any interest to the successor to the Earl of Hyde, who was staying in their territory, and Jinto had never bothered to visit their orbital palace either. “I was never invited.”

“So you don’t know how you should interact with us?”

“That’s it.” Jinto nodded. “I do think it is inappropriate to ask such a question to someone I just met but...”

“Not at all.” Lexshue said jovially, “Gentry rarely have the opportunity to tell a noble how to act.”

“and... am I acting strangely? Should a lord be bearing himself more arrogantly?”

“Sometimes they are forgiven for being acting arrogantly.” The Hectocommander said. “But they are never liked for doing so. Does that help?”

“Great. Then, I haven’t been acting too peculiarly.”

“No.” Lexshue crossed her arms. “Honestly, you do act a little peculiarly. But, acting peculiar is not always a bad thing.”

“Oh...” Jinto felt his confidence shatter instantly. “Umm... how should a Lord act to avoid being peculiar?”

“You don’t bear yourself strongly enough.”

“Probably.” Jinto calmed down.

“But, it’s much better than being full of yourself, Your Grace.”

“Thank you very much.” The Captain’s compliment failed to recover Jinto’s confidence.

“You do realize that your status is above mine?”

“Actually, I’m not too sure about that either. Captain, you have treated me very respectfully the entire time, but I doubt that I’m important enough for that.”

“Really.” The Captain looked confused. The type of confusion you feel when you’re dealing with someone who was too clueless.

“I know which titles are above which, but I couldn’t find any information on how they relate to social status in any books. Actually the more I investigated the more confusing it became. It seems common in the Empire for a noble to work under a gentry.”

“Yes it is quite normal.”

“Then, my social status is equal to none, right?”

“The relation of two people who are not in the same group is decided through title status.” Lexshue explained. “I am a Captain, so I am considered a first class Baroness. It is a rather high status for a gentry, but it is far below that of a successor to an Earl.”

“Is that not confusing?”

“What about?”

“Would leadership not be difficult if your subordinates were higher ranking than yourself?”

The Hectocommander laughed heartily. “That is only when you are affiliated to different groups. Within the military, this is all that matters.” She pointed to the rank insignia on her right upper arm. That action of hers reminded him of Lafiel. It may be a habit common throughout the Star Forces Flyers. “If Your Grace were to be assigned to me as an Administrative Flyer, I’d put you to work without any hesitation. Please don’t expect to be treated the way you are now at such a time.”

“Yes, I had heard that...” Jinto was still not quite convinced. “But don’t you find yourself thinking of things outside of the military?”

“Let’s see.” Lexshue thought. “In the past, perhaps. But our status based society and military have had a long history. That is impossible these days. A person unable to differentiate between their social status and military status, is a socially worthless person no matter how high his or her place is.”

“It’s quite complicated.” Jinto sighed.

“Really? I have lived in this society since birth, so it is second nature to me.”

“Is it like age?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh.” Jinto explained.

It did not really exist on Martinyu, but on Delktu great importance was placed on respecting age. Within an organization, their ranks were held in regard instead of age, but once out of the organization, it was reversed. Since the Abh did not show signs of age, they may find this respect of age confusing.

“Possibly.” Lexshue agreed hesitantly. “We do not consider age very often.”

“Yes, but.” Jinto began giving his opinion on the matter. “An older person usually has more experience, so is worthy of respect. But how is one person better than another just because he or she was born to a higher house?”

He was aware that he was challenging the very basis of the Empire, but Jinto didn’t worry about it. After all, he was a noble himself. He did not need to hesitate in doubting his own status. But he did expect the Captain to be troubled.

Her expression did not change. Making an Abh emotional seemed to be a task of great difficulty.

“Well.” The Captain thought for a moment. “Nobles are the descendents of capable individuals. They’re people who accept the family traditions of capable people. So we expect them to be quite capable themselves. I believe that is why they are worthy of respect.”

“Really.” Jinto was unconvinced. “But they’re not necessarily capable just because they were raised by capable people.”

“Not at all.” Lexshue agreed. “Just because a person is capable at one thing, doesn’t mean that he or she is a capable educator. There are many examples of the children of heroes being completely worthless. But usually the descendents of exceptional people are worthy of respect in some way.”

“Oh.” Jinto replied. He pictured himself. No matter how exceptional his father may have been, he was not raised by his father...

“And,” Lexshue continued. “Just being old does not necessarily make you capable.”

“You’re right.” Jinto pictured someone who grew older without learning anything.

“My opinion is that our system of social status makes just as much sense as respecting age. Does that help?”

“Yes. Of course.” It did help. But he didn’t feel like completely agreeing with it.

“Then, let me have someone take you to your room. I’ll have the trainee that greeted you at the spaceport take you.” Lexshue brought her wrist computer (Kryuno) to her face.

“Oh, her...” Of course she meant Lafiel. “She is a noble too right?”

Lexshue blinked in surprise. “No.”

“Huh? That’s strange. Her attitude was quite different from the Captain’s.”

“You do not know her!?” Her right eyebrow rose in surprise.

“No. Umm...” He had a bad feeling in the back of his mind. “Should I know her?”

“No. Considering Your Grace’s peculiar raising, you can’t be blamed for it.” The Captain smiled, and communicated through her wrist computer (Kryuno) “Abrial Flyer trainee, come to the bridge immediately.”

“Abrial!?” It was the same name as the High Commander of the fleet that invaded the Hyde system. He was royalty, so that means that it was the name of Royalty. “Which Abrial?”

“The Kryuve Kingdom”

“Then...”

“Yes.” A slightly sinister smile appeared. “Flyer Trainee Abrial is the grand daughter of Her Highness the Empress Ramaju.”

5. A Princess of the Empire

Though the Empire placed some trust into the loyalty of its nobles and gentry, and the unity of the Abh as a family, they did not have illusions that it was a very deep one. What kept the unity of the Empire was its sheer military might, and the center of that unity, the Empress, must hold that power. That is a basic concept behind the construction of the Empire.

Therefore, someone that inherits the title of Emperor or Empress must have experience in the military, and be a capable military leader. But if someone were to become Emperor automatically, for having military power, a constant struggle for power and internal strife would occur. The Empire would topple overnight.

Therefore, a method that considered various aspects of the candidates for the title of Emperor was used in The Empire of Mankind by the Abh". Eight families of kings formed the royalty in the Empire. Each were the siblings or descendents of the founding Emperor Dune, and share the last name Abrial.

They are...

Skeel Kingdom Nei Lamal

Iryush Kingdom Nei Dusyl

Lasuis Kingdom Nei Lamsaryu

Vesko Kingdom Nei Duael

Balke Kingdom Nei Lamsar

Balgzed Kingdom Nei Dubzel

Suelgdez Kingdom Nei Duasek

Kryuve Kingdom Nei Dubrusque

Those eight families.

People born to these families have the duty of joining the military. They cannot join the branches that are usually behind the lines like the Medical branch or the Administrative branch, but must become a Flyer of the Piloting branch.

Royalty was given one special privilege concerning their role in the military. It was concerning the advancement to the military university. A minimum of four and a half years is required for the military university, but with royalty they are automatically admitted after two and a half years regardless of their ability. Once they become a Wing Flyer, they are promoted to the rank of Rear Flyer after a year, and Forward flyer after a year and a half, and are allowed into Dune Star Forces University, the most difficult military university of them all. After half a year of education, they receive the rank of decacommander and wear the insignia of a commander.

Though it is a privilege of the royal families, it could also be seen as forcing responsibilities onto them beyond what their experience and abilities can handle. Once they pass the rank of decacommander, royalty does not have any more privileges. Any later promotions occur at roughly the same speeds as any other graduates of a military university, and a merciless punishment awaits them if they fail a mission, just like the way it does for any noble or gentry.

Once they climb all the way up to the top of the twelve ranks of the Piloting branch starting from Wing Flyer, and reach the rank of Imperial High Commander, they become the High Commander of the Imperial Star Forces. Though in peacetime, this position controls but a few commanders, it is a rank that the Emperor has always held. So rising to this rank means that he or she will become the next Emperor, in other words they become the Imperial crown prince.

Once the new high commander of the imperial star forces is decided any royalty older than him or less than 20 years younger than him must retire. Even before then, any royalties forfeiting their privilege of becoming an Emperor must leave the force. They usually inherit the kingdom, or gain a different territory and become a last-generation royalty. The descendents of these last-generation royalty receive the last name of "Boz" signifying that their family traditions are inherited from those of the royal family; however, they are nobles, and a noble is not allowed to keep the name of Abrial.

The high commander of the imperial star forces waits until the next royalty reaches his or her rank, and is capable of inheriting his or her rank. Once that happens he or she becomes Emperor, and the former Emperor retires.

Most of the time, the long-lived Abh still have a good century of life left after they leave the throne. The Empire does not permit even them respite. Former Emperors and Empresses and Kings who failed to become Emperors form the Upper Royal Council, and receive the title of Nisos. This Upper Royal Council deals with problems of promotions and entrance interviews of Flyers of the royal family. This

entrance interview is supposedly much harsher than those given to normal Flyers by the military. After passing this exam, the children of the Eight Kings begin their fierce competition to “the throne of wings”, during a limited period of forty years.

While waiting for the Flyer trainee to appear, Jinto looked her up on his wrist computer (Kryuno). He discovered that Abrial Nei Dubrusque The Viscountess of Paryuun Lafiel is the first princess born to the King of Kryuve Dubyus.

Jinto felt extremely uncomfortable, even as he walked a step behind her. The feeling of embarrassment that had haunted him the previous six years had reached a peak. Until then, the embarrassment was like an insect buzzing around him. Jinto had grown used to it, and sometimes even felt comfortable enough to grow to love it. But, this insect had apparently heard from somewhere that it had a sting, and had now was stinging Jinto repeatedly.

It wasn't that he didn't expect to meet royalty. Jinto was, despite all, a noble so he may have enough status to come to know royalty. But, he had expected such encounters to occur during social occasions like banquets or dances after formal introductions had been given. This was quite an ambush.

Now that he was near someone that was incredibly close to the ruler of 900 billion subjects and citizens, his belief that everyone was born equal had blown away. Despite what he was in the past, and will be in the future, right now Jinto is an Abh noble, and deeply entranced in the status system of the Empire.

The more he remembered the attitude the Captain had taken towards the child of a self-made noble, the more his fear and worry of the conversation they had on the shuttle solidified.

How should I make it up?

Jinto glanced around nervously. Jinto had expected the insides of the warship to be bare and practical in design, but instead there were many pictures hanging on the walls. There were pictures of a prairie grass being blown by the wind, or white clouds flowing across the sky. He had hoped that they would comfort him somewhat, but they had little effect.

“What is it Jinto?” Lafiel said next to seeds of dandelion flying. “You've been silent the entire time, and why are you walking behind me?”

“Well Your Highness the Imperial princess...” Jinto said nervously. Instantly, Lafiel stopped walking, and she turned around. Goosebumps came to him when he saw her expression.

She had glared at him several times on the shuttle, but he now realized that those were half joking, something like a dog barking playfully.

So this is what she looks like when she's really angry...

The beautifully symmetric face was covered with an unmistakable sign of anger, and a black flame burned within those jet-black pupils. But what flowed from her lips was something as bitter cold as the vacuum.

“I am not an imperial princess, just a princess. The empress is my grand mother, and my father is merely a king.”

“My apologies Your Highness the Princess.” Though he lowered his head in apology, Jinto thought to himself that she shouldn't be getting so angry just because he made a mistake on her title.

Lafiel turned away and began walking away quickly. Jinto chased after her.

Lafiel continued talking. “If you wish to stress my relation to Her Majesty the Empress, you should call me the Grand Daughter of the Empress, but it's not an official title, and it's hardly ever used. Actually I've just rediscovered the fact that I am the grand daughter of the Empress, and am feeling a sense of surprise. Besides, it doesn't sound good, Her Highness the Grand Daughter of the Empress.”

“Yeah. I mean, Yes Your Highness.” Jinto agreed nervously.

“Also, I was given the territory and title of Viscountess of Paryuun at birth from the Empress, with my father as a cosignatory. So, sometimes I am called Her Highness the Viscountess of Paryuun. But these days, I'm usually called Flyer Trainee Abrial for some reason.” Lafiel said in one breath.

Jinto couldn't find a chance to butt in, and just moved his feet quickly in silence.

“But I remember telling you, to just call me Lafiel!”

Dense as Jinto is, he understood the real reason why Lafiel was angry. He immediately changed the tone of his voice “Oh yeah, sorry. So your friends call you Lafiel.”

“Not really.” Lafiel's tone of voice is still cold. “The only ones who call me without a title are my father His Highness the King of Kryuve Dubyus, my grandmother Her Majesty the Empress Ramaju, and the Upper Royal Council that I'm directly related to. My friends call me either Her Majesty the Princess, or just Her Majesty. The title of Her Majesty Lafiel is quite popular among my relatives.”

“Then why...” His feet stopped. The successor to the Earl had apparently gotten ahold of an incredible privilege, and was about to lose it. “did you tell me to call you Lafiel... I had just met you.”

“It was the first time someone asked for my name.” Lafiel stopped too, but she still looked forward. “apparently the granddaughter of the Empress is quite the celebrity, everyone knows my face and name. Even if I don’t introduce myself, they call me ‘Her Majesty the Princess’. Even to someone I know well, I’m ‘Her Majesty’. It had been so ever since I was born, so I never bothered to think about it. But, I felt a little, just a little mind you, envious of the students calling each other by name in the trainee program. Especially so after I realized that they couldn’t relax when I was with them.”

“I’m sorry, I...” Jinto was stunned by the gravity of the crime he had committed. He had slapped away the hand of friendship she offered, and instead hurt her deeply.

“There’s no need to apologize.” Lafiel said, still cold. “You have done nothing wrong, though ‘Her Majesty the Imperial Princess’ is wrong, there was no ill intention behind it. I have not been told to tolerate rude names, but I will accept any official titles. Feel free to call me Her Majesty the Princess of Her Highness the Viscountess of Paryuun or anything else you wish Your Grace the Successor to the Earl of Hyde.”

“No, I’d like to just call you Lafiel...”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t want you to call me ‘Lafiel’ or anything. I just said so because I wondered if it would be polite to attach a title to my name when asked for it.”

If she’s this bad at saying a lie, she’s probably not very suited for the throne...

Jinto cast the stray thought in his head off, and begged her. “Please, I want to just call you Lafiel.”

Then, Lafiel finally turned around and stared at Jinto. “There’s no need to force yourself, Your Grace.”

“I’m not. So...”

“If you’d like, I wouldn’t even mind if you called me Her Majesty the Granddaughter of the Empress.”

“Ahh!” Jinto screamed. “What do I have to do for you to forgive me Lafiel?”

Lafiel stared at Jinto silently for a moment. But eventually her mouth began to twitch, and the feared princess began laughing, as if she could hold herself back no more. Jinto felt relief, since it seemed as if they were on good terms again.

“You didn’t realize that I was an Abrial?” Lafiel asked after she stopped laughing.

“Nope. Not at all.”

“Even after you saw these ears?” Lafiel brushed her hair back. The elfish ears, High Commander Abrial, who invaded the Hyde system had the same ears. “This is ‘the Ear of the Abrial’ it is one of the family markings.”

“I couldn’t see it behind your hair.”

“Oh... My ears are rather small for an Abrial.” From her voice, it seemed as if she felt inferior because of it.

“Oh.” Jinto continued. “I doubt I would have realized even if I saw them. I’m not an Abh by birth, so I just don’t notice family traits.”

“Oh, really.” Lafiel said apparently impressed.

“Yes really.”

A family trait is a physical trait, shared by a family: the shape of an ear or a nose, the color of your eye or skin. Each family has a different one. Whether you’re a noble or a gentry, the Abh places great importance that all members of a family share a physical trait. Of course, it is carved into your genes.

The fact that ‘the Ear of the Abrial’ is the most famous family trait goes without saying. But, Jinto had forgotten the existence of family traits until just now.

Lafiel walked shoulder to shoulder with him, and said “You are funny after all.”

“Stop it.” Jinto lowered his shoulders. “Hey, about earlier...”

“Earlier?”

“Your memories in the trainee program. About how no one could relax when they were around you...” Lafiel motioned for him to continue with her gaze.

“I have memories too.” Jinto laughed nervously. “Though they’re probably nothing compared to yours.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know if you know or not, but I was the only noble in my school.”

“Oh...”

Since they wished to work under the Abh, the students at the Abh language and culture school had no anti-Abh feelings at all. Instead, most of them felt a wish to do a good job as a citizen to get promoted to the status of a noble or a gentry so that they can make their descendents genetically Abh. To such people, the existence of a young boy who was promised a title despite the fact that he's a grounder was intolerable. He was picked on the great deal, and was the victim of horrible pranks when the teacher was not around. Now that he looked back, here were people who tried to complicate his life by dealing with him with an overly snide attitude.

None of them knew how they should interact with a noble.

"It's not their fault, I didn't know how I should act either."

"Then you had it much tougher. In my case, the trainees all knew how they should deal with royalty. It's just that I didn't like the way they dealt with me. I was held with respect, and given suitable treatment. But..." Lafiel looked at him with disapproval. "I would not have just let them pick on me."

"I'm a pacifist, Lafiel." Jinto said weakly.

"Whether you're a pacifist or not doesn't matter."

"But there were too many of them, even the teachers were inclined towards them."

"Oh..."

"But, I came up with a solution very quickly."

"What did you do?" Lafiel asked full of interest.

"I didn't tell them I was a noble."

"You can do that?" Lafiel asked.

"I'm not as famous as Her Highness the Princess. But..." Jinto shook his head. "It didn't work well at school. Even if I talked to a new guy innocently, old rumors spread around and they would gain unneeded information."

"And, what did you do Jinto?"

"I went to town. I became friends with subjects who lived without a care as to the Empire."

"I see. What an unexpectedly difficult life you've led." Two crewmen saluted as they passed by. Lafiel, returned the salute while walking.

"Hey." Jinto asked quietly. "What am I supposed to do when this happens? It would be strange if I saluted back."

"You should just greet them." Since the crewmen had already passed by, Jinto turned around and greeted them. The crewmen raised the hands they were in the process of lowering in surprise.

"You'll trouble the crewmen if you do that." Lafiel scolded him gently.

"Looks like it." Jinto sighed in his mind. It went well the next time they passed by crewmen.

Eventually, they arrived before a door with a picture of a large sunflower basking in the radiance of a star.

"These are your quarters." Lafiel said while pointing at the door.

"It's been bothering me for awhile but..." Jinto examined the door "just what are these pictures? What kind of meaning is behind them?"

"They're just decorations. They're meaningless." Lafiel said. "There has to be decorations on a warship too, don't you think so?"

"But, they throw me off." Jinto muttered. "if they're decorations, shouldn't they reflect space in some way?"

"How?"

"Stars or galaxies or..."

"Who would draw such a boring thing?"

"I thought you people loved space." Jinto was surprised.

"We love it, because it's our home. But, stars are too commonplace to be the subject of a painting. You can look at the real thing if you wanted to see one."

"But..."

"Besides, this seems to relax the crewmen here from planets."

"I see..." Jinto inspected the sunflower. "But what do you people think? The Abh that is?"

"Like I keep saying, you're..."

"Yeah, I'm an Abh too." Jinto interrupted. "But I'm not an Abh by birth. So, I'm interested as to what an Abh feels when looking at plants from nature."

"I doubt it's very different from what a person from a planet feels." Lafiel grimaced. "We are the descendents of people who evolved on a planet."

“But, you’ve never seen a real sunflower right?”

“That’s prejudice Jinto. Of course I’ve seen a sunflower. There are green houses on Lakfakalle, and there was a garden in my house.

“Oh.” Jinto turned around and pointed at the wall behind him. “Then what about a scenery like this?”

It was a great field of grass. Grass tall enough to reach a person’s waist grew densely, and elephants and horses were eating them. Large trees popped out of them occasionally, and cherry blossom petals were floating in the blue sky.

“I haven’t seen anything like this.” Lafiel answered.

“Then what does it look like to you?”

“Why are you asking me that?” She looked displeased.

“Please” Jinto said. “Help me out. I want to know what it’s like to be an Abh by birth.”

“Oh.” Lafiel seemed to understand. “It looks like something out of a dream.”

“Like some place that doesn’t exist?”

“No.” Lafiel shook her head. “I know that it exists somewhere. I know that we came from a place just like this. It reminds me of a myth.”

“The homeland you left.”

“Yes. Space is our home now. We are people of space, and feel pride in it.”

“People on planets are descendents of interstellar travelers too.” Jinto pointed out.

“Travelers. The ancestors of the people on the ground simply passed through space. We live there. This is a great difference, right?”

“Maybe.” Jinto didn’t really know. The Abh did have something strange about them. But it wasn’t clear to him whether it was because their homes were different.

“What does it look like to you Jinto?” Lafiel asked. “Is it as boring to you as the stars are to us. By us I mean those who were born Abh. You are Abh too.”

Is she trying to be courteous in her own way? He thought as he said, “It’s not boring at all. There aren’t many places like this on planets either. Besides, the ecosystem on my home world is quite different from those on other worlds. But, it doesn’t seem so farfetched that it looks like something out of a myth. Of course, the ecosystem in this picture is probably really crazy. It probably looks farfetched in the eyes of a botanist. Speaking of, can you let me in now? I don’t know how to open the door.”

“You’re the one that brought up the sunflowers.” Lafiel said.

“But wasn’t it interesting?”

“Yes. It was the first time I looked at a picture so intently.” This first princess of the Kryuve King seemed to have an honest personality deep inside.

“Then please, Lafiel.”

“Use your wrist computer (Kryuno). The electromagnetic wave signature has already been registered.”

“Oh, really.” He touched the red stone on the side of the display area of his wrist computer. The door opened.

Jinto looked around the room from the door and said. “Wow, this is incredible.”

“Are you dissatisfied?”

“Not at all. I didn’t think it would be this great.”

It wasn’t very large. The length of the room was just enough for the bed. Its width was about twice that. There was a table and chair in the space not occupied by the bed. There was an even smaller door in the back. But what really caught your attention was the Hyde family standard hanging on the wall over the bed.

A red Lezwan was pictured over the green background. A Lezwan looks like a bird, but is actually a type of haired fish that swims around the seas of Martinyu. Since it was a fish, it was quite a stupid creature, to say the least. But, it was a rather majestic sight when its swimming fins were fully extended.

“Your luggage should be in there.” She pointed at the closet on the opposite side of the bed. “Use that door if you care for your hygiene.”

Jinto opened the door in the back and looked in. There was a bath and sink, just as he had expected.

“Wow. What room is this? A sleeping quarter for guests?”

“This is a cruiser. It’s a normal decacommander quarter.”

“I hope I didn’t leave anyone homeless.”

“Don’t worry. They build extra rooms into the designs of ships as large as a cruiser. You never know where you might pick up extra passengers. I’m an extra passenger too here.”

“That’s good.” Jinto shifted his gaze to the flag hanging on the wall. “Where did you get that?”

“Oh, we made that on the ship.” Lafiel said casually.

“For me?”

“Who else would it benefit?”

It doesn’t really benefit me either...

Jinto relaxed. He felt no attachment to the quickly designed crest. He first saw it right after the founding of the Earl of Hyde family, but he had forgotten that they had a crest until just then.

Jinto felt the bed to see how comfortable it was. It was soft enough to promise a good night’s sleep.

Jinto sat down on the bed and asked, “Well, what should I do?”

“Okay.” Lafiel checked the schedule on her wrist computer, “Dinner will be in another two hours. You will probably be invited to the Captain’s table. I’ll probably come get you when it’s time, so wait patiently.”

“Really? If you tell me the way over the intercom, I’ll get there myself. I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“That’s not a good idea.” Lafiel said seriously. “I’ve been ordered to show you around tomorrow. It’s best if you don’t wander around alone until then. There have been many incidences where new recruits and civilians had almost died in an abandoned storage closet because they firmly believed that they knew how to read a ship diagram since the formation of the Star Forces.”

“How did you do?” Jinto asked teasingly.

“It’s rude to ask questions that you know will touch upon old scars.” The Flyer trainee answered snidely.

“Looks like you had some fun memories.” Jinto laughed.

“Quiet, Jinto.” Lafiel said suddenly. “Anything else you need?”

“Nope. Thanks. I have something I can kill time with, so I’ll wait here obediently.”

“Then, see you in two hours.”

“Yeah, in two hours.”

Lafiel turned around. The door closed behind her back. Jinto decided to take a hot bath. Jinto was surprised at how relaxed he was as he undressed. The tension he felt before boarding the cruiser had disappeared.

6. Emergency Situation

Five days after the cruiser Gosroth left the Volash Earldom.

“Captain” decacommander Lelia’s voice sounded by her ear.

The Captain of the cruiser Gosroth, hectocommander Lexshue Uef Lobel Prakia opened her eyes immediately and glanced by her pillow. There was a hologram of the currently on-duty second in command there.

“What?”

“Please come to the bridge immediately.” The 1/10th scale face had a scary look on it that was rarely seen on him. “We have discovered several unidentified space-time bubbles.”

“I’ll be right there.” Hectocommander Lexshue jumped up right after she waved the communicator off. She put her black uniform on with practiced motion, combed her hair, and put the single winged headpiece on. She picked up her belt and control rod, and headed towards the bridge.

She put her belt on quickly in the transport tube to the bridge, and hung her control rod on. By the time she arrived at the bridge, she looked the way a proper Captain should.

“Lelia, report.” Lexshue shouted as she came on the bridge.

“Direction, 78 degrees in front of us, distance 1539.17 Kedrel. Bearing 18 degrees. They’re headed towards the Sfgnoff system.” Lelia motioned to give the Captain’s seat to her once he reported everything.

But Lexshue made no motion to sit down. “Sfgnoff is our next destination.”

“Yes.” Lelia nodded. “We should arrive before them.”

“How many ships?”

“We have detected 120 space-time bubbles thus far. Total mass is roughly 90 zesebos. If it’s a fleet, its size is equal to roughly four divisions of fleet.”

Lexshue looked at the planar space diagram on the floor. The blue dot representing the location of the cruiser was at the center. Several sords surrounded them in their black swirls.

Sord had very little mass in normal space, and since it radiates energy, it reacts with the solar winds. So, naturally it is usually found outside of solar systems. But, when a sord is in the plane of a solar system, it receives more energy than it releases. In this situation, the energy flows from normal space to planar space instead of the other way around. This is called a volcano (Kigarf).

Energy from a Kigarf becomes space-time particles, a microscopic four-dimensional bubble with roughly four times the mass of an electron, and disperses through planar space. When it meets another sord, it returns to normal space. This is the source of the energy that mankind once used for interstellar travel.

Space-time bubbles work similarly to space-time particles. It absorbs and releases space-time particles. Since it always releases more space-time particles than it absorbs, the gap must be filled by the energy pumped into the space-time bubble generator. That is the toll for traveling through planar space.

Space-time bubbles also release a mass wave in addition to space-time particles. It behaves similarly to the way electromagnetic waves behave in normal space; theoretically it ripples infinitely, and passes through even space-time bubbles. Therefore, it is possible to detect the existence of space-time bubbles from quite a distance away.

Roughly 60 degrees from the direction they were moving in, a swarm of mass waves (sessraz) could be detected hiding behind three sords. Even mass waves cannot pass through sords.

No thought was required for the Captain to realize that something strange was going on. If friendly forces were gathering in such numbers, she should have been notified of it ahead of time. If it was mobilized suddenly, something must have happened. If they weren’t friendly forces... no explanation is necessary.

She wished to ask the strange swarm of space-time bubbles what they were doing, but the laws of physics in planar space prohibited that. Mass waves cannot be used for communication. The wavelength and frequency of mass waves are set by planar space physics, and it cannot be shifted at all to the convenience of mankind. Though they can use mass waves to communicate if they could alter the mass within space-time bubbles, gravity control does not alter the mass of objects, so this was impossible.

The only practical method of communication between space-time bubbles is through the usage of space-time particles. But, this inter-bubble communication is painfully slow, and completely useless beyond certain distances.

“Can you tell which sord they came from?” Lexshue asked.

“Rear Flyer Leshkrya is calculating that right now.” Lelia answered.

The inexperienced male Flyer, navigator Leshkrya reported eventually. "I've narrowed it down to 47, but I can't narrow it down any further."

"Are any of those sords used?" Lexshue asked.

"No, they're all closed gates, and not used." Leshkrya shook his head.

"Are there any sords with an inhabited planet within a light year?"

Leshkrya scanned through the old reference material with the thought crystals. "No."

"Within five light years?" Lexshue increased the span.

"There was one!" Leshkrya's forehead flushed red from excitement.

"Where?"

"Planet Vascotton IV of the Vascotton system is 4.3 light years from Kysh193 sord. Its affiliation is... with the United Mankind!"

"It seems." Lelia walked over and whispered. "like it's one of our competitors."

Once, the Abh were armed merchants who traveled through space on the giant ship Abrial, this is where the name of the royal family originated, with eight closed gates in its belly. Though they were merchants, since it was never certain when they can meet partners to trade with, it was hardly wise to deal in foodstuffs or things used in daily life. They produced basic necessities on their ship. What they traded for with the outside world, was mainly information.

The history of various human worlds, technical information, scientific papers, artistic masterpieces, they were all merchandise. Since every human society was tens of, and sometimes dozens of, light years away from other similar worlds, they desired information on how mankind was doing. The city ship Abrial was the uncertain but only thin line that tied them together.

Maybe it was because they didn't need it to support their daily life, but the Abh's concept of trade was quite one-sided. They named the items they could offer, and put a price to them. Though they were merchants, they dislike tedious bargaining, and if the deal was rejected, they simply left the system. If they felt they were cheated, they left what they thought was sufficient "payment for their debts", and then left. Occasionally, they realized that it was an unfortunate misunderstanding, but by then, the people they needed to apologize to were light years behind them. Though the Abh valued fair trade, it wasn't enough to make them turn back just to apologize.

The Abh, they are arrogant and reckless, that was their reputation on numerous worlds. It spread after the empire was formed, but the roots for it was probably created on some world during this period.

Eventually, the Abh, who had collected technologies from various worlds of humanity, came up with the theories behind planar space travel. The Abh settled down on a certain system, and began experimenting with opening their sords. When they finally succeeded after spending more than fifty years, the Abh decided to monopolize this technology.

Up until then, all of the worlds of humanity were isolated, so it was impossible for interstellar war to occur. But, planar space travel technology would make it possible. Though the universe was plentiful in space, mankind had a talent for finding reasons to go to war with each other. If multiple societies had planar space travel technology, they would probably be unable to keep away from going to war with each other. In order to prevent that, they had to monopolize the technology.

But, it was a scientific theory, and technology. Even if they forbid research into it by law, someone would eventually discover it. So the Abh decided to tie mankind together, and decided to monopolize the technology with their military might.

When the founding emperor Dune declared the formation of the Empire, the total population of the Abh was 27904. According to the estimates by the Abh population studies experts, this was a rather accurate figure, the total population of mankind at the time was over 100 billion.

They decided to try to rule more than 100 billion people with less than 30,000.

They are arrogant and reckless indeed.

But unfortunately, the Abh were not the first ones to step into planar space. In one of the colonies, the Sumei system, methods of utilizing planar space was discovered out of coincidence. The people of Sumei did not try to monopolize the technology, and they willingly, though it was quite expensive to trade for, spread it to twenty other systems.

The Abh realized that others had already discovered planar space by the time they added five systems into the Empire, and felt displeasure. The Abh believed that what the Sumei system was doing would make politics in space unnecessarily complex. They believed that politics in space should be simple, and the simplest state of politics was when there was only one ruling body.

The Abh declared: no race used Space other than the Abh. Since the inhabitants of planets do not love space, they should just try to find happiness on planets. That way everyone can live together in harmony. Unfortunately, other interstellar nations had their own opinions, so the Empire's belief was rather unpopular.

The Abh knew of respecting intellectual property rights, so they did not do anything to the systems that bought the technology from the Sumei, but they had no intentions of following the example set by the Sumei. So they conquered without hesitation any system they came to that still had not discovered planar space travel.

Human society turned out exactly the way the Abh predicted. Interstellar nations didn't seem to even bother to find a real conflicting view point, and turned upon each other without any reason that would convince a third party. The Empire watched as various states bargained each other, with their existence on the line, as if they were watching children playing an interesting game. But, due to circumstances, they were occasionally forced to participate in wars as well.

The Abh knew no mercy and did not know where to draw the line where war was concerned. Once war began, negotiating a peace was impossible. It continued until the enemy state lost their interstellar travel technology, and was absorbed into the Empire as individual worlds. This tradition had various repercussions. Two emperors and seven crown princes, and various nobles of the Empire died in space. But thus far, the Empire of Mankind by the Abh has won in the end every time.

The Empire, ruled by a species different from their own, that did not view war as an extension of diplomacy, was a frightening body for the other nations. The other interstellar nations continued conquering each other and splitting up to civil wars, but its numbers constantly dwindled. Now there were only four other than the Empire left. In order of national power, The United Mankind, The Hania Alliance, the Greater Alkont Republic, and the United Systems of Democracy.

The greatest of them, the United Mankind has a population of more than 600 billion. The population of all four nations reached 1.1 trillion. There all had small things that they shared, and all of them had a democratic government.

Twelve years ago, the four nations gathered on the Nova-Sicilia system within the United Mankind, and signed a treaty and gave up on their old feuds. It is a military alliance. Who it is against, was unspoken, but it is clear that it was against the only nation that was not invited, "The Empire of Mankind by the Abh".

The treaty is called the Nova-Sicilia treaty, and referred to its member nations as the Nova-Sicilian states. But they preferred to refer to themselves as the States Valuing Human Rights, and the Empire simply called them "The Alliance of Four".

The goal of the military alliance, was to try to scare the Empire, and force them to negotiate with them. But, the Empire unexpectedly liked the existence of the Nova-Sicilia treaty. After all, politics became a lot simpler since all of the other nations had declared itself an enemy of the Empire.

Since then, the Empire and the Nova-Sicilian treaty states had been quietly hostile to each other. But during the past years, the quiet hostility had turned into serious hostility. The treaty states said that the reason for it was behind the invasion of the Hyde system by the Abh Empire. But Lexshue knew that it was simply an excuse.

The Hyde system was invaded seven years ago. The treaty states had filed complaints against the Empire together just like usual, but remained silent afterwards. But, one year ago, they had apparently discovered that the invasion of the Hyde system was an unforgivable crime. It's not that anything new developed in the Hyde Earldom. If something new had developed, it had to have been within the treaty states.

"This must be it." Lexshue muttered.

"What is?" Lelia looked up curiously.

"No." Lexshue laughed bitterly. "Don't you think the 'Alliance of Four' has been rather provocative lately? They've made unreasonable demands like the independence of the Hyde system, and our opening a route within the Empire to it so that they can safeguard its independence. They must have known that the Empire would never accept it."

"And?"

"That means they're prepared, and they want an excuse."

"I see. Preparing for this must have taken some time."

First collect closed gates from normal space, then open them and see where it leads to in planar space. It's impossible to tell where a gate leads without opening it. How many gates did they investigate before they found one that leads to the arm of the Abh? Then they would need to carry the gate that met all the requirements to a nearby-inhabited system, in other words another gate, through normal space.

They would need to wait for the gate to close once again before they could transport it. If an open gate is left alone in a low energy state, it naturally closes into a closed gate. But, the half-life for this process is 12 years.

"If it took them less than ten years to prepare for this, I'll have to start believing in miracles, either that or nightmares."

"They must have been at it since before the invasion of the Hyde system." Lelia agreed.

"Yes, the business concerning the Hyde Earldom was simply a recent disagreement. Maybe the Nova-Sicilia treaty was formed only because this plan of theirs was coming into shape."

"I don't understand." Lelia shrugged. "Why do they make such blatant lies?"

"This lie is there only to fool one group, themselves."

"Self glorification... I really don't understand them now."

"I don't really understand the way they work either. But they probably want to believe that they're the good side."

"What an honor. So we're a manifestation of evil." Lelia said coldly.

"Oh, you didn't know Lelia?" Lexshue said happily. "We're invaders from afar and mass-murderers. You should look at a history book of the United Mankind sometime. Apparently all evils in the world are caused by the Abh..."

The communications officer in charge of the investigation reported in just as Lexshue got that far. "Change in enemy space-time bubbles!"

No one corrected the young Wing Flyer's assumption that the unidentified space-time bubbles were the enemy. Lexshue looked towards the unidentified space-time bubbles.

"One space-time bubble has split into ten. They are heading towards us. Judging from their mass, I believe they're single-assault ship space-time bubbles."

A space-time bubble's speed is dependent only on its mass. At this point, there is no hope of altering it through technology. Simply, the lighter they are the faster they are. Most fleets have high mass vessels like ships-of-the-line (Alek) or transports (Isaz), so they are slower than cruisers. However, a fleet formed only out of small ships like the assault ships are different. It was quite clear that the goal of the split off space-time bubbles is to slow the Gosroth down.

"When will our guests enter the range of our torpedoes?"

The communications officer replied immediately. "Around 2115 ship time." They had four hours.

"Second in command." The Captain said. It was a harsh voice vastly different from before. "Yellow Alert. We'll enter Red Alert at 2030 ship time. Head arms officer, analyze our tactics. I have to know what our chances of victory are."

The faces of the non-regular crewmembers the Princess and the successor to the Earl flashed across Lexshue's mind as she gave out the orders.

Jinto was struggling with "Rules for life in the Administrative Trainee Program" in his room. According to the Flyers at the recruitment office, it was expected of all trainees to have memorized this before they entered school.

This is impossible!

Jinto muttered the worst word he could think of in the language of Delktu. He had no idea that this much content would be in the memory chip that he received at the recruitment office.

Whoever it is that made this rulebook must have been unaware of the concept of erasing archaic rules. Instead, he made up for it by adding in detailed criteria and exceptions. At the end of the endless pages of listings of rules, it said "Outdated on x month x day of xxx year of the Imperial Calendar (Luekos)."

And to think, I'll be going there next month...

Though he was to blame as well for not glancing at it before coming aboard the Gosroth, he still despised it with a passion. Jinto tackled "Etiquette for Lunch". He glanced at the end to make sure it wasn't out of date, and began memorizing the 112 rules. He skimmed through everything he already knew, and repeated the rules that seemed peculiar to him.

A chime rang just as Jinto began to go insane. Jinto raised his head from the screen on his wrist computer.

I wonder what it's for.

He glanced at the index of his rulebook in the hopes that it would tell him.

There was no need. A ship wide announcement immediately followed the chime.

"This is the Captain to the crew. Remain at your posts. An unidentified fleet of space-time bubbles is cruising roughly 1540 Kedrels 78 degrees from the vessel. Their destination seems to be the same as ours, the Sfagnoff system." The Captain paused for a moment, as if she wanted the information to settle into the crew's minds. "Listen up boys and girls, at this rate we will arrive at Sfagnoff first. But, apparently they don't want that to happen, so they've sent ten single assault ship space-time bubbles at us. We're not sure where they came from yet, but it looks like a fleet from the United Mankind. We may be entering a battle everyone."

Is this a drill? Jinto wondered.

He couldn't make himself believe that it was so. It was too realistic.

"This is not a drill." Lexshue's voice kindly confirmed it. "I repeat, this is not a drill. If they're persistent, we will be going into combat around 2115 ship time. We will enter red alert at 2030 ship time. Any off duty crewmembers are to rest in preparation for it. I'll repeat it once more so make sure you listen up, My Beloved Crew, this is not a drill or a rehearsal. This has been your Captain."

Jinto stared at the roof stunned, and tried to deal with the information that entered his ear.

We're going into combat!?

It was unbelievable. To the best of Jinto's knowledge, the Empire was not at war with anyone. They were deep within Abh territory too. It should have been a simple stroll, completely safe. Jinto stared at the family standard confused. It didn't help. He returned his gaze to the screen.

He had no idea what he had to do now, but it was certain that this was not the time to be studying. Jinto turned his wrist computer off.

What will I do?

He didn't feel like demanding an explanation by barging into the bridge or sending them a message. It would be useless for Jinto to know the details.

"Jinto, may I come in?" He heard Lafiel's voice through the intercom.

Jinto jumped on it like a cat onto a fresh fish. "Sure, come in Lafiel!"

The door opened. Lafiel just stood at the door, and made no motions to enter.

"Exactly what's going on?"

"It's just as you heard. I don't know anything else either." Lafiel said. "Looks like you made it here just in time to see a war start."

"What luck." Jinto muttered. His life seemed to be a series of unexpectedly lucky events. He didn't have to try at all to meet up with trouble. "I hope it ends before I join the force."

"I doubt that." Lafiel said. "We do not like ending a war unfinished, and it looks like our opponent is the United Mankind this time. I wonder if it'll end in my life time..."

"You really do have a talent for cheering a guy up Lafiel." Jinto sighed.

"More importantly, I was ordered to take you to the bridge. Can you come now?"

"I'll go." Jinto stood up, and put his headpiece, showing his status as the successor to the Earl on.

"I wonder if she'll have a special spectator's seat ready for me to watch from."

"You can ask." Lafiel replied coldly.

Jinto felt a strange atmosphere on the bridge when he arrived there. There was a nervous tension that filled the air.

"I apologize for making you come all this way, Your Grace." Lexshue said. "Flyer trainee Abrial, please remain where you are."

"Yes, sir." Lafiel stood at attention diagonally behind Jinto.

"Your Grace the successor to the Earl, unfortunately we don't have a seat for you." Lexshue looked up at Jinto from the Captain's chair.

"Please don't concern yourself over it, I'll stand."

"I'm sure you understand what's going on from the broadcast earlier."

"Yes, we'll be going into combat?"

The Captain nodded. "Our chance of victory is .37. This figure is based on the assumption that the enemy is using state-of-the-art warships. But even if they have an inexperienced crew manning derelict ships, the figure doesn't quite hit .5."

"Not very good." Jinto was strangely calm despite the fact that death was quickly approaching him. Everything seemed surreal to him. He must have not caught onto it mentally yet.

"Yes, it would be best if we could run away, but the situation will not allow that." The Captain laughed bitterly. "So, we must have Your Grace the successor to the Earl leave the ship."

"I see." Jinto nodded. It was a good idea. A spaceship is a collection of very precise technology. Even the lowest of the crew that operates it, a fourth class crewman, has had a year of special training before being assigned. Even if Jinto, with no training at all, awakens to a noble desire to help, he would only get in the way. The greatest contribution he could make during battle would be to cower in his room so that he doesn't get in the way. But there is a problem, how would he get off a cruiser traveling through planar space. He knew that the Captain had more to say, so Jinto remained quiet.

"There is a communications ship on this ship. It is small but it was planar space travel capability. Please go to Sfagnoff ahead of us on this. You will need to refuel once on the way, but you should still be able to arrive before that space-time bubble group. Please transfer to another ship after that. There is a communications fleet base at Sfagnoff, so you won't need to rely on luck to catch a flight." Lexshue glanced behind Jinto for an instant. "Flyer trainee Abrial shall take you to the Sfagnoff system."

"But Captain!" Lafiel shouted out in protest. "I do not have a command certificate."

"But you should know how to fly that ship." The hectocommander pointed out. "You'll automatically get your certificate after this trip. It's a matter of paper work. You can fly it, trainee."

"But I'd like to remain on this ship and..."

"I have no intentions of discussing this with a flyer trainee. Am I not the Captain of this ship?" Lexshue said, intending to end the conversation.

"I can't accept this." Lafiel didn't back away. "I'll say so once more. I am an Abrial, it would be a shame to the name of Abrial if I were to run before an enemy..."

The Captain stood up, and glared at Lafiel with her golden pupils. "Wait at least until you get a double-winged headpiece before you start spouting nonsense like that Abrial Nei Dubrusque The Viscountess of Paryuun Lafiel. What are you saying is running before an enemy? You don't have a position on this ship. You are incomplete, you would only be in the way here. But, I gave you a duty, an important duty to take His Grace the successor to the Earl away from here, and inform the Empire of the approach of a possible enemy fleet. Would not refusing to accept that duty not be running before the enemy? You're too stupid to even understand what running before the enemy is, if that is not a shame to the Abrial, then they are not worthy of the loyalty of the Abh. If you still have anything to say, I'll arrest you on insubordination. Say anything else you have to say at the infamously strict upper royal council!"

Jinto, who was standing between them, could only glance between them worried. He was suddenly downgraded to simply watching to see what will happen to him from actually participating in it.

Lafiel turned pale, and bit her lower lip. But it was incredible of her not to look away or try to avoid the Captain's gaze.

"I misunderstood Captain." The princess said.

"I'm glad you understand." Lexshue nodded. "Immediately go prepare the communications ship (Pelia) for launch. I still need to talk to His Grace the successor to the Earl."

"Understood." Lafiel saluted. "I will go prepare the communications ship for launch."

"Just report in with me once it's prepared. There's no need to come back."

"... Understood."

Lafiel and Lexshue's gaze met for an instant.

"Go on now." Lexshue's attitude changed, and became gentle. "Let's meet at Lakfakalle My Beloved Highness."

"Yes, certainly." Lafiel seemed to wish to say something else, but she turned away after saluting once more.

Once she made certain that Lafiel disappeared behind the door, the Captain turned towards Jinto once more. "Your Grace the Successor to the Earl, we are limited in both time and space, so please take the bare minimum amount of luggage you can."

"I intended to do so." Jinto nodded. "I trust that I will get the rest at the Capitol."

"I apologize that we could not keep our promise to take you to the Capitol."

"There were many mix-ups with the transportation system at Volash as well."

“I feel better that you think of it like that. Oh yes, Your Grace the successor to the Earl.”

“What is it?”

“There is something I’d like you to take with you other than your belongings.”

“Yes?”

Lexshue turned towards the wall behind the Captain’s chair. “Weapons closet open. Hectocommander Lexshue Uef Lobel Prakia.”

The wall opened. There were quite a few hand arms inside. The Star Forces has just about given up on the practice of intra-ship combat. They just keep it as a tradition. But, they have hand arms stored on the ship in case they need to operate in a hostile environment, or if there is a mutiny of the crew (for the sake of the Star Forces, this hasn’t happened in 200 years).

Lexshue took out two laser pistols (Kraanyu), and gave it to him along with holsters and flash grenades. “Keep one for yourself Your Grace, and give the other to flyer trainee Abrial. She should know how to use it.”

“Why will we need this?” He reluctantly took the gun.

“Just in case.” The Captain looked at the planar space diagram on the floor, “I believe that to be the advance force of an enemy assault fleet. If they’re not, there’s no point in splitting their fighting force up just to stop us. But, I have a feeling that they’re just moving to an instinctual desire to destroy.”

“You mean... Sfagnoff may already be in enemy hands by the time we arrive there?”

“I pray that it’s not the case.” The hectocommander nodded slightly.

“Umm, Captain.” Jinto seemed to understand what Lexshue was actually trying to do. “Your actual goal was to try to let Her Highness the princess get away right? I’m sure there’s someone who would be a much better guard than myself...”

Jinto closed his mouth when those two golden pupils shot at him

But, the Captain’s tone of voice was very courteous. “Please don’t misunderstand me. We are supposed to try to avoid battle when we have non-combatants aboard, if we can’t possibly avoid it, we need to attend to the safety of the non-combatants. This is a duty given to all commanders of the Star Forces. It is also true that flyer trainee Abrial does not have a position on this ship. Even if flyer trainee Abrial came from a nameless family, I would have made her pilot the communications ship.

“I’m sorry, I asked a stupid question...” Jinto backed down. He was not as strong as Lafiel.

“But” Lexshue’s gaze softened. “It would be a lie if I said that I wasn’t grateful that Her Highness the Princess is a flyer trainee.”

“You’ve being very considerate, Captain.”

“Yes.” Hectocommander Lexshue let a smile appear on her face. “Even though status is not supposed to matter in the force, Her Highness Lafiel is someone who may one day become Empress. She may become an excellent Empress. When that happens, I’d like her to admit that it was all thanks to her training as a flyer trainee, that is my ambition. I won’t let her be cut off as a bud.”

“You’re right.”

“You should be leaving now. Please gather up the belongings in your room. I feel bad that I cannot have someone guide you, but you should know the way to the shuttle bay.”

“I’ll be fine.” Jinto responded, “Oh yes, I’ll leave my family standard behind. I look forward to the day when you can give it back to me as a memento of my stay here.”

A curious shade appeared on her golden pupils. “Spoken like a true noble, Your Grace.”

“Really? I’m glad.” Jinto said humbly, interpreting it as a compliment. “Well then, Captain, I’ll be going now.”

“Your Grace the Successor to the Earl, please take care of Her Highness the Princess.”

“I can’t think of a situation so dire that Her Highness would count on me.” Jinto said humbly. “But if that does happen, I’ll do my best.”

7. Battle of the Gosroth

“Communications vessel, space-time separating.” Lexshue nodded silently in response to the report by the communications officer she had placed in charge of investigation of the enemy fleet.

The tense bridge was already operating with all assigned crewmembers. The last time the Empire displayed their invincibility was 47 years ago during the Camintale campaign, if you disregard insignificant events like the invasion of the Hyde system. That war, when the current Empress Ramaju fought as the Crown Princess and high commander of the Imperial Star Force, felt like a thing of the past to even the long-lived Abh. Of course, no one on the Gosroth has any real combat experience. They had a right to be nervous.

Second in command Lelia had recovered more of his usual calmness than anyone else.

“The girl and boy left.” Lelia said to the Captain from the second in command seat diagonally behind her.

“I just hope nothing happens to them.” Lexshue tapped at her armrest as she watched the small blue dot move further and further away.

“I hope so too.” Lelia said happily. “They both had strange upbringings, so they may become rather interesting people when they grow up. Though they are plenty interesting already.”

“Yes.” Lexshue mumbled.

The Princess, who grew up in the royal family, the source of all that is Abh, and entered the trainee program at the age of 13, was a stereotypical Abh. On the other hand, the Successor to the Earl cannot let go of his grounder ways, he was a peculiar Imperial noble. They contrasted each other so much.

“I hope they influence each other for the better.” Lelia said.

“Oh, Lelia” Lexshue turned back towards her second in command in surprise. “You say things that I expect to hear from a teacher. Do you wish to get transferred to the trainee program?”

“Not at all.” Lelia shook his head. “I’m not the type of person who can be held responsible for a youngster’s education. I feel much more comfortable on the front lines. Especially now that a war is starting.”

“Don’t say so just for my regard, I won’t think of it as running away.”

“If I do request transfer to a rear position, you can think so all you want. But, right now I have no intentions of doing so.”

“Oh, too bad.”

“Am I really that bad of a second in command?” Lelia laughed bitterly.

“You’ll find out on your next work evaluation.” Lexshue smiled, and turned her gaze back to the front.

“Teacher Lelia, what do you think of His Grace the Successor to the Earl?”

“He’s a nice young man. He probably silently questions himself about everything he does, about whether it’s what an Abh would do. I like his eyes a great deal.”

“I like him too.” Lexshue laughed as she recalled memories about him. “Including the overly direct questions he asked sometimes. I had never thought more about our race than during these past five days.”

“A citizen would hold back on asking some of those questions. But His Grace didn’t hesitate to ask them at all.”

“He was holding back on some questions though.”

“It would be a good experience for Her Highness to interact with His Grace.”

“Yes. Making those two meet each other may be the greatest deed I have ever done. But that’s only if the two of them make it back to the Capitol safely.”

“You must be very worried.” Lelia said teasingly.

“Is it strange to be worried?” Lexshue’s gaze challenged her second in command.

“Well to tell you the truth, we are the ones facing the greater danger. Is that not why you sent those two away? I don’t think the situation really lets you worry about anyone else. Though it troubles me deeply to challenge my superior officer like this.”

“What an interesting idea, that you feel troubled for challenging your superior officer.” The Captain gazed at the group of yellow dots that approached them. “But, you’re right. I need to carry out my duties towards my subordinates right now.”

19:37...

“Captain” Head communications officer forward flyer Yunselia reported. “We have entered communications range with the unknown space-time bubble group.”

“Name ourselves, and ask them who they are.” Lexshue ordered.

“Understood.” An inter-bubble transmission was sent from the cruiser Gosroth.

“This is the cruiser Gosroth. Tell us the name of your ship, and your affiliation.”

A response returned after a long awkward moment.

“This is...” The communications officer focused her spatial sense on the patterns that appeared on the inner surface of the space-time bubble. “This is not a transmission, it’s a challenge to fight.”

“It’s decided then.” Lexshue muttered. The slight hope that they were friendly ships operating under orders she was unaware of disappeared. But somehow she felt relieved for it.

“They are repeating their challenge to fight. Shall we respond?”

“No, let them be. If they want to play, they need to catch up first.”

The ten space-time bubbles approached as they screamed out their bloodthirsty message.

20:30

“It’s time Captain.” Lelia quietly told her.

“Okay.” Lexshue announced to all crewmembers at all stations. “To the crew, this is your Captain. The unidentified space-time bubble has clearly declared that they are the enemy. We are switching to red alert now. Put a pressure suit on, and all crew are to go to combat stations.” Simultaneously, an alarm began to sound throughout the ship.

A combat control monitor rose before the Captain’s chair. There was a diagram of planar space on its surface, but its range was limited to the immediate surroundings of the ship, so it did not show the enemy yet. Lexshue connected her data link into the combat control monitor.

Despite the Captain’s orders, no one on the bridge put a pressure suit on. The space-time bubble generator was stationed right below the bridge, and securely defended in a spherical shell. This room would be not depressurized until the ship was destroyed. In other words, it would be meaningless to wear a pressure suit on the bridge, so it was normal to keep it off.

“All crew at combat stations.” Second in command Lelia reported, he had been monitoring the ship wide crew stations display.

“Prepare for torpedo combat (Hoksatioks) The Captain said without pause. “fuel torpedoes seven through ten with antimatter fuel.”

The mobile space-time torpedoes, shortened torpedoes, had a space-time bubble generator. It was a small planar space starship. Its size was considerable. So even a large cruiser cannot hold too many. Gosroth can only carry ten, and one through six had already been used in mock battles.

The destructive capability and propulsion of a torpedo is in antimatter. Since it would be too risky to constantly have it filled with antimatter, it is fueled with antimatter from the mother ship just before use. Director decacommander Gyumlia ordered the antimatter fuel deck to begin transferring antimatter. The antiprotons flowed into the torpedo through the electromagnetic fields. Four torpedoes were fueled in such way.

“Torpedoes fueled with antimatter.” Head arms officer forward flyer Saryush repeated the report from the antimatter fuel deck for the Captain.

“Launch torpedoes, have them await further orders within our space-time bubble.” The four torpedoes were shot out. The torpedoes waited in the same space-time as the Gosroth, and began circling the ship.

21:13

“Enemy space-time bubbles entering the range of our torpedoes!” The communications officer reported. Saryush looked up at the Captain questioningly, but she shook her head silently.

The ten space-time bubbles came in even closer, and began surrounding the Gosroth.

“Their formation is right out of the books.” Lexshue commented, “All torpedoes activate space-time bubbles!”

“Torpedoes activating space-time bubbles.” The torpedo arms officer repeated. After a few keystrokes, he raised his head, “All torpedoes have generated space-time bubbles.”

The enemy space-time bubbles could already be seen on the combat control monitor. Little red numbers were placed next to each of them on the screen.

“Torpedo targets. 7 to 3, 8 to 1, 9 to 6, 10 to 7.” Lexshue ordered. It would be best to send two torpedoes into each space-time bubble, but that was a luxury they could not afford then.

“Inputting orders.” The voice of the torpedo arms officer raised the tension on the bridge. “Orders given.”

Lexshue switched her headpiece to external sensors. The readings from the sensors throughout the ship flowed into her navigational lobe. The sensations of the bridge disappeared from her spatial sense. Lexshue is in the middle of a spherical bubble of space. The inner surface of the space-time bubble was shining gray from the impacts of space-time particles. It foreshadowed the coming battle.

“Prepare for normal space combat. Activate main engines.”

“Understood, activating main engines.” Gyumlia repeated.

The reliable vibrations of antimatter meeting matter spread through the ship. But, there were probably quite a few crewmembers that felt fear from it.

“Head arms officer, prepare the rail guns.”

“Understood, preparing rail guns for launch.” Forward flyer Saryush had put his control glove on. It was his job to pilot the ship within the space-time bubble. The forward flyer turned the safeties off the rail guns with his right hand, and sent the first rounds into the gun. “Rail guns ready to fire.”

The red dots had completely surrounded the blue dot, the cruiser Gosroth. They circled around the Gosroth, closing in on it like a prey.

They really are doing it by the books.

Lexshue was impressed. She could tell that they were quite disciplined. It was quite difficult to establish an ordered formation like that in planar space, when you have no way of communicating with the other ships. But, they were just as disciplined, the Captain believed. It was true that the Gosroth was just commissioned three months ago, and that it would have been a stretch to say that the crew worked together smoothly. But every member of the crew was an experienced soldier, and would do his or her job.

21:32

Lexshue stood up from her seat, and pulled the control rod out of her belt. The Captain’s chair sunk into the ground. With the communicator on her control rod, she said to the crew “Okay, my beloved crew, let’s begin. You must be tired of waiting by now. Begin combat!”

The alarm shook the air in the ship just as Lexshue said those words.

The Captain pointed at the torpedo arms officer with her control rod, “All torpedoes are to space-time separate!”

“Torpedoes separating.” The arms officer said. “Seven has space-time separated. Eight has space-time separated. Nine...”

The torpedoes left the range of Captain Lexshue’s spatial sense one after another. Four more blue dots appeared around the blue dot of the Gosroth. Each assaulted a red dot, traveling their own courses.

“Eight has space-time merged... Enemy space-time bubble one has disappeared!” The communication’s officer’s report flooded the bridge.

There was no way Lexshue could have known so, but the enemy vessel in the first space-time bubble was the destroyer “KEO3799” of the United Mankind’s peacekeeping force. The Captain, Lieutenant Carlton and the twenty-three crewmembers are recorded as being the first casualties of this long war.

Seven and Ten also each took out a space-time bubble. The space-time bubbles broke down into space-time particles, and dispersed through planar space. But Nine missed its target. Enemy space-time bubble number six still approached them, unfazed.

“Turn about! Forty degrees to the right! We’ll ram into enemy number four!” She pointed at the planar space navigator with her control rod. The enemy seemed to wish to space-time merge with the Gosroth from all directions at once to surround it. It was a very basic and deadly plan, but there was no reason why the Gosroth should let them.

“Understood.” The navigator replied.

Planar space slid around the immobile blue dot. The red dot with the number 4 approached them.

“Distance 100 Sheskedrel, 50 Sheskedrel...”

“Space-time merging! Location...”

The Captain already detected one portion of the space-time bubble boiling due to the extra space-time particles.

“Front towards the merging point!” Lexshue pointed the control rod towards the merging point. The direction the control rod pointed in was detected by the sensors in the bridge, and is sent directly to Saryush’s spatial sense by the thought crystals. Right now, the head arms officer’s spatial sense was

sensing the outside of the ship just like the Captain. The movement of the control rod should be doubled up with those sensations in the forward flyer's mind.

"Fire without waiting for orders as soon as we've merged!"

"Understood." Saryush sounded nervous.

"All crew brace for the firing of the rail guns!" The second in command announced to the crew. The head of the ship pointed towards the portion of the inner surface of the bubble that was bubbling up.

"Space-time merging!"

There was no time to even count down.

A large tunnel opened in the spherical space, the other side of which was another universe. The center of that universe was the enemy spaceship. It confronted the Gosroth with hostile intentions. The rail guns fired just as Lexshue noticed tunnel opening.

The main weapon of the cruiser is the rail gun. There are four on the front of the Gosroth, and two on the back. The four on the front shot out nuclear fusion warheads that were accelerated to .01c in an instant.

Another volley followed.

Even the gravity control systems could not handle the large repercussion, and any crew that did not brace for impact was thrown on the ground. Lexshue bore the shudder by hanging onto the combat control monitor.

The eight nuclear fusion warheads flew towards the enemy ship, avoiding the barrage of defensive fire by the enemy ship. After finishing their directional control thrusts, it used up all of its remaining fuel to accelerate towards the enemy ship.

The enemy ship fired its anti-proton gun too. But since most of the anti-proton stream hit the Gosroth head on, it bounced off the defensive magnetic field of the Gosroth harmlessly.

The enemy ship exploded. But they had no time to be celebrating their victory.

"Space-time merging! With enemy number two, five, six..."

Six locations in their space-time bubble were already showing the telltale signs of space-time merging.

"Bring the head about to!" Lexshue pointed to the merging point with the second enemy space-time bubble, which she judged to be the first one to complete, with her control rod. The nose of the ship turned towards it. A volley was sent in right before the tunnel to the enemy's universe opened.

They turned towards their next target without even confirming the enemy's destruction. They were about to space-time merge right behind the warship.

"Bring the tail about to!" Lexshue pointed the control rod over her shoulder.

The Gosroth budged slightly to correct its position, and launched two shots from the two cannons in the rear. Enemy space-time bubble number six hastily tried to space-time separate despite the fact that they had just merged. The first volley burst into their universe in that instant of opening. The other two shots wastefully exploded in the cruiser's bubble, but the enemy space-time bubble disappeared right as it separated.

Enemy space-time bubble number five had completely merged on the cruiser's flank. Neither the head nor the tail would make it in time.

"Shoot it down with the point cannons!" She threw her arm and control rod towards the flank.

"The cruiser Gosroth had many mobile laser cannons and anti-proton cannons, and they could all be controlled from the bridge. The arms men pounded the enemy ship with laser fire and anti-proton streams. But laser bursts and anti-proton streams did not have the auto-lock mechanisms that the rail guns had, so their accuracy was extremely low. Their firepower was quite a bit lower as well.

The enemy ship let loose the four anti-matter torpedoes it had, and fired its anti-proton cannon. The torpedoes were not a problem. They had not been accelerated ahead of time, so they were prime targets for the ship's point-cannons. But the anti-proton cannon that was set at the front of the enemy ship was quite a bit stronger than the mobile type on the cruiser, and could destroy a giant ship in one good hit.

The stream of anti-protons that the enemy ship shot clustered together and flew towards the Gosroth. Though the defensive magnetic field slowed it down, the anti-proton stream still impacted the crystalline outer hull of the Gosroth. It passed through the outer hull instantly, and boiled the water that was stored just inside. It even reached the heavy metal beyond and melted it. The boiling water detonated another part of the outer hull and one of the attitude control thrusters.

The thought crystals of the Gosroth detected the damage and compensated for moving without that attitude control thruster without any signal from the director, but the ship's mobility was hurt.

The space-time bubble, disturbed by the numerous merging points, twisted and distorted. The battle continued within the writhing universe.

23:05

The enemy vessel dubbed number ten turned into a ball of plasma. Two vessels remained. The cruiser was hurt too. Almost half of the point cannons were now silent, and many of the attitude control thrusters were damaged as well.

“Laser cannon number three heavily damaged!”

“Number three forward thruster down.”

“Main engine output has...”

Bad news flowed constantly from all of the sections on the ship. Gyumlia was swamped with organized emergency repair teams and sending them to make emergency repairs.

“Depressurization in section 907. Closing it off.” Sweat came down Clerk Dysh’s forehead as he monitored the environment within the ship. Now more than 40 sections within the ship have been closed off. More than fifty were dead or missing. It was quite a large loss for a ship with a crew of 220.

Lexshue closed her eyes and focused on her spatial sense. The space around them was littered with debris. There may even be people among the debris. But even so, they could not save them. Any shuttles they released would no doubt be shot down. That and... their uniforms were too thin to protect them from the raging radiation.

The two enemy ships buzzed around quickly like bees, but the cruiser’s movement was painfully slow. It was not difficult them to move around the cruiser.

Of course the point cannons were raining fire upon them. Laser fire broke through the outer hull of the enemy ships, shooting out debris. The propulsion thrust of the ships hit debris, raising the particle density of their universe. The floating protons and anti-protons met turning into electromagnetic radiation. Their little universe was fiery as if it was in the middle of a big bang.

But this universe had no chance of creating life. All there is is death. The hatred that wandered through the universe danced with each other, creating more death.

One of the enemy ships was about to enter the range of the rear rail guns, chased by the point cannon fire.

“Tail towards there!” Lexshue shouted for the attention for the head arms officer. Three shots fired seeking vengeance. The strong reaction shook the cruiser’s giant mass. An explosive fireball formed behind them.

One more!

The Captain’s thoughts must have been what the entire crew was thinking.

The last ship fired its anti-proton cannons from the flank. That last shot was fatal.

“Magnetic defense field is gone...” Gyumlia reported with a gasp.

A feeling of doom hung in the air.

“Don’t give up my beloved crew!” Lexshue shouted. “We’re going to beat that out of our universe! Turn the head about!”

The Gosroth slowly began moving the head about. It moved as if begging for a chance to rest after all of its hard work.

“Point cannons concentrate fire to the right of the enemy, force it to move towards the head of our ship.”

But the enemy ship flew towards them all the while, and continued firing its anti-proton cannon. A rain of anti-proton streams, much stronger than before due to the lack of a magnetic defense field, rained upon the cruiser. The point cannons carved out a chunk of the enemy spaceship’s armor, but it failed to slow them down.

Finally, one anti-proton stream penetrated the Gosroth’s outer hull, cut through the inside like butter, and punctured the anti-matter fuel tanks. The magnetic cage was penetrated, and the escaping anti-protons assaulted the material constructing the ship.

23:27

The cruiser Gosroth was destroyed.

The young boy and girl were not aware of the death of the cruiser. Even though mass waves dispersed infinitely, there was a limit to what the meager systems on the communications ship could detect, and a sword was in the way too. That may have been a blessing for the two of them. Even now, despite the fact that they still had hope, the cockpit of the communications ship was dreary.

Jinto sat uncomfortably in the co-pilot's seat. Unlike the shuttle, just a control glove could not pilot the communications ship, because of its planar space travel capability. So, a series of control fitting Jinto's image of such, spread out before them. But there was no need to use them very often in this area scarce of sords.

Lafiel sat taciturn in the pilot's seat and stared at the planar space diagram. Jinto sighed gently next to her in the co-pilot's seat. The only thing in this isolated universe, outside of a few particles of space dust, is the communications ship. The engine room was immediately behind the cockpit of the communications ship, along with a wash station and a small room for sleeping. That was the only habitable space in this entire universe.

We're the only people in this universe...

But, half of the sentient creatures in this universe was deeply depressed. The other half was hardly in a good mood, but wished to fill the universe with a slightly more cheery atmosphere.

"Umm, Lafiel." Jinto tried conversation.

Lafiel raised her head. It was hard to read from her expression exactly what she was thinking.

"You're the Viscountess of Paryuun right?"

"Yes, I am."

"Can you tell me about your territory? What kind of a place is the territory of Paryuun? Since it's called 'the rose country' (Paryuun) it's filled with roses right?"

"No." Lafiel reluctantly responded to him. "There are no life forms at all, let alone a rose. There aren't even microbes on any of the planets."

"Then why is it called the rose country (Paryuun)?"

"A man who loves flowers discovered the world, so he just named all of the worlds after flowers. That's why there's a 'nation of Lilies' (Gyryuun) or a 'nation of camellias' (Speshyuun). That's all."

"I see. What kind of a place is it?"

"It's not worth discussing. There's one yellow star, and seven planets orbit it. The second planet may become habitable with some work. That's why I'm thinking about fiddling with it once I'm relieved of my duties as royalty. I want to make roses bloom all over the planet to suit its name."

"That's wonderful."

"I suppose."

A heavy silence fell upon the cockpit again. Jinto wracked his brain over what to do about the bitter silence yet again. But this time it was Lafiel who broke the silence.

"Jinto"

"What?"

"My thanks to you."

"About what?"

"You're being considerate. It's hardly effective, but I'm grateful for your consideration."

"Sorry that it's not helping." Jinto relaxed even as he took offense.

"Don't be angry." Lafiel smiled slightly. "I am thanking you."

"I'm not angry."

"I'm..." Lafiel stared at the screen once more. "angry. That I was completely useless when I was needed the most."

"That's horrible." Jinto said quietly.

"What?" The Princess stared at him curiously.

"You are being of use to me. You're the only person I can rely on right now. Or is my little life not enough to satisfy your noble sense of duty?"

"... you're right. Forgive me."

"I'm sure that ship is fine." Jinto said with no basis.

"Really?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Jinto said, half trying to convince himself.

"Jinto."

"Yeah?"

"Do you remember what I said about my birth secret?"

"Yes, of course." Jinto wondered why she brought that up all of a sudden.

"It's a secret, don't tell anyone..."

"Okay. I love secrets." Jinto said in a cheery tone, trying to get the Princess to cheer up.

"The source for my genetic material was the Captain."

“Huh?” Jinto wondered if he misheard her. “You mean... hectocommander Lexshue is your mother?”

“She’s not my mother, she’s the my genetic donor.”

“Don’t mind that, I’m still used to my grounder ways.” He explained, “But... she didn’t seem that way at all.”

No, there was. Jinto corrected himself. The Captain called Lafiel ‘My Beloved Highness’ as they were saying goodbyes. He felt something beyond the relationship of an officer and her subordinate.

“What do you think the Star Force is? It doesn’t matter if you’re old friends. Except when you’re alone together.”

“Wow, it’s complicated.” Jinto shrugged. “But...”

“I was proud. Prakia was... The Captain was an acquaintance of mine since I was little, and I respected her. I feel proud that she is the source of half of me. More importantly, I was a daughter of love. The Captain was my father’s love. I thought it may be so, I wished that it may be so...”

“If you knew since when you were little, you should have asked him.” Jinto was half tired of the Abh tradition of separating family and relations.

“I told you. I was still not an adult, so without my father’s consent...”

“No I mean, you should’ve asked the Captain directly.” Lafiel blinked and stared at Jinto.

Jinto worried. “Did I say something strange?”

“Yes” The Princess said. “Something incredibly strange.”

“Oh. But how is it strange? Is it really that strange to ask the Captain directly?”

“There is such a thing as etiquette.”

“Oh... you mean it’s rude to ask your genetic donor if she’s your genetic donor.”

“That is something very shameful Jinto.”

“Oh.” Jinto crossed his arms and thought. I don’t understand. “How is it shameful?”

“You don’t need a reason for something to be shameful. It’s shameful because it’s shameful.”

She has a good point there.

Jinto forced himself to agree. Asking someone if she was your mother would take quite a bit of courage even from his non-Abh perspective.

“Besides, even if I asked, she would not have responded. Only your parent can tell you who the source of your genetic material is.”

“Is that etiquette?”

“Yes, etiquette.”

“How complicated.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’d like to take you to my home world and make you live there for a few years. Then you’ll learn what ‘complicated’ means.”

“Oh. I may take you up on that offer once my duty as royalty is over.” Lafiel said slightly happily.

“Yes, that would be great.” Jinto felt grief even as he answered.

You’ve forgotten. Even then, you’ll only have grown ten years; you’ll still be young. But by then, I’ll either be an old man or dead...

“But She’s your father’s... The King of Kryuve’s love? It’s not rude to ask or tell someone that?”

“Of course not.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Is that confusing too?”

“Very.” Jinto said. “Who did you hear that from? That hectocommander Lexshue is His Highness the King of Kryuve’s love.”

“I can tell even without asking. The Captain came to our palace frequently.”

“How confusing.”

“Stop repeating yourself Jinto.” Lafiel wrinkled her brow. “It annoys me.”

“Don’t mind me.” He leaned back.

Lafiel stared at Jinto as if she wished to say something, but returned her gaze to the screen. “Even if she wasn’t my genetic donor, I still like Prakia. I respected her even in the palace, but I learned to respect her even more on the ship. The other flyers and crew too, though I disliked a few of them, I hope they’re all okay...” Lafiel said as if praying for their safety.

“Yeah.” Jinto remembered each person he spoke to on the cruiser. He had only known them for five days, but they were all nice people. His prejudice of the Abh as being violent invaders had completely disappeared. At least, he had no reason to wish them dead.

Lafiel stood still for a few moments. The deep silence they had finally scared off had returned. This time Jinto remained silent and stared at the controls.

“Jinto” Lafiel raised her head. “Will you tell me about your home world?”

“Yeah sure. Of course.” Jinto felt relieved, “where should I begin. Unlike your territory, I have lots of stories about my home world.”

Jinto noticed the jewel hanging on his chest that he had been fiddling with, and decided to start talking about the organism on it, about the tragic dietary habits of the Lezwan.

The next two days, outside of the time they spent sleeping in shifts, Jinto talked about what he remembered, and sometimes what he made up concerning the organisms on the planet Martinyu. Surprisingly, he succeeded in making Lafiel laugh a few times.

After two days on the communications ship, Jinto and Lafiel arrived at the territory of the Baron of Febdash.

8. The Territory of the Baron of Febdash

The Febdash territory has a blue star and two gas giants, and numerous asteroids. Even with the Empire's best terraforming technologies, creating a habitable planet would be impossible. The asteroids didn't have any resources worth ferrying out over planar space either.

It was an empty star system, even more so than the territory of Paryuun. But the Baron family did get an income from this territory. It was a business that could be run anywhere with a star. A merchandise that is constantly in demand and stable: the production of antimatter.

To turn matter around and create antimatter is theoretically impossible. If you wish to create antimatter, you have to use an archaic method that predates any civilization.

First you absorb the energy from a star with solar batteries, and use that energy in a particle accelerator to accelerate an elementary particle. If you make elementary particles impact each other at high speeds, the energy from the impact condenses to form matter and antimatter.

At this territory, they were producing antimatter just like at any other resourceless star systems. Many circular disks orbit near the star Febdash. These are the antimatter generators. The side of the disk facing the star is filled with solar batteries, and sixteen linear accelerators protrude from its back.

The heat and light radiated from the star are absorbed by the solar batteries, and sent to the linear accelerators, and turn into matter and antimatter at the center of the circular disk. Out of this the only thing gathered is the anti-proton. The protons are thrown away. It is much cheaper to collect protons from gas giants rather than to make a device to collect them.

The gathered anti-proton is stored in a container attached to the antimatter generators. Once the container is full, it detaches and orbits the star outside the orbit of the factory as an asteroid, so that the factory isn't destroyed in the event of an accident.

The Manor of the Baron of Febdash orbited even further out than the fuel asteroids. The Febdash sord was placed like it was a gate to the manor. Now, a single communications vessel invaded the territory from the sord.

"Can you display the outside for me Lafiel?" Jinto requested.

"Okay." She closed the hand in the control glove in a complex shape, and the walls of the cockpit became filled with stars.

"I didn't know that the stars were so comforting." Jinto said sincerely. The inside of the space-time bubble was a dreary gray. Compared to that, the glittering stars felt much more friendly. He understood a little of why the Abh called themselves 'the Kin of the Stars' and thought of Space as their home.

"The journey ahead is still long Jinto." Lafiel was cool. "We'll return to planar space as soon as we've refueled."

"Can we take a break while we refuel?" Jinto asked full of hope.

"What do you need to take a break from? You haven't done anything."

"Thanks for reminding me." Jinto said sarcastically. "But I was monitoring the devices while you slept."

"Every time something happened you woke me up."

"I never woke you up because nothing ever happened."

"That is all thanks to the thought crystals and myself."

"Fine." Jinto gave up.

It was true that Jinto hadn't done anything, or more precisely can't do anything, but the communications ship was set on autopilot. He had never seen Lafiel do anything either.

Compared to that – Jinto muttered in his heart – I've done a lot more work from trying to start conversations.

Lafiel communicated with the control tower. "This is a communications vessel from the cruiser Gosroth. Requesting response from Febdash manor operations." A grounder woman appeared on the screen that displayed the star charts.

"This is Febdash manor operation."

"This is the communications vessel from the cruiser Gosroth. We request refueling."

"A communications vessel from a cruiser?" The operator asked curiously. It was probably rare to see a communications vessel request refueling without the mother ship.

But even so the operator nodded. “Understood, communications vessel from the Gosroth. We welcome you. Please select how you would like to be refueled.”

“This is a light weight ship, so we request refueling in your docking port.”

“Understood. Please transmit the refueling quantity that you request.”

“Understood.” Lafiel ended the transmission, and said to Jinto “If we refuel at the docking port, we can take a break. We can probably take a shower too.”

“That’s great!” said Jinto. “Taking a bath isn’t a bad idea at all. Right now you’re probably the smelliest princess in all of the galaxy.”

“What did you say Jinto?” Lafiel’s pretty eyes narrowed into a slit. “Was that an expression of your admiration towards death? I’ll help you if it was.”

“It was a joke, Lafiel” Jinto felt troubled by the glint of light in Lafiel’s jet-black pupils. “You don’t smell that much, I promise.”

“That much?” Lafiel’s eyes narrowed even more.

“I mean, you don’t smell at all.” Jinto corrected himself immediately. That was closest to the truth. “What kind of an idiot would suggest that you would smell at all!?”

“Have you noticed Jinto? Your jokes sometimes touch upon things they shouldn’t.”

“Even if I notice, I forget it right away. That’s the problem.”

Lafiel brought her sleeve up to her nose, took a deep breath, and made a face. “Well I suppose there is something behind your opinion.”

Jinto carefully remained silent.

“But, you are hardly sanitary yourself.”

“Yeah.” Jinto admitted, “But you’ll probably find a successor to an Earl or two that are dirtier than I am somewhere in the Empire. I mean there are a lot more of us than there are princesses.”

Just as Lafiel opened her mouth to say something back, the operator called them from the screen.

“We have approved your refueling in the docking port, communications vessel from the Gosroth. No problems, please move to the docking port immediately...”

The operator trailed off. Her eyes had been glazed over looking bored, but suddenly they opened wide, and she muttered. “Your Highness the Princess...” She seemed to have been surprised by who the pilot was. She bowed her head.

I see – Jinto thought – Even this far out, people recognize Lafiel. I must have seemed really out of the loop.

“May I request guidance to the docking port?” Lafiel asked.

“Of course. I’ll immediately do so.” The communications ship approached the manor, guided by the information sent to them by the nervous operator.

“There is something I must notify you about Febdash Manor operator...” Lafiel told them about the invasion of what appears to be an enemy fleet into Imperial territory while they approached the Manor.

“That’s...” The operator broke off. It took her some time to pull herself together again, but she said “I, I must tell that to my Lord.”

“Of course, do so.”

The narrow part of the Manor of the Baron could be seen clearly in front of the blue star Febdash. Old orbital manors are usually a ring. This is to use the centripetal force of rotation as gravity. But, the difference in gravity between levels and rotational speeds is unavoidable with that design. So, recently – recently meaning during the last 300 years – it has become common for manors to carry artificial gravity as well. It took money for the equipment and installation, but it provided a much more comfortable living area.

The Baron’s Manor was of a design that utilized artificial gravity. The main body was a distorted hexagon. A long arm stretched from it, and supported a construct at the end. The construct was the spaceport. Because of the spaceport stored antimatter fuel for refueling various ships, it was built at a distance from the main part of the Manor.

A large hydrogen transport vessel docked at the spaceport as well as a few other small intra-system spaceships, resting there like small insects.

The artificial gravity field surrounding the Manor began to work. The spherical cockpit turned around. The ceiling of the cockpit, which had been facing the front of the ship, turned away from the Manor. A red “17” appeared beneath Jinto’s feet. The 17th docking port was assigned to the communications ship.

They approached the port. The view of the outside was turned off, and the walls turned milky white again. The green letters flowing across the screen reported that they had connected to the docking port.

“Let’s go Jinto.” Lafiel stood up, taking off all the equipment.

“Yeah.” Jinto stood up too, “How long can we stay here?”

“Around half an hour.”

“Just that?” Jinto looked disappointed. That was just enough time for him to wash himself. Though he was plenty thankful for just that.

“We have to get to Sfagnoff as soon as possible.”

“I know.” Jinto followed Lafiel into the engine room. “But how far ahead of the enemy ships are we?”

“What you didn’t know?” Lafiel scorned him. “27 hours by Sfagnoff time.”

“Then we...” Jinto noticed the Princess’s expression “can’t waste a moment’s time. We have to tell Sfagnoff about the danger as soon as possible.

“I’m glad you haven’t forgotten.” Lafiel said bitterly.

The two of them stood above the airlock in the engine room. It was closed off by a drop chute.

“Come down.” Lafiel ordered the drop chute.

The two of them stepped onto the Baron’s Manor after traveling through a clear connection tube. Jinto felt a little dizzy from feeling gravity for the first time in two days, his eyes wandered.

It’s a starry sky. Judging from the fact that the blue star Febdash wasn’t there, it wasn’t a projection of their immediate surroundings. There was another telltale sign that it wasn’t a projection of their immediate surroundings: numerous fishes swam between the stars.

Dozens of grounders stood in attention at the end of the connection tube. They were probably the Baron’s vassals. Jinto felt something strange about it. He realized what it was immediately. All of them were female. The women had their heads bowed down.

“Your Highness the Princess.” One of them stepped forward fearfully. She was the operator that they spoke to earlier. She looked down the entire time, as if meeting the grand daughter of the Empress face to face was bad luck. “Please come this way, I will take you to the resting room.”

“Yes, please do so.” Lafiel’s voice was forceful. “But right now I am a Flyer trainee of the Star Forces, please treat me as such.”

“Yes. I understand, please come this way Your Highness.”

Lafiel sighed as if giving up.

“Is it always like this?” Jinto whispered to her.

“Not at all!” She spat the answer out.

They were taken to a room within the spaceport. There were several couches, and the walls were filled with fishes swimming amongst the stars. No one else was inside. Lafiel was guided to the most secluded couch in the room. When Jinto tried to sit down next to her, the operator motioned for him to stop. “You may be seated over here.”

“Huh?” Jinto just blinked, not understanding. “Why?”

“That’s...” The operator hesitated not knowing how to put it into words. She gazed Jinto right in the face without hesitation.

It’s the usual response. She’s finding the combination of my brown hair and the noble headpiece peculiar. And, she probably thinks she shouldn’t let this young man who obviously has the genetic material of a grounder sit with a noble member of the royal family.

“Jinto!” Lafiel said impatiently. “What are you doing, hurry up and come sit.”

“Yeah” Jinto was angry too, so he sat down without paying heed to the operator.

The operator wrinkled her brow, but didn’t try to disobey the princess. “May I bring you something to drink?” she asked.

“I would rather” Lafiel began, “use a shower room than have something to drink. Please take me there.”

“A member of the royal family take a shower!?” The operator’s eyes opened in surprise. “I will prepare a proper bath, so please give us some time.”

“We don’t have time, and royalty takes showers too.”

“Oh...” The operator was confused. “I dare not respond to that. What should I bring you to drink?”

Lafiel looked at Jinto as if she had lost.

"I'd like a coffee (Surugu), a cold one." He wasn't thirsty, but Jinto said so because he felt that he had to say something.

"I'd like peach juice (Til nom), a warm one, with a slice of lemon (Lop) on the top.

"You've got a peculiar sense of taste, Lafiel." He said so casually, but when he realized, the operator was glaring at him viciously. Jinto cowered back.

"Understood. I'll bring the peach juice (Til nom) immediately. Please wait shortly." The operator erased the expression from her face, lowered her head even more, and backed away out of the room.

"I wonder if she'll bring me my coffee (Surugu)..." Jinto muttered. He felt as if they weren't paying attention to him at all.

"I don't like this place." Lafiel said.

"I agree." Nobles aren't very important compared to royalty, but it was hardly pleasing to be ignored. It wasn't that he wanted to brag about his status, but he wanted them to give a sign that they realized he was there. That was Jinto's wish.

Eventually, the operator returned with another woman and a machine. The machine stopped next to Jinto.

"Go ahead." The operator glanced at Jinto coldly.

"Thanks" for not forgetting, Jinto muttered in his mind, as he took out a cup with cold coffee from the machine.

The other woman was trying to place the cup of peach juice down from her tray. It was evident that she was very nervous. Her fingers were shaking, and the peach juice was moving in waves. Finally the juice spilled. It wasn't very much. A single drop hit the table. But the fear on the face of the two women was as if they had spilled scalding hot water all over the princess.

"Selnay! W-What have you done!" the operator turned pale.

"I'm sorry!" The one called Selnay immediately got down on her knees and apologized.

Jinto laughed. What did they need to apologize like that for? They simply spilled a little bit of the drink.

Lafiel looked disgusted too. "What's the problem?"

"I-I spilled the drink we brought for Your Highness, I-I don't know what to do... Please excuse my insolence..."

"Don't worry about it." Lafiel lowered her hand as if hiding it. "I don't know what your opinion of being raised in the King's palace is like, but I can wipe my own fingers."

"But..." Selnay was about to cry.

Lafiel looked to Jinto for help.

"Umm..." Jinto began. "Wouldn't it be even ruder to continue?"

"Y-Yes." Selnay bit her lip and lowered her head.

"You heard what Her Highness said Selnay." Said the operator. "We should excuse ourselves now."

"Yes." Selnay bowed her head down again, quivering.

"I'm starting to dislike it even more." Lafiel muttered after the two of them left.

"I'm surprised. Are citizens all like that? They seemed scared of something. I thought the crewmen on the Gosroth were much more settled than that." It was not pleasing for Jinto to see, although he was a noble, he was also a grounder.

"Not at all. The crewmen on the Gosroth are normal."

"Oh." Jinto did not believe her. Lafiel said it herself, their family didn't matter in the force, but chances are the Star Force was the exception.

"You don't believe me." Lafiel said surprised. "It's true. You'll find out once you get to the Capitol. I don't make lies that gets foiled right away."

"Mmm..."

"I've even been yelled at by citizens when I was a child!" Lafiel got angry.

"Maybe he didn't know that you were Her Highness the Princess."

"He's not you! Besides, that citizen worked for us. How can he not know who I was?"

"By us do you mean the King of Kryuve family?"

"Yes. He was a gardener for our family. I had made the automated cart malfunction in the dining hall, and ruined the thicket."

"Your stories are hard to understand sometimes. Why would there be a thicket in the dining hall? Was it just outside the dining hall?"

“No, it was a garden style dining hall.”

“Oh.” Jinto recalled something.

The homes of the Abh are usually within an artificial environment. It rains where and when the inhabitant wants it to rain. Since there is no difference between indoor and out, they can even make a flower garden in their bedroom. It was not surprising to have a thicket in the dining hall.

“and...” Lafiel began to narrate.

A suspicious analysis of her story reveals that the gardener said to Lafiel with a strong bearing the following.

That he felt a lot of pride in the work he did, and that he put a lot of artistic work into the late thicket. He felt a great deal of shock and anger in that it was ruined by a seven year old girl’s prank, and that mankind had still not discovered a way in which his anger could be quelled.

By the time his lecture had ended, Lafiel was sincerely apologizing him with quivering lips, and promised never to repeat such a foolish act with the vocabulary of a seven year old.

The gardener did not count on Lafiel’s promise. Without breaking out of his courteous and warm manner, he made sure that it was carved into her memory that “the next time that Your Highness’s automated cart wrecks my artistic works, I will make sure that you spend some time in an intimate relationship with the earthworms.” Before allowing her to go.

“... of course, my father scolded me afterwards too. ‘If you believe that your life is worthless enough to trade for a moment of pleasure, then fine. But, a person’s pride is definitely not worth more than that.’ He said”

“Maybe that gardener was an exception.” Jinto was still suspicious.

“No! The vassals for the Kryuve family and the vassals of all noble families that I know all feel pride in their work, and are proud people.”

“I guess.” Jinto was finally starting to believe her. “But they seem plenty proud in dealing with me.”

“You’re just being ignored.”

“Thank you for telling me that. I was just wondering if that was the case or not.”

“Anyways, I don’t like this. Maybe I should give up on the shower...”

Just then, the wall on the side of the table changed. A square appeared amidst the fish swimming in the stars, and instead the picture of a man appeared.

“I apologize for sending but a transmission.” The man said. “You are Her Highness Lafiel from the family of the King of Kryuve I take it?”

“Yes, I am Abrial Nei Dubrusque The Viscountess of Paryuun Lafiel.” Lafiel introduced herself.

“I am Atosurya Syuunu Atos The Baron of Febdash Klowal. It is my pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you Baron.” Lafiel nodded, and pointed towards Jinto. “He is His Grace, Lin Syuunu Roc The Successor to the Earl of Hyde, Jinto.”

“Nice to meet you Your Grace the Baron.”

“I’m glad to meet you Your Grace.” Once the formal introductions were complete, the man lost interest with Jinto rapidly.

“Well, Your Highness. I must apologize to you for something.”

“What is it?” Lafiel showed suspicion.

“Unfortunately we have a bit of a problem. It has become evident that we don’t have enough fuel for you.”

“Okay. Then we will refuel directly from a fuel asteroid.”

“What are you saying?” The Baron of Febdash laughed gently.

Jinto was scared.

“You’ve come all this way Your Highness.” The Baron continued, “It would be a shame to the Baron of Febdash family if you were to leave like this. I must have you come to my humble manor.”

“Thank you for your invitation but...” Lafiel wrinkled her brow “I am currently on duty, and I don’t have time to be doing such. Have you not heard? Then you should ask your vassals. It is not a matter of etiquette Baron.”

“I have heard, Your Highness. But, I would still like you to accept my invitation.”

“I thank you for your invitation but...” It was clear that she did not feel thankful at all. Lafiel was starting to get impatient. “If you are aware of the circumstances, you must have more important things to do than to welcome us. Perhaps you should prepare to abandon your territory.”

"I thank you for your consideration of us, but unfortunately we do not have a ship. There is nothing we can do."

"Oh. But..."

"But please listen." The Baron interrupted. "The fully fueled fuel asteroids are in orbit quite a distance from us. Everything near us are empty fuel asteroids."

"That's impossible."

"You doubt me, Your Highness?" The Baron made a severe look. "I know the situation here at this system best."

"Forgive me." Lafiel apologized sincerely. "But even if it is a little distance away, we can fly there."

"There is no need, we are accelerating the asteroid this way. It should be in the vicinity in another twelve hours."

"Twelve hours..."

"So, Your Highness. I would like you to spend some time at my Manor in the mean while. At least wash your sweat away in my Manor, and join me for dinner. I have had some experience in the military, and I know some things about what a communications vessel is like. It pains me dearly to know that a member of the royal family has had to endure that environment for a prolonged period of time."

"I am not a member of the royal family right now." Lafiel stressed. "I am requesting fuel from you as a soldier of the Star Force."

"Then, I request the Star Force for more detailed information as a Lord. I have that right."

"Oh." He caught Lafiel off guard. "You're right Baron. I had not realized. We have the Gosroth's logs, so I will give you a copy of necessary passages."

"That is fine." The Baron said dissatisfied, "but I wish to hear it from you at the dinner table."

Jinto was kept at the edge of his seat, listening to them from the side. So this is a conversation of the Empire's upper social class. It sounded like a graceful argument. Lafiel's tone of voice was stiff and completely different from when she spoke to Jinto.

"But, we should arrive earlier than that if we leave on our communications vessel. I would like to depart towards the closest full asteroid as soon as I give you a copy of the logs." Lafiel reiterated.

"That is correct." Said the Baron. "But, I have been informed that Your Highness's communications vessel is in need of a check up. Either way, it cannot be allowed to leave."

"Check up? Where?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard the details. Please ask the person who examined it. But, since she is busy with her duties, you may join me for dinner before doing so." Without waiting for a response, the baron said. "Well then, my vassals will be there to guide you, so please wait where you are."

His face disappeared.

Lafiel glared at where his face was. "He was ignoring you too."

"Yeah." Though they did greet each other, it was only because Lafiel introduced him. He spoke as if Jinto wasn't even present after that. "But you can't blame him. Anyone would pay more attention to the royalty if a member of the royal family and a noble were together."

"If he really wished to welcome us, he should have extended the invitation to you out of courtesy. Am I not right? Or is this confusing to you as well?"

"No. It's not confusing." Jinto thought back to Lafiel's conversation with the Baron. He listened to the conversation as if he was listening in on something he wasn't supposed to, so he didn't notice, but the Baron's attitude was quite rude. But unfortunately, Jinto was used to being treated rudely, so he wasn't very angry. "I'm happy that you're angry for me but..."

"I'm not angry for you."

"Oh." Jinto took a sip of his coffee.

"I don't trust that attitude of his. The communications ship needing a check up was a lie too. Pardon me but I doubt a territory this small has that kind of capabilities. He may just wish to delay us."

"For what? It's not good to be overly suspicious Lafiel."

"But I don't like him."

"Hmm... I agree with you on that..." Jinto crossed his arms. The phenomenon of disliking someone without trading a word does exist. In the case of the Baron of Febdash, what he felt wasn't strong enough to be called hatred, but he did not wish to get to know the Baron. If the first Abh he had met was the Baron of Febdash instead of Lafiel or Captain Lexshue, Jinto would not have grown to like the Abh so quickly.

On the other hand, he may just be the kind of person who makes bad first impressions.

“Let’s think about this logically. If the Baron is plotting something, what is he plotting? What can he gain by keeping us at his manor by lying to us?”

Lafiel looked as if she wished she could think up of some thing.

“Maybe he wants the communications ship.” Jinto suggested.

“For what?” The Princess looked up.

“For what? It’s obvious, to run away from the enemy fleet.”

“That communications ship has two seats. Only two people can go on it.”

“That’s plenty if the Baron plans on running away alone.”

“Leaving his vassals behind?”

“You don’t trust the Baron but you trust in his sense of justice?”

“Idiot. His personality doesn’t matter. Leaving your vassals or subjects behind is the most shameful act a noble can make. Just that is unforgivable before Imperial law. If you pile on the crime of hijacking a ship, he can expect much better treatment in a United Mankind POW camp, rather than the Empire.”

“I see. You have a responsibility to your title.”

“Yes. Your title is a responsibility.” Lafiel nodded.

“But” Jinto did not back down from his idea. “People may do illogical things when they feel threatened. This happened back when I was in the Volash Earldom, but a high-rise building caught on fire. I saw a person jump off of the 35th floor chased by the flames. He probably thought it would be better to plummet to his death rather than burn to death. But I thought then that I’d hate to go out like that. Maybe the Baron is in the mentality of jumping off the 35th floor?”

“Did he look desperate to you?”

“No, he didn’t but...” Jinto grinned then. “Then it means that the Baron doesn’t have a hidden agenda.”

“I suppose so.” Lafiel reluctantly agreed.

“Then let’s accept his welcome. I’ll try to enjoy it.” When Jinto looked to his side, the Baron’s vassals were walking towards them.

9. The Smile of the Abh

The bath did feel great. Lafiel felt all the exhaustion she had built up along with sweat melt away as she lay in the tub. But she couldn't totally relax. The reason behind it was her companions. For some reason, that woman Selnay had followed her into the bathtub and constantly bothered her with offers to "wash her back" or "wash her hair". She seems to have this misconception that royalty all live like that.

But, except for when she was very young, Lafiel has never had someone else wash her body. Usually just dipping in a bath with liquid soap mixed in, and walking under a dryer kept her clean enough. But Selnay didn't believe her.

"Please don't hesitate to ask."

Hesitate!? Does she really believe that a member of the royal family would hesitate to ask for something?

Lafiel grew tired of arguing, and let Selnay do as she please. Even now, Selnay sat by the bath with a fluffy white towel.

"Have you heard? An enemy fleet is headed towards the Sfagnoff system." Lafiel said to her from within the bath.

"Yes."

"Are you not afraid?"

"No. I'm sure my Lord will do something about it."

"The Baron? What can he do?"

"I don't know."

"I see. You must trust the Baron greatly."

"Of course!" Selnay said passionately. "I would not be here today if not for him!"

"What do you mean?"

"It was a dream of mine since I was a child to become a citizen. But I didn't feel like becoming a soldier, and I didn't have the education to become a vassal."

"If it was your dream since you were a child," Lafiel pointed out, "you should have had time to educate yourself."

"In my home world, the Fliza Earldom, the status of women is extremely low. We were unable to receive the high education needed to become a vassal. They did not expect anything of a woman other than to become a good wife and good mother. Until I went on other worlds, I thought all worlds were like that."

"Really?"

"Yes. My Lord picked me up from that world, and even gave me an education."

"Education?" What education was necessary to wash someone's back in the bath?

"Yes. I'm usually in charge of maintenance of the fuel tanks. I received education for that."

"Oh, so you are not in charge of the baths."

"No. It is my first time working here at the bath. I have never been called to my Lord's bath."

"The other vassals wash the Baron's back?"

"Yes."

Lafiel decided that this place is insane. Though Lords sometimes had vassals take care of their basic daily needs, waiting tables during meals is the limit. It's excessive to have vassals serve you when you're taking a bath.

"And," Selnay continued. "He is an extremely kind Lord."

"Just because he's kind, doesn't mean he's capable." Lafiel commented sadistically.

"What can I do?" Selnay said dreamily, "But to trust in my Lord."

"How many people are in this manor?" Lafiel changed the topic.

"There are about fifty people here. But, I have never really counted. If you are interested you should ask..."

"No, it's okay." Lafiel stopped her. "How many are Abh?"

"Two. Our Lord, and his father. His sister has been in Lakfakalle for a long time now."

"Oh, it sounds like a lonely place."

"It's true that we do lack excitement here. But we live peacefully, and no one is really dissatisfied."

"Excitement... I suppose I'm just something exciting to you all."

"Not at all!" She seemed shocked, "It is the highest honor we can have to welcome Your Highness. Please don't think of it as just being excitement."

“We do have servants... but they do not do this.”

“Oh, what a thought.” She didn’t believe her. Once she got dressed, or more accurately once they finished dressing her, Selnay picked up a jewelry-box, and walked over. “Here are the ornamentations.” A satin red cloth was laid over the box, and various precious gems glittered in the box as if competing to see which was brightest.

“Your Highness, please pick whatever you’d like.” The older vassal said.

Lafiel narrowed her eyes. Once again, the most important things were missing. “What did you do with my headpiece and wrist computer?”

“He said they were unattractive...”

“That’s irrelevant. I need them.” She told herself that they were following orders, but she still couldn’t hold her anger back. Do they think of the headpiece and wrist computer as just decorations? The wrist computer has your electromagnetic identification pattern, and personal information, and the headpiece is useless unless it is adjusted for the wearer. Though the crown glittering in the middle of the box was beautiful, it would not be a replacement for Lafiel’s military headpiece.

“We understand, Your Highness. As you wish.” The older vassal sighed, and motioned for Selnay to fetch them. Selnay quickly brought the headpiece and wrist computer.

Lafiel put her headpiece on, and regained her spatial sense and finally felt some relief. It is very discomforting to have one of the senses you’re used to disappear.

They took her directly to the dining hall from the bath. The floor was a pale blue. The walls and ceiling showed glittering stars. Holographic fish swam here as well.

What horrible taste – she decided.

Lafiel headed towards the table at the center of the large room. The black of her Star Force uniform could be seen beneath the fluttering cloak.

The Baron of Febdash already sat at the table, dwarfed by the size of the room. Scantly clad female vassals stood by his side. The food had not arrived yet, there was just two crystal glasses sitting on the table. There was only one empty seat.

The Baron stood up, and greeted the princess with a bow.

Lafiel stopped near the dinner table and asked the Baron, “Where’s Jinto?”

“Jinto?” The Baron raised his head, “Oh, you mean His Grace the Successor to the Earl of Hyde. My father is entertaining His Grace.”

“Why is your father not here?”

“My father does not like being around people.”

“You’re contradicting yourself. Why would he entertain a guest if he does not like being around people.”

“Those that suffer seek each other out, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?” The comment bothered Lafiel.

“Please don’t let it bother you.”

“I can not. My duty is to take Jinto... take the Successor to the Earl of Hyde to Sfgnoff.”

“Your Highness,” The Baron raised an eyebrow, “Are you suspecting us of harming His Grace the Successor to the Earl?”

“How can I not?” Lafiel declared.

“That is unfortunate.” The Baron said, in a tone that hardly sounded disappointed. “Anyways, please sit. Allow me to resolve your misunderstanding while we eat.”

“I pray that it really is a misunderstanding, Baron.”

The waiter was already waiting with Lafiel’s seat pulled out. Lafiel sat down. The Baron also sat after making sure she was seated.

“What wine would you like with your dinner tonight?” The Baron asked.

“I’m on duty. I’d like something non-alcoholic.”

“As you wish. Would apple juice be alright?”

The Baron snapped his fingers after he saw Lafiel nod. The waiter whispered instructions into the microphone by his mouth.

“Then,” the Baron began as they waited for their drinks, “Your Highness, you call that young man by his first name? Then would you please kindly call me Klowal as well?”

“No.” Lafiel said without a moment’s pause.

“Why not?”

I would feel more comfortable if they thought of me as just some excitement – Lafiel thought to herself.

She grew tired of sitting in the bath. My skin will wrinkle if I stay in here any longer – Lafiel stood up.

“So beautiful...” Selnay sighed, awestruck by Lafiel’s beautiful skin and fine bodylines.

Lafiel ignored her compliment. Her perfect looks were the product of her ancestor’s sense of beauty and the art of genetic engineering. They were not Lafiel’s achievements. She did not appreciate the compliment.

Selnay brought a bathrobe to the princess. The drops of water on her skin were absorbed by it.

Once she left the bath, a female vassal older than Selnay carried a large pile of bathrobes and bath towels.

Lafiel grew weary. “Does this place not have a body dryer?”

“Our Lord believes that that is a savage tool.” The older vassal replied, and wrapped a towel around Lafiel’s wet dark blue hair. Lafiel took her soaked bathrobe off, and replaced it with a new one.

Now that she’s experienced it, she realized that letting other people take care of everything was rather comfortable. Is Jinto – Lafiel thought – receiving this sort of treatment as well? From female vassals? If he is... -- she wasn’t sure why, but she didn’t like the idea.

A new problem awaited Lafiel once all of the moisture was soaked off of her body and hair.

“Where is my uniform?” She frowned after looking at the change of clothes they had prepared for her. She set aside the matter of underwear, but there was a problem with what to wear above. A cloak, dyed in a beautiful yellow, decorated with ruby, gold, emerald, and other jewelry was prepared. The pants were a light green in color, looked to be of good taste, and obviously expensive. She would not feel ashamed walking around in the Palace dressed in such garments.

“We are currently washing it.” The Baron’s vassal replied.

“Washing it by hand I take it?” Lafiel said sarcastically. They should have had plenty of time to wash it while Lafiel was in the bath.

“Our Lord also said that a uniform would be unattractive for the dinner tonight.”

“Unattractive...” She didn’t mind someone calling the uniform unattractive, everyone has his or her own opinion. But what nerve to force his opinions upon other people. Lafiel had no idea of becoming a dress up doll for the Baron’s pleasure.

“I will only wear my uniform.” She declared. “If you are not done washing it yet, I will wait for you to finish.”

“But...” The older vassal wrinkled her face. She was about to cry.

“Your Highness, please...” Selnay got down on her knees and pleaded. Lafiel felt sorry for them, and the entire ordeal began to seem inconsequential.

“Then...” Lafiel compromised. “I’ll wear the cloak over my uniform. Will that do?”

The two vassals looked at each other.

“Our Lord said to...”

“But we can not disobey Her Highness...”

She heard the two mutter such things despite herself.

It’s not that big a deal...

Setting the fact that she insisted on wearing her uniform aside, Lafiel looked at the Baron’s vassals diffidently. The fact that she was discussing what to wear for dinner, far away from the cruiser Gosroth as it fought an enemy seemed surreal. She felt sorry for herself. Lafiel thought of the Gosroth.

The battle should be over by now, how did it end. I hope the Gosroth is intact...

“Okay, Your Highness.” They seemed to finally come to an agreement. The older vassal said, “We’ll bring your uniform here immediately.”

So they were done washing it.

The older vassal brought her uniform.

“Please, before you catch a cold.” The vassal said while picking up her underwear.

Of course, the female vassals didn’t permit Lafiel to touch her clothes. They put the garments on Lafiel as she stood there like a tree.

“You’re very good at this.” Lafiel was impressed, despite herself.

“I am used to it.” The older vassal said.

“Used to it? Do you constantly do this?”

“Yes. Your Highness, you must have servants as well in your palace.”

“Because I do not wish to call you so, Baron.”

The Baron was silenced, and stared at Lafiel with narrow eyes.

A female vassal arrived with a flask and bottle on top of a tray. The Waiter took the bottle, and carefully filled Lafiel’s cup with it. He then poured apple wine from the flask to the Baron’s cup.

Lafiel was thirsty from just taking a bath, and down the apple juice in one gulp. The waiter refilled the cup immediately.

The appetizers were brought to the gloomy dinner table. Delicate Abh cuisine was brought on a black square dish with pale flowers drawn on. Abh cuisine tries to develop the appearance of the food as well as its taste.

“Please eat.”

“Yes.” Lafiel took the silver chopsticks and brought what appeared to be a tree leaf to her mouth. The taste of clam spread through her mouth. “It is good.”

“I’m honored, Your Highness.”

“I didn’t compliment you.” Lafiel said coldly, “I complimented the chef. You had a person instead of a machine make this, didn’t you?”

“Good observation, Your Highness. I do not like machines very much. That set aside, it seems that Your Highness is in a bit of a foul temper.”

“Good observation, Baron. I am angry.”

“Are you that displeased with my welcome?”

“Did you think I would be?” She stopped reaching her chopsticks out to the flower shaped dish, and glared at the Baron.

“Why may I ask?”

“You have not resolved my ‘misunderstanding’. If it is a misunderstanding that is.”

“Oh, concerning that grounder boy.”

“Jinto is an Abh noble.”

“Oh yes he was.”

“Not just concerning Jinto, does the communications vessel really need a checkup? Do you really not have any fuel here? I have many suspicions concerning you.”

“Oh, I was lying about that.” The Baron said frankly. “We have plenty of fuel, and we are not checking the communications vessel.”

Lafiel was not surprised. She knew that they were not wholeheartedly being welcomed, ever since she was separated from Jinto. She didn’t stop moving her chopsticks either. She finished off the appetizers, and shoved the empty plates aside.

“Why did you lie?”

“You would not have come had dinner with me other wise.”

“Of course not. We are in a hurry.”

“Then, it was correct of me to lie to you.”

“Really? I hate being lied to.”

“I can understand that.”

“Now that I have discovered your lie, you will let us leave immediately right?”

“About that, Your Highness.” The Baron downed the rest of his apple wine, “Could you possibly delay your departure a little more?”

“Will you let us leave if I say no?”

The waiter brought the main course. It was a soup of sea turtle. Lafiel took her dish, and enjoyed the appetizing fragrance.

“I’m afraid I can not.” The Baron responded. “I must have you remain here no matter what.”

“Until when?”

“Until the next ship of the Empire comes here. In other words, until it has been confirmed that my territory is safe.”

“We’re not sure when that will be.” She lifted the bowl up, and sipped on the delicately flavored soup.

“I know.”

“You plan on keeping us here despite that?”

“Yes.”

Lafiel leaned back. She was more curious than angry now – what exactly was this Baron plotting?

“Just so that you know, I am not planning a rebellion.” Said the Baron.

“Your actions are not elegant enough to be called a rebellion.” Lafiel said bitterly.

“Too bad.” The Baron made a cold smile with his lips, “My family has a short history, it seems we’re not very suited for elegance.”

Lafiel ignored the Baron for a few moments, and concentrated on her soup. When she glanced up, she noticed that the appetizers were still in front of the Baron, and he had barely touched it.

Was it poisoned? Lafiel suspected for a moment.

It can’t possibly be – Lafiel shook off her doubt – If the Baron had done it, it would be too late now that I’ve finished off the appetizers, besides he’s probably intelligent enough to only put the poison in my food. There’s no need for it either. This is his Manor.

A fish wrapped in pastry followed the soup.

Lafiel attacked the fish. “And?” She asked, as she peeled off the breadly wrappings.

“Yes?”

“Why are you keeping us here? Do you despise us for some reason?”

“Not at all! I intend on giving Your Highness the best treatment possible while you’re here. I would never imagine harming you...”

“Oh? I’m starting to become uncertain whether you understand your own actions.”

“Of course I do. I am trying to protect my territory.”

“How does stopping us here protect your territory?”

“The Sfgnoff system is a large state.” The Baron spoke, “Of course the United Mankind knows of its location. However, my territory is very small, and newly formed. There is a large possibility that they don’t even know of the existence of the territory of the Baron of Febdash. The only contact we really have is a communications vessel that stops by twice a month. If they do not know of my territory, I’d like it to remain that way. But, what would happen if they saw a ship going through the Febdash sord? They would realize that there might be gaps in their intelligence. If they discover that this territory truly was a gap, they may even destroy it out of anger.”

“But we have already passed through the Febdash sord. How do you know they haven’t already spotted you?”

“They may have. But one opportunity is more than enough to give to the enemy. There is no need to give them another.”

“It makes sense.”

“Of course it does.” The Baron nodded, “So Your Highness, as much as you dislike the idea, I would like you to remain here until I can be sure that the enemy has been forced back from this area. If the enemy fleet is destroyed, it won’t be very long of a wait. Even if they are not destroyed, it would only be until the Empire regains this area.”

“Can we survive here until then?”

“My territory has an hydroponics garden, and a cloning range. There is no need to worry about food. Of course, we are limited in ingredients, so the chef’s works may displease you.”

“If the territory is never recovered?”

“We’ll worry about that when it happens. It is all this small territory can do to worry about the immediate danger.”

“It would do you no harm to think a little further ahead.” Lafiel never stopped tearing the fish and pastry even as she spoke.

“Like?”

“You are obstructing the passage of a military communications vessel during duty. The Empire may strip you of the territory you worked so hard to protect.”

“That won’t happen. Everything I did is from passionately trying to protect my territory. I’m sure the Imperial High Courts will not punish me for my actions. At most, I will be forced to pay a fine.

“Even if the Sfgnoff system is attacked without warning as a result? Is the High Court really that benevolent?”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine on that point too. There is a lot of traffic near Sfgnoff. I’m sure someone will tell them of the approach of the enemy fleet even if Your Highness does not. Then what problem would there be with my actions? I trust that Your Highness will, by the name of Abrial, testify at the High Court that I treated you very well.”

“Do not say that name.” Lafiel slammed. “The Honor of my family is beyond your understanding.”

“Is that so.” The Baron bowed humbly. “Please forgive me, Your Highness.”

Lafiel ignored him. She shoved what remained of her food aside, and the waiter took the dishes away immediately.

“Let’s say I’m fine. What about Jinto?”

“The Successor to the Earl of Hyde is with my father...”

“Stop it with your lies Baron, I told you that I hate being lied to.”

“I understand.” The Baron leaned back. “That boy is not worthy of being treated as a noble, so he is receiving treatment suited for a grounder.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? Jinto is a Noble!” said Lafiel. “And, it seems you have a unique understanding of the status of a citizen. I have never seen citizens getting treated worse than they are here. They’re like cats who have been taught tricks, it is despicable.” She said, intending for the waitering girl to hear her.

“Even Her Majesty the Empress does not have a say in the relationship between a Lord and his Vassals. So Her Highness the Princess cannot either.”

“That is true, but it piques my interest in what you consider treatment suited for a grounder.”

“There is no need for Your Highness to worry about that.” The Baron said stubbornly.

A stew of pumpkin, meat, and vegetables was served. Lafiel looked at the dish with the pumpkins and said, “Listen, Baron. You have a territory you need to protect, and I have a mission I need to complete. My mission is to safely deliver Jinto to Sfagnoff. If anything were to happen to Jinto, I will not forgive you even if the High Courts do.”

“I don’t understand.” The Baron shook his head snidely. “Why do you care so much about that grounder?”

“If you were in the Force,” Lafiel glared at the Baron with anger in her eyes, “you must know the sanctity of your mission. On top of that, this is my first mission. I intend on completing it, even if I have to cause your territory to burn in flames.”

“I really can’t let you cause my territory to burn in flames.” He said confidently. But it was clear to her that his confidence was forced.

Lafiel stood up after eating two three more bites of her pumpkin.

“Oh, Your Highness. I apologize, there are more dishes coming so...” said the waiter.

“My thanks and apologies to the chef. I’ve had enough. Please tell her that it was very delicious.”

The Baron clapped his hands. “Take Her Highness to her room.” Two vassals, who were probably standing closely by, appeared. They were both female.

“Her Highness is very tired. Have her rest immediately.” The Baron instructed. “You two make sure you wait until she is asleep.”

I see, he has no intentions of letting me go near the communications ship.

“I’ll ask you just to make sure, but Baron do you have any male vassals?”

“No. I cannot stand to have male grounders near me.”

Lafiel’s lips twitched.

The Abh do not smile when they are supposed to, and sometimes smile when it is completely unexpected – at least that is what those who hate the Abh believe.

It is a terrible misunderstanding.

The Abh do smile when they’re happy, and they smile when they are having fun. But there is a reason behind their misunderstanding. The Abh also smile when they absolutely despise person before them. This smile is too cruel to be called a cold smile, and bears some resemblance to a beautifully blooming poisonous flower. A smile with a mix of contempt and challenge, an expression unmistakably different from that of friendship – their enemies call this ‘the smile of the Abh’ and loathed it.

“I have gained yet another reason to hate you.” The smile of the Abh spread across Lafiel’s face.

10. Jinto's Anger

Jinto awoke. His head felt heavy. It was as if mud was running through the veins in his head instead of blood.

Where am I...

His memories returned to him slowly. When he reached the main manor after walking through a long path from the spaceport, he was told that he would be lead to the bath. Yes, that's when he got separated from Lafiel. Of course they couldn't use the same bath, he said to himself then...

But the instant Lafiel disappeared, something pressed against his neck from behind. He didn't have time to shout or resist. His consciousness faded immediately and...

Damn that Baron!

Though it was his vassals who carried out the order, the Baron must have given it. They must have drugged him with a hypospray.

Jinto got up. He felt anger towards the Baron, but he was more worried about Lafiel's well being.

"Oh, young man you've come to." A voice sounded next to him.

When Jinto looked towards the direction of the voice with caution, an old man with the cloak of a noble stood there. He must be far past 70 years in age. He had a strong build and seemed relaxed. His hair was white.

"Who are you?"

"You should name yourself first before asking others for their name."

He was right. "I'm Lin Syuunu Roc The Successor of the Earl of Hyde Jinto."

"Successor to the Earl? Oh! But you don't look Abh to me."

"Neither do you." Jinto said cautiously.

"Then, you're one of my kind. I'm Atosurya Syuunu Atos The Former Baron of Febdash Sloof. I was the second Baron of Febdash."

"Then you're the current Baron's..."

"Father."

"What are you trying to do!?" Jinto asked full of anger.

"Trying to do? Me? I was just sitting next to and worrying over an unconscious young man who was brought to me."

"Don't pretend that you don't know what I'm talking about!" Jinto raised his voice.

"Calm down young man. No, Your Grace The Successor to the Earl. It seems my son did something to you, but I have no idea what is going on.

"You don't know what's going on? That's..."

"Not impossible. Look, I'm imprisoned here too. How can I know what your problem is?"

"Imprisoned?"

"Yes, imprisoned. I live without any worries, but I'm not free to leave this place. What would you call it if not imprisonment?"

"Then tell me. Where's Lafiel... I mean, am I the only person who was brought in? Was there another girl?"

"Girl? No, it was just you. Is that girl your girlfriend?"

Jinto ignored the old man's question.

"Where's my wrist computer?"

"I don't know. I don't have it. If it's missing, then my son took it."

"Do you really not know what's going on?" Jinto questioned the old man.

"No I don't, sorry." Said the old man. "To tell you the truth, I don't even know where I'm being imprisoned. I haven't been told anything."

"But isn't His Grace the Baron your son?"

"That's why, I suppose. It's dissatisfied that I'm genetically a grounder. So, he's trying to keep me away from the eyes of others, well the vassals I suppose."

"I'm getting even more confused." He touched upon his head, which still hadn't recovered its full capacity. He finally realized that he didn't have his decorative headpiece on. He didn't even have the cloak that signified his status as a noble. But that wasn't a major problem. At least compared to the lack of a wrist computer it wasn't.

"He has an inferiority complex." The former Baron declared.

"He didn't seem to."

“Even if he didn’t seem to, he does. I’m his parent, I know. The Baron of Febdash family has a short history. His over inflated ego just can’t accept that.”

“But, you’re nobles. You even have a territory.”

“Though it’s a very small territory.”

“It may be small, but it’s still a very high status.”

“We do have high status, but we weren’t even gentry until just three generations ago. That bothers him, and he may be trying to lie to himself about it. He probably can’t bear to see his grounder father.”

“This is all starting to sound familiar to me.”

The former Baron grinned. “The only thing I’ve been thinking about since I’ve been imprisoned is where I went wrong in raising him. I had plenty of time. I’ll give you some pointers in raising a child of your own if you’d like.”

“Later maybe.” It would be a long time before Jinto had a child of his own. Though they may be very good advice, there are more important things to do right now than learn the ways of parenting. “We have to get out of here right now.”

Jinto tried to get off the bed, and almost collapsed. His feet were wobbly. The drug still hadn’t totally worn off.

The former Baron caught Jinto, and placed him back on the bed.

“Don’t strain yourself, Your Grace the Successor to the Earl.”

“Please stop calling me ‘Your Grace the Successor to the Earl’ it doesn’t sit well with me.”

“Seems like you have a lot of things to deal with young man.” The former Baron accepted Jinto’s request immediately.

“Yes.”

“But still, an Earl! You’re a Lord. Your father or mother or grandfather or grandmother... or maybe someone other than that, I don’t know, but to become an Earl straight from a citizen, whoever it is did a good job.”

“It was my father. My father wasn’t even a citizen of the Empire. Really, he certainly did a good job...”

“Oh really, why don’t you tell me your story?”

“No, I’m sorry but...”

“You’d rather not talk about it. I’m getting even more interested now. But, I can’t force you to since you don’t want to. Oh well, but why don’t you take a bath? You let out quite a bit of sweat while you were asleep.”

“Later. We have to escape...”

“You can’t right now. Maintain your hygiene, and eat a meal. We’ll think about how to deal with your problem after that. I may be of help to you.”

“You...?” He didn’t feel like accepting the hand of help that was offered to him.

This former Baron seemed trustworthy. But considering their gap in experience, fooling Jinto was probably as easy as taking off a shoe to him. Besides, would he really be able to help even if he was truly willing? Didn’t he just say that he was imprisoned here?

“Trust in the words of an old man.” The former Baron said. “Dipping in some warm water is not a bad idea at least. I won’t do anything. If I wanted to, I would have done so already.”

“But I don’t have time!” A horrifying thought crossed Jinto’s mind. “How long was I unconscious?”

“It’s been...” the old man looked at his wrist computer, “about five hours since you were brought in here. I don’t know what you’re in a hurry about, but you must have another hour or two to spare. Other wise, you’re already too late.”

– Five hours ...

They do have plenty of spare time before the enemy fleet arrives. But, what is Lafiel doing? It may have been plenty of time for the Baron to carry out any plots.

“Could I see that wrist computer for a second?” He had memorized the number for Lafiel’s wrist computer in case of an emergency. If Lafiel had her wrist computer on, and was within a light second of him, he should be able to get in touch with her.

“Of course.” The former Baron took the wrist computer off and passed it to him. Jinto was disappointed; the former Baron’s wrist computer was just a clock.

“Umm, is there a communicator here?”

“Just one.”

“Could I see that for a moment?” Jinto requested immediately.

“I don’t mind, but it can only communicate with the manor control room. You probably want to talk to that girl, but you’ll have to have them call her to the manor control room. Do you think they will do that?”

Jinto shook his head in disappointment. Establishing a friendly relationship with the Baron’s vassals at this point is hopeless.

“See? Go take a bath.” The former Baron spoke as if pleading with a stubborn child, “refresh your head, then eat. Get some strength. We can carry out any conspiracy we want after that.”

“You’re right.” Jinto agreed disheartened. He would probably need some strength.

Unlike Jinto, Lafiel’s mind was at full capacity as soon as she awoke. Though it was a short nap, she felt strength even down to the tip of her fingers. She gently pushed the soft and warm blanket to the side and stood up in the dark.

“Lights on” she whispered, and the lights came on.

Lafiel sighed with a relief as she noticed that no one else was in the room. The two vassals followed their lord’s orders and stayed there until Lafiel had fallen asleep. She thought about pretending to be asleep, but she was more tired than she thought and really fell asleep.

She checked the time with her wrist computer. Usually she took her headpiece and wrist computer off when she went to sleep, but tonight she feared getting it taken away again, so kept it on.

She was asleep for about four hours.

The Baron has done me this one good thing. It would be hard to do anything if she was tired. But – Lafiel bit her lip – it’s so childish of me to actually fall asleep while pretending to fall asleep...

It turned out okay in the end, Lafiel said to herself.

She turned her thoughts back to the Baron again, and the anger flowed back. His getting in the way of her mission was more than enough reason to be angry, but he didn’t stop there. Lafiel had never been manipulated so much by someone she did not accept orders from, and her pride was deeply hurt.

I’m bearing it well – Lafiel complimented her own self control – I bore it very well considering that I was born as easy to anger as any other Abrial.

But she was at her limit.

It was worth escaping from here just to teach the Baron his place. She found her uniform in the closet. There were many other gorgeous dresses there, but Lafiel didn’t pay any attention to them. Lafiel is a Princess, and once she returned to her palace, she could wear all the pretty dresses she wanted to.

She didn’t find it surprising that dresses fitting for noble ladies to be prepared ahead of time. But now that she thought about it, it was peculiar for a manor with no Abh women to have them.

Lafiel put the uniform on.

– Okay, where’s Jinto?

She had to find that out. Lafiel turned her wrist computer on and tried to connect to Jinto’s wrist computer.

“The wrist computer you have tried to reach is not in the possession of its owner.” The wrist computer beeped at her. It meant that the Baron took away Jinto’s wrist computer.

“Humph.” Lafiel cut the wrist computer off. That Baron seemed to wish to completely cut off her connection to Jinto.

The next step. She turned the terminal in the bedroom on and called up a diagram of the manor. There were three floors to the main body of the Baron’s manor. It was separated into sections like living areas, administrative areas, storage, hydroponics gardens, and cloning ranges.

“Display my current location.” Lafiel ordered the terminal. A sign saying “diagram of second floor” popped up, and a room near the center turned red.

“Tell me where the Baron’s bedroom is.” A room near the one Lafiel was in turned red.

“What about guest bedrooms?” Twenty other rooms on the floor turned red.

“Which ones are in use?” Only one remained red, the one Lafiel inhabited.

“Is there anyone being imprisoned?” Lafiel asked without expecting much of a reply.

“I don’t understand the meaning of the question.” Just as expected, the terminal did not give an answer.

“Display the name and location of everyone currently in the manor.”

"I cannot do that without the permission of my master. Would you like to request his permission? Unfortunately my master is currently sleeping. So, he would not be able to permit it until tomorrow morning..."

"No that's okay." She cut the terminal off.

– I guess I have to ask the Baron then.

It was a mistake to leave their weapons back in the ship. Though the Baron probably would not have let her bring it into the manor.

– Oh then I'll just go get it now.

Lafiel immediately decided. According to the clock on the wall of the room, it was night in the manor. Chances of bumping into a vassal were low. She knew where the communications vessel was, the problem was whether she could get there or not.

"Can I enter the spaceport? Are there any pressurized passages leading to the communications vessel there?"

"Yes."

"Are they locked?"

"They are not locked, but you need a registered electromagnetic key to cross it."

"Is my electromagnetic key registered?"

"No."

"Can I register it now?"

"I cannot do that without the permission of my master. Would you like to request his permission? Unfortunately my master is currently sleeping..."

Lafiel didn't bother to listen to the rest. "Whose electromagnetic key is registered?"

"My master's and that of all the vassals. The names of the vassals are..."

"No don't." Lafiel stopped it, expecting it to read off the names of all fifty of them.

– Let's try going there.

Lafiel decided. The situation didn't seem very good, but nothing could be accomplished by thinking alone in the bedroom. She brought up the diagram of the manor, and uploaded it into her wrist computer.

All prepared.

Lafiel tried to leave the room. But, she paused just as she was about to order the door to open. Something was bothering her.

– What is it?

She realized what the problem was after racking her brain for a moment. There should have been another inhabitant in the Manor other than the Baron and his vassals.

Lafiel turned the terminal on again.

"The Baron's father should be here right?"

"Yes, His Grace the Former Baron is currently in the Manor of the Baron of Febdash."

"The Baron's father's electromagnetic key isn't registered?"

"No. It is not registered."

"Why?"

"It was an order by my Master."

"Why did the Baron make that order?"

"I cannot do that without the permission of my master. Would you like to request his permission? Unfortunately my master is currently sleeping..."

"I've heard enough of that line." Lafiel was impatient. "Where is the former Baron?"

A diagram of the third floor appeared. The hydroponics gardens and cloning ranges took up most of the area. A single passage ran from the elevator through the hydroponics gardens to an isolated living area. That area blinked red.

"I wish to meet with His Grace the former Baron. Schedule an appointment."

"I cannot do that without the permission of my master. Would you like to request his permission? Unfortunately..."

"No I won't." Lafiel banged on the desk that the terminal was on. "Why do I need the Baron's permission to meet the former Baron? It's strange."

"Unable to reply."

"Unable you are." Lafiel muttered two or three words unsuitable for princesses towards the terminal. "Is someone else in the section that the former Baron is in?"

“Yes. There is one person.”

“What is the name of that person?”

“It is not in my records.”

“So that person isn’t a vassal.” Lafiel checked.

“No.”

– Looks like I’ve found out where Jinto is.

“Will I need an registered key to go to the former Baron’s quarters?”

“You will need my Lord’s permission in addition to a registered electromagnetic key. Would you like to...”

“Don’t say any more.” Lafiel said gloomily. She had never had an urge to destroy something this great since she was freed of her robotic tutors.

Seems like there’s some family trouble in this manor. I’m not interested in that. It’s hardly uncommon in a noble family.

She opened the closet, and chose a cloak. It would be easier to hide a weapon under a cloak. She put on a deep scarlet cloak with the picture of a bird with open wings stitched in with silver thread, and tied a jade colored belt around it. She took a platinum bracelet with scarlet gems as well.

This time she went out into the hall.

“Your Highness!” A voice suddenly sounded.

Lafiel looked around in surprised. A vassal stood up from the chair she was sitting on, and bowed down deeply. She was not one of the vassals who were with her before she fell asleep, but her face looked familiar.

“Were you not Selnay?”

“Yes, I’m honored Your Highness.” She looked as if she was about to fall, “You remembered the name of someone so unworthy as myself!”

Lafiel lost her strength, and began to understand some of Jinto’s confusion. She had no intentions of changing another family’s traditions, but the atmosphere in the Baron of Febdash’s manor should be changed if not only to keep a semblance of the concept of respect. The attitude that the Baron’s vassals took towards Lafiel had long passed the boundaries of respect.

Of course there were many vassals working for the Kryuve family as well, and Lafiel grew up with those around her taking care of her. But, they were able to differentiate between loyalty and worship. Lafiel thought she was acting normally, but she sometimes felt like an overly pompous idiot.

“What were you doing there?” Lafiel asked, forgetting about respecting the Febdash family traditions. “Were you monitoring me?”

“Not at all!” Selnay’s eyes opened wide. “Why would I do that? I was simply waiting in case Your Highness required assistance when you awoke.”

Lafiel didn’t doubt her. If they wished to monitor her, there were more civilized ways to do it. There is no need to have someone stay outside the door at all times.

“The Baron’s orders?”

“Yes. I was told to take care of Your Highness while you were here.”

“Do you not require sleep as well?”

“Oh, for Your Highness to concerned over the well being of an undeserving one like myself, I am honored. But, there are others who will switch with me, so there is no need to worry.”

“Good.” Lafiel said in an uncaring tone. Perhaps she should sympathize with Selnay, but she seemed content with her place. That’s what she found most irritating. She began walking away ignoring Selnay.

“Your Highness, please wait!” Selnay rushed after her. “Where are you going?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I will do what is needed in your place, so Your Highness you can wait in your room.”

“No, it’s okay. I have to go myself.”

“Where are you going?” Selnay repeated her question.

“The communications vessel.” Lafiel answered honestly. She couldn’t come up with a clever lie, and if all went well, she could use Selnay’s electromagnetic key.

“Oh,” Selnay brought her hand to her mouth. “I’m sorry Your Highness, but my lord has requested that you not enter your ship...”

She had half expected it, so Lafiel’s reaction came very quickly. “That’s strange. This is the Baron’s manor, but the communications vessel is not the Baron’s. It belongs to the Star Force, and it’s

under my command right now. Is that not right? I don't understand how the Baron can forbid me to enter it then."

"Y-You're right." Selnay seemed confused. She was used to thinking that everything around her – and perhaps she herself – belonged to the Baron, and she seemed to suddenly realize that things had changed.

They arrived at the door leading to the passageway to the spaceport. It was the first place that required an electromagnetic key to pass.

"Could you open the door? My key isn't registered." Lafiel asked Selnay.

Selnay hesitated. "Your Highness, it is not my place to make sure a decision..."

Lafiel didn't say anything. She was afraid she would be stricken with a feeling of guilt if she said anything at this point. She just stared at the door with her arms crossed in front of her. She was getting quite stubborn too. She planned on standing there until something happened, either she would go to the spaceport, or the Baron's vassals would pull her back.

"Your Highness," Selnay said out of concern, "you're not going to leave now are you?"

Lafiel was surprised. "How can I leave now?"

"You're right, you still need to say farewell to my lord before..."

"Not that." Lafiel's surprise increased. "You don't know?"

"What may I ask?" Doubt showed on Selnay's face.

"The Baron has refused to allow me to refuel. That ship can't go anywhere. To top it off, he has imprisoned my companion."

"Oh." Selnay's jaw dropped, and she covered her mouth with her hand to hide it. "My lord has done such a thing!?"

"You really did not know? The Baron could not have done it by himself, his vassals must have obeyed his orders."

"I would have obeyed such orders as well, had they been given to me." Selnay admitted shamefully. "But I swear, I was not aware of it. My lord does not give his vassals unnecessary information. I was told that Your Highness simply stopped here in the middle of your duties."

"But, you knew of the invasion of the enemy fleet."

"I heard that as a rumor. Rumors spread very quickly in a small territory such as this. I did not hear it from my lord."

"Oh." The operator was probably the one that spread the rumor. "Then, now that you know what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean by what will I do?"

"You are a citizen of the Empire as well as a vassal of the Baron. Will you pledge your loyalty to the Baron as his vassal, or will you help me in my duty as a citizen?"

There was a long pause.

"I understand." Selnay finally decided, "I will follow Your Highness's orders."

"No..." Lafiel considered explaining to her that she was not ordering her as the princess, but asking for her help as a soldier, but she decided against it. It didn't really matter; instead she just said "My thanks to you".

"Your words are wasted upon me." Selnay stood up and opened the door.

11. The Former Baron

“The first Baroness of Febdash, my mother, was from an over populated planet called Di Lapurans. There were some family problems, and she was given a choice between becoming a citizen of the empire and moving to a less populated world.”

The meal that was brought to them was broiled chicken and raw vegetables. There was too much for them to eat alone, and it was all very good. The Abh preferred light tasting food. He thought their taste buds worked differently, but it seems to work the same way as their ancestors. They just liked light tastes. Jinto had even heard a theory that they believe that light taste is more dignified. Though it was a little too spicy, it tasted much heavier than the food Jinto got on the Gosroth, and were more to Jinto’s tastes.

But he didn’t feel like casually enjoying the food. He listened to the old man tell him of the founding of the Baron of Febdash family as he poked at his food.

“So, she chose to become a citizen of the Empire. The quickest way to becoming a citizen of the Empire is to join the Star Forces. So she decided to become a crewman within the weaponry division. Are you familiar with the weaponry division, young man?”

“Yes.” Jinto nodded. “It’s the technical division that deals with the maintenance of weapons right?”

“Yes. She met my father in the force, and gave birth to me in the grounder way. In other words, through marriage.”

“I understand.”

“Then, they recognized my mother’s talent, and she was accepted into the weapons development trainee program. Are you familiar with the weapons development trainee program?”

“I considered entering it so yes. It’s the trainee center for weapons technicians isn’t it?”

“Yes. She graduated from there, and joined the weaponry division and became a Flyer. If you’re a crewman, the most you can expect from years of service is to become gentry. You can say that she did well.”

“Yes.” Jinto reluctantly agreed, under the gaze of the old man.

“I think she separated with my father then. SO I don’t know what my father looks like. But, that’s hardly a rare story with the Abh. And, my mother did well after that too. She wasn’t very skilled as a technician, but she was good at dealing with people, she had promise as a leader. Thanks to that, she kept climbing the ranks, at the end she became the Technical High Commander, and even became High Commander in Force Administration.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Isn’t it? The Empire rewards its High Commanders with a title. So, we got this bluish star.”

Jinto was bearing through vegetables right then, so he simply nodded.

“So, anyways, my genes are still those of a grounder. I was pretty bitter over it when I was young. But, it doesn’t really matter to me at this point. To be honest, I would probably just waste the youthful body at my age. To die of old age is a privilege that the Abh gave up. Though you’re probably still too young to understand that.”

“No I can’t. I would like to stay young forever.”

“See? But, your body and mind should age together. That set aside, thanks to my mother’s status as a gentry I was accepted into the trainee program. But because I don’t have a spatial sense, I couldn’t become a Flyer of the piloting branch, what those folks call ‘a true Flyer’. So, I joined the shipwright division. Are you familiar with the shipwright division?”

“Yes. I considered joining that as well. But, I felt that I wasn’t cut out to become a designer.”

There were four technical branches. The weaponry branch (Fazia Lubon) that built weapons, the shipwright branch (Fazia Hal) which designed ships, the mechanical branch (Fazia Sel)) that designed machines, and the photon branch (Fazia Datkyul) which dealt with thought crystals. Each of them had their own independent trainee program.

“I was happily able to become a Flyer of the shipwright branch. When my mother got her title and territory, I was able to put my technical knowledge to use. That’s where this conspiracy was seeded.”

“Huh?” Jinto asked not being able to keep up with the story. But he realized that they were finally on a topic that was of interest to him.

“The conspiracy to get you out of here, it’s an evil plot of mine that I carried out behind my son’s back. You haven’t forgotten have you?”

“Not at all! That’s all I’ve been thinking about.”

“Instead of paying attention to my story.”

“No, I...” Jinto turned red.

“It’s okay.” The former Baron shook his head; “I haven’t spoken to a person in a long time. I’ve been rambling too much.”

“Not at all. They were all very interesting stories.”

“Young man, you seem to be a good person, but I thought you’d be old enough to know that obviously false compliments can in turn hurt a person’s feelings.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Anyways, let me explain it to you in a little more detail. There is a similarity between ships and orbital manors. Orbital manors are like ships without an engine. I designed this manor. I took some liberties with the design, and I haven’t told my son about them yet. That impatient fool, he imprisoned me before I could tell him. I can take over all of the thought crystals in the manor with one key word. If I can get near a terminal, I can easily imprison that impudent fool.”

“Then why...”

“I’m tolerating being imprisoned? It’s a three degrees Kelvin vacuum immediately outside. All of my old vassals have all been replaced, and there are only vassals that my son hired to suit his own tastes here. I can’t be blamed for not feeling motivated to do so.”

“But I’m sure you could have called for help.”

“The Empire does not care about family matters among its nobles. If you’re a noble, it’ll do you no harm to remember that. Besides, I’m rather fond of this lifestyle. I don’t really want to go outside for any reason either. Of course I haven’t been keeping in very good touch with my friends, they haven’t changed at all since we were young. It angers me when I see that I’m the only one that’s aged.”

“But didn’t you just say something about aging both mentally and physically...”

“Oh, young man, have you ever heard of the phrase ‘refusing to admit one’s defeat’?”

“Yes I have.”

“Then there’s no need for me to explain.”

“Then, I guess that’s that but...” Even if he were to completely trust the former Baron, he still had some concerns. “About that key word, are you sure that the Baron hasn’t changed it?”

“I can’t be sure.” The former Baron declared. “But people need to take a gamble sometimes, otherwise, life is no fun. My greatest dissatisfaction here is that I have no one to gamble with.”

“I don’t like gambling.” He’s felt that he wasn’t on very good terms with fate since that day seven years ago. He had no intentions of putting any part of his life in the hands of gamblers.

“That’s good. But the odds of this gamble are good. The keyword is burned into the molecular structure of the thought crystals. It can’t be changed unless he’s replaced all of the thought crystals in the manor.”

“Is that so.” Jinto still felt doubt. There is no proof that the Baron didn’t have it all replaced.

“Trust me, and put your wager on me young man. Well, I can give you a hand to kill some time, but you need to tell me what your problem is. What brought you here, and why are you here with me now?”

Jinto began telling him. About how he was accepted into the administrative branch trainee program, about how he boarded the cruiser Gosroth, about how they encountered possibly hostile space-time bubbles en route, about how they escaped on a communications vessel piloted by Lafiel, about how they stopped here to refuel...

“And you know the rest.”

“Oh? Then is that Lafiel girl you mentioned earlier Her Highness the Princess?”

“Yes.” Jinto nodded reluctantly.

“I see.” The old man grinned. “So that’s what’s been going on outside while I was locked away here. That’s incredible! My late mother would be ecstatic if she heard all this. To have Her Highness the Princess come... our place in the world certainly has risen.”

“Please stop joking.” Jinto became irritated. “Are you going to help me?”

“Of course I am. I just need let you and Her Highness on the communications vessel and let you go off right?”

“And to refuel.”

“Yes, can’t forget about the fuel. Would you like some food as well?”

“Yes, if possible. I was getting tired of field rations. It’s lightly flavored just like the Abh prefer. But, can you do it?”

“I think I can. But there’s one problem.”

“What?”

“I said ‘if I can get to a terminal’. My son must have had a feeling as to what I could do, there’s not a terminal in the imprisonment area.”

“Oh.” Jinto was disappointed.

“What were you expecting? That you two young ones can make an escape of love as soon as I ordered a terminal really quickly? The real world isn’t that easy.”

“Lafiel isn’t my girlfriend.” Jinto pointed out.

“Don’t worry about it, I just felt like being poetic.”

“That set aside, how can we get to a terminal?”

“We just need to leave the imprisonment area.”

“How?”

“That’s what the two of us are going to be thinking about now. Or else it won’t be a plot or a conspiracy. You’ll be able to face up to Her Highness better later if you worked hard at it as well. Oh yes, young man...”

“Yes?”

“Are you sure you two aren’t in love?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Though it hurt him to deny the fact.

“You say so, but there aren’t very many people in the Empire who can call Her Highness the Princess by her first name. Or, do you only do that when Her Highness isn’t around? If that’s the case, I’ll need to reevaluate my opinion of you.”

“Umm, ahh, I...” Jinto was at a lack for words. “I call her Lafiel to her face too.”

“Then...”

“But it’s a product of my fortune and stupidity. It’s a rather long story, and quite boring too.”

“I’d like to hear it, but I doubt you’re in the mood for it.”

“No. Unfortunately not. I don’t have time for it either.”

“It truly is unfortunate. I was about to make my son play the role of an evil noble in love with someone else’s woman. It’s a savage role, perfectly suited for him!”

Of course the Baron of Febdash was not in love with Lafiel. Lafiel isn’t in love with anyone either, so she wasn’t anyone’s woman.

That night, the Baron went to bed alone where usually he would have had a few of his favorite vassals wit him. He had a lot to think about tonight. The Baron poured the apple wine from the Semryush Earldom into his crystal cup and thought.

He was uncertain. He was not certain if his decisions were right.

His wish was to make his own kingdom. Not a kingdom that could go up against the Empire. The Baron did tend to over estimate his own talents, but he was not insane. A kingdom the size of his current territory would be enough.

He was susceptible to feeling inferior in Imperial noble society. He was merely a Baron; his family history was even less impressive than those of some gentry. That is why he decided not to go to the Capitol. In a place with many Abh, his family’s short history would be a source of constant pain for his pride.

While in this territory, he was the only Abh. The Baron didn’t think of his own father as being Abh. Even if he did, it made no difference. In this small world, he was absolute. Yes, so long as he was in his territory, he could immerse himself in the illusion that he was the ruler of a small independent kingdom.

When he was notified of the dialogue between Lafiel and the operator, the first thought to strike him was fear of losing his kingdom. The enemy was the Alliance of Four, even if he was a hermit in his own territory, he knew enough to realize that.

Would the Alliance of Four allow him to keep his territory? Impossible!

Then what should he do?

After pondering over that, he placed all his hope into the chance that the Alliance of Four won’t notice his territory. He would have to prevent unnecessary traffic. He could not allow anyone to go into planar space from the Febdash sord. He explained all this to Lafiel.

Of course the Baron knew that even if something were to go to planar space from the Febdash sord, its chances of catching the enemy’s attention was low. So the first thought that crossed the Baron’s mind was to refuel them as quickly as possible and kick out the small vessel that may guide them to the territory. In that case, the danger would be minimized.

But right then, a thought crossed the Baron's mind. He considered the possibility that the enemy fleet was already heading towards his territory. If they enemy asked for his cooperation after their arrival, the Baron planned on obeying them without question. The Baron's territory had no military power. Resistance was futile. He would give them all the fuel they asked for, if that would preserve his little kingdom. But they may not ask for the Baron's cooperation. There was a large chance that they would forcefully take the antimatter production plant and other equipment.

But – would they not be interested in the granddaughter of the Empress?

Taking a hostage against the Empress of the Abh would never work, but they may not know that.

If that were the case – he had a bargaining chip.

He would negotiate for the preservation of his territory in exchange for the Princess. He would make the negotiations last as long as possible. He'd give them all the cooperation possible during negotiations. He would turn the territory of Febdash into a precious supply base for the Alliance of Four. Once it became an important supply base, they would not dare to disturb it. If they were to try to take it from him, the Baron was always ready to commit suicide and take the territory with him.

So, he decided to keep the bird that wandered in called Lafiel as a form of insurance.

What if he was cut off from the Empire and the enemy didn't come?

That's exactly what he could wish for. He would become the true ruler of his little world! It didn't matter if he only had fifty vassals. It didn't matter if he could only eat hydroponics vegetables and cloned meat. He could bear even if he ran out of his favorite apple wine from Semryush. So long as he could rule over this world as its absolute ruler, he would be fine.

The Baron pictured himself ruling this little world. Lafiel was in that world. If they were to get cut off from the Empire, he would not have to feel inferiority from the fact that she was the Princess. In this territory, Lafiel had no power. The vassals that he picked were all obedient females that thought of the Baron as a god. None of them should hesitate when the Baron and the Princess gave conflicting orders.

To tell the truth, the Baron had never had relations with an Abh female. He got to know with many Abh females on Lakfakalle and the Force, but he had problems speaking to them.

Perhaps that was the reason why, but sometimes he had his vassals dye their hair blue, and dress up as Abh nobles to try to sate his tastes. The dresses and accessories from that were useful in welcoming the Princess, but they never quite worked as he expected.

He could tolerate their appearances. The concept of beauty was too individualized amongst the Abh, and there were occasionally women who were not very beautiful. The problem was what was inside. They were too worshipful of him, and they didn't seem Abh at all. He had actually forgotten what a real Abh woman was like until he had met Lafiel.

The Baron grinned as he poured another cup of apple wine.

I said what I wished to against a real Abh, and the Princess nonetheless!

His feeling of security from the fact that he was in his own little castle allowed him to. He could not even imagine doing so at Lakfakalle. It was good practice for when he really came into power.

– A successor would be necessary for a Kingdom.

He thought with his drunken head.

There are many females in this place. All of his vassals were female. But they were grounder women. There was little chance of a child being born between a grounder woman and him without any genetic manipulation. Even if it were born, it would probably be retarded.

Of course there were many facilities for genetic manipulation within the Empire. The Baron himself was born between his genetically grounder father and a genetically Abh woman. He was perfectly Abh genetically. But, the territory of Febdash had neither the technology nor the equipment for it.

However Lafiel was without a doubt an Abh. With her, there would be no problems – biologically – in creating a successor. There is danger in natural birth for Abh, after all the Abh as a race was not natural. But it wasn't so dangerous that it absolutely had to be avoided. The Baron had once read a paper on the probabilities of genetic defects in an Abh that was created completely naturally. According to that trust worthy paper, only one out of fifty such children would have a major genetic disorder.

They weren't bad odds.

– Yes, I'll have the Princess give birth to my successor.

His fantasy went on endlessly.

The Baron may have started to fall in love with Lafiel then. Of course, it didn't have to be Lafiel; it could be any woman who was genetically Abh. But Lafiel's beauty was undisputable, so his child would

also be indisputably beautiful. But Lafiel's beauty was still not fully developed. There was plenty of time before she matured into a real woman. There were problems with her personality too.

But this would all be far off in the future. Right now, the Empire could retake the territory at any time.

It would be useful if he treated Lafiel properly – or at least appear to do so – for when they reestablished connections with the Empire. Perhaps he was not treating that pesky grounder boy, but it was not so horrible that he would be punished for it. After all, he did give him the same treatment as his own father.

He wished to destroy the communications vessel that the two came on, because that may become trouble, but when he pictured explaining why he did it to the Empire, he decided to delay doing so some more. Once he found out that the Empire could not possibly come back, he would do as he wished. The Princess would probably be much easier to handle by then.

The Baron's doubts flew away as the alcohol increased its influence on his brain. He was prepared for all possible situations. It was hardly perfect, but it was all he could do in this situation. The Baron downed the rest of his apple wine in a gulp, and lay down on his bed.

The communicator beeped right then, as if it was just waiting for that moment.

"What is it!?" The Baron asked as he thought to himself that he would need to yell at them if it was something inconsequential.

"This is Gleda from the manor control room. My Lord, I apologize for disturbing you during your sleep, but someone has entered the communications vessel. What should we do?"

The Baron jumped to his feet. There was no guarantee that the bird that wandered in would stay obediently.

The Baron made one miscalculation. The Baron was spectacularly beautiful by grounder standards, and helped him in keeping the loyalty of his vassals. They looked yearningly at the Baron, and could be said to have been in love with him. The time they spent with the Baron was as attractive to them as narcotics. It was something they competed with each other for. If it came from the Baron, even an insult or a blow was a wonderful gift to them. If they didn't think of it as being wonderful, they were not suitable for becoming a vassal for the Baron of Febdash.

But, the half godly beauty was not something that only the Baron had. Any one of the kin of the stars, the Abh, had such beauty. There were some vassals who pledged loyalty to the Baron as a person. They were his partners at night, his lovers. But that was not the case with most of the vassals.

What the Baron mistook for loyalty to him as a person was actually interest towards the Abh as a race. They mistook the world of the Abh with heaven, and were well aware that the Baron was not a special person within the world of the Abh.

Selnay was one of them.

She looked up at the Baron, and her hobby was to gaze at holograms of Abh noblemen. Though she did not lean at all towards homosexuality, she had to feel some attraction towards the Abh Princess in front of her.

She surprised herself that she could even speak without collapsing out of awe. It was probably because everything still seemed so surreal to her. Of course, she was grateful to the Baron for giving her a life in the heavens, though it was an outskirts of heaven. She was even conditioned into thinking that the Baron's orders were absolute from her long stay there.

But Lafiel's words struck Selnay's ears with an irresistible force. After all, she was a young woman who could possibly become the ruler of all of the Abh. Once she settled the conflict that tore her apart inside, Selnay began to feel joy in the fact that she could assist the Princess.

She took the Princess to the landing bay, and waited patiently for her new master by the transport tube. Eventually, Lafiel came down with a new luggage.

"Your Highness." Selnay greeted the Princess with a bow.

"Vassal Selnay." Said Lafiel. I'd like you to take me to Jinto. Or perhaps bring Jinto to me. Can you do that?"

"To Master Jinto?" It was a name that was unfamiliar to Selnay. "Who would that be?"

"My companion, the Successor to the Earl of Hyde. He is being imprisoned. You have met him."

She pictured a blue haired son of a noble after hearing the words successor to the Earl, but she was disappointed, Lafiel was referring to the grounder boy who was dressed up as a noble for some reason.

"Him..."

“Do you know where he’s being imprisoned?”

“I’m sorry but…”

“There is no need for you to apologize.” The Princess’s tone sounded irritated for some reason.

“Your words are wasted upon me.”

“But you do know where the former Baron is imprisoned, do you not?”

“My lord’s father?” Selnay asked. Though he had the status of an Abh, he was not an Abh. He was hiding because he felt shameful of that fact. “He is not being imprisoned, he is simply isolating himself.”

“Then why is it that I can’t communicate with him?”

“I’m not sure.” Now that she mentioned it, it was strange. Though she had never tried to communicate with him before, so she didn’t know that it was impossible.

“It doesn’t matter if he’s being imprisoned or if he’s isolating himself. What matters is that Jinto is with the former Baron. I’d like to get to him.”

“I’m very sorry, but that is impossible.”

“Because the Baron forbids it?”

“That is part of it. But, it is actually impossible to go there without the Baron’s permission.

“Is it locked?”

“Yes”

“Is there some way to communicate with them?”

“I believe that we could communicate with them from the manor control room, but only a few vassals are permitted there.”

“Can we break in there?”

“If you mean without being seen, that’s impossible.” A few vassals were always in the manor control room.

“Then let us take it over.” Lafiel took a weapon out of the pocket of her cloak and gave it to Selnay. “Do you know how to use it?”

“No, I have never used it…” The trust that the princess gave her was unexpectedly great. Selnay silently took the gun.

“It’s simple.” Lafiel pulled the other gun from her thigh and taught her how to use it.

“Okay. I understand.” It was simple. You check to make sure that the safety is off, point at your target and pull the trigger.

“Let’s go.” The Princess began to run. “We don’t have time.”

“Yes.” Selnay ran past Lafiel. There were many doors on the path to the manor control room, so she had to guide her. But Selnay hesitated when she came before the first door.

– Oh, I’m rebelling!

Selnay pondered. She didn’t think very deeply about it and followed the flow of the Princess, but what she was about to do – no what she was doing was rebelling against her lord. She used the electromagnetic key on her wrist computer and opened the door.

“Open.” Selnay said with her quivering voice, and turned around. “Your Highness.”

“What is it?” Lafiel walked past Selnay.

She began chasing after Lafiel. “I have a request.”

“Say it.”

“Now that I have rebelled against my lord, I cannot remain here. Please allow me to join the ranks of Your Highness’s vassals.”

Lafiel turned around and blinked. Selnay feared if she asked for too much.

“Oh, yes.” Said Lafiel. “But I don’t have any vassals.”

“I-It can’t be.” Selnay couldn’t believe it. It was impossible that a member of the royal family didn’t even have one vassal.

“Of course we have many vassals working for the Kryuve family. Though my father is in charge of employment, I will probably be able to do something for you.”

“Your father would be His Highness the King of Kryuve?”

“Yes.” The Princess nodded casually.

Selnay reconfirmed her loyalty to the Princess with the realization that she was of very high status.

“But we can’t use your skills in my family. You are a specialist of antimatter fuel tanks are you not?”

“Oh it’s an honor.” It was unexpected that the Princess would remember not only her name but her line of work as well. Selnay was about to cry from happiness.

“Stop that.” Lafiel said impatiently.

“What do you mean by that?” Selnay quivered in fear of displeasing the Princess.

“Never mind.” The Princess gave up. “Anyways, it may be better for you to go somewhere where you can put your skills to use.”

“I’m filled with happiness at the fact that you are concerned over the future of one such as myself. But Your Highness, I can not longer remain here.”

“I understand that.” The Princess nodded. “I’ll make sure that you can leave this place. But I can’t promise that you can work at the Palace.”

“Just those words are enough.” She would probably be taken to the city of Abh, Lakfakalle.

There was another door. The manor control room is right around the corner.

Selnay opened the door excitedly.

Though it was an insignificant event for Lafiel’s life, a major event in the history of the Febdash Baron family was about to occur.

Right now, the Abh mainly use capital ships, but they depended on highly mobile units with a crew of one to three when the Empire was first formed. That unit's pilot/commander is the Flyer.

At that time, the Star Forces based its formations on squads of four units. They form a diamond, with the commander on the forward unit, and the sub-commander on the rear unit. In other words, the commander is the Forward Flyer, and the sub-commander is the Rear Flyer, and the pilots of the flanking ships are the Wing Flyers. Depending on the situation, a four-unit squad can split into a two-unit squad, but in that case the Forward and Rear Flyers each lead a Wing Flyer.

When two such four-unit squads merged, a more complex formation could be formed. There is a companion unit to the commanding unit of this formation, so a squad of exactly ten units is formed. So the commander was called the decacommander.

When the city-ship Abrial was all that the Abh had, they had a total of 100 to 200 combat units. So, they called the high commander of all of the combat units the hectocommander, though it wasn't always accurate. There were also several sub-hectocommanders to aid the hectocommander.

Eventually, when the Star Forces expanded, it became unrealistic to leave all command under the hectocommander. So the kilocommander was formed as an even higher rank. By this time, the relationship between number of ships in the formation and rank became hazy.

After the formation of the Empire, the Abh started using several capital ships. So they started needing a commander for the capital ship fleet, and thus the rank of Admiral was created.

With the expansion of the Empire, the number of capital ships increased, and Admirals began to need assistants to help them command their fleets. This is the Rear Admiral.

Eventually, with the advancement of space combat tactics, it was decided that it is more effective to form a fleet with capital ships than numerous highly mobile units. So all ranks below the hectocommander became simply ranks, and lost their relation to their function.

The influence of the Empire expanded, and the size of the Star Forces expanded along. Once it became normal to have numerous fleets at any given time, the need for a rank above that of Admiral became necessary. That is the Greater Admiral and Master.

Then, yet another problem arose. The Star Forces handled combat in space, but a ground based fighting force would be necessary to establish their rule over planets. Thus, an army was formed. The Master at that time became the Master of the Star Forces, and a Master of the Army was created to command the army. So the rank of Imperial High Commander was established above the two of them.

But this period of having two separate forces didn't last long. The army was formed of mostly grounders because of the nature of its duties. Though they were grounders, those with ranks of Flyer or above were treated as gentry or noble, or in other words as Abh, but that did not satisfy them. Finally, they started a rebellion to end the rule of the Empire. This rebellion, named after its leader "Jimlyua's Rebellion" is the greatest rebellion in the history of the Empire.

After the Empire succeeded in quelling it after great effort, they immediately disbanded the army. Since then the ground based combat unit has been called the "Aerial Branch" and operates as a single branch instead of an independent force.

Though the role of Master of the Army was eliminated, the rank called Master of the Aerial Branch remains, and the rank of Master of the Star Forces still remains as well. There are also other ranks such as Master of the Administrative Branch, Master of the Medical Branch, and Master of the Technical Branch.

Notice: The special branches include: The Administrative Branch, Aerial Branch, Medical Branch, and the Technical Branch who are all headed by a Master. The Security Branch, Policing Branch are all headed by a greater Admiral. The Engineering Branch, the Weaponry Branch, the Shipwright Branch, the Machinery Branch, the Photon Branch, and the Navigation Branch are all headed by an Admiral. Any officers with a higher rank are reassigned to the Technical Branch. Then there is the Entertainment Branch, where the highest rank is a hectocommander.

Extra: Imperial Star Forces Flyer Ranks

High Flyers	
Imperial High Commander Master of the Star Forces Greater Admiral Admiral Rear Admiral Kilocommander	Piloting Branch
Master of the Administrative Branch Administrative Greater Admiral Administrative Rear Admiral Administrative Kilocommander	Administrative Branch
Plain Flyers	
Hectocommander Sub Hectocommander Decacommander Forward Flyer Rear Flyer Wing Flyer	Piloting Branch
Administrative Hectocommander Administrative sub Hectocommander Administrative Decacommander Administrative Forward Flyer Administrative Rear Flyer Administrative Wing Flyer	Administrative Branch

After word

To most people, this will be the first time I will be speaking to you. I'm Morioka Hiroyuki.

I mainly wrote plain science fiction stories set in the near future for my short stories, (it sounds like I wrote a lot of them, but there's only a few of them), but I decided to make my debut novel length work an extravagant story set in a galactic scale.

I'm at heart, a science fiction fan. With a bit of heroic fantasy mixed in.

Ever since I became a science fiction writer, I've wanted to create a galactic empire, at least on paper. The reason I made it in my first novel length work, is to surprise everyone who got to know me through my short stories.

My debut work was important, so I intended to start writing after establishing a perfect plot and background, and maybe getting the publisher's approval. But when I started writing this book three years ago, I only had a rough idea of the setting. In other words, I couldn't wait any longer, and I shoved a floppy disk into my word processor, and began typing.

I had to add to the setting, or make revisions later. I placed a memo pad next to the keyboard on my word processor, and I developed the settings along with the story.

I had no idea what was going to happen in the story. But, "Crest of the Stars" was completed. It is the first novel length piece I have ever written.

People often mention how their "characters come alive", but I have experienced what it's like for my characters to take a life of their own.

Since I didn't get the publisher's approval, I had to bring the work into them. Of course, quite a bit of time passed between the completion and its publication. Unfortunately, it also doubled up with a time when Hayakawa Books JA reduced the number of their new works. Timing was critical since a nameless author wanted to start a series of books.

Now that I look back on it, it was a great period of growth. I believe that my work was better developed because I rewrote it several times.

So anyways, all three volumes of Crest of the Stars are already written. The second volume is supposed to get published in May, with the third in June. So even if you bought this book when it was first published, you shouldn't have to wait too long.

I'd appreciate it if you casually enjoy it as a fantasy in a strange world set in Space. I'm also trying to please hardened SF fans.

Well then, I'll see you again after "Crest of the Stars II A Little War".

March 10, 1996

Translator's After word

There are a few things I need to immediately cover in this after word. First, when the translated versions of the rest of the series will come out, and second why the @%#\$ I'm actually putting a translator's after word on this.

According to what you read above, the second volume of Crest of the Stars should become available 6 years ago? Unfortunately, you're going to have to wait a little more than -6 years for the second volume. That's just what the author said for the Japanese novels translated word for word.

Secondly, I need to cover why I even put a translator's after word on this. This entire project started with someone asking me to translate the novels for another series. So I asked around if anyone would be interested in that, and it turned out that more people were interested in Crest of the Stars than the other series.

But that doesn't answer your question. Well, it does give you a background to the project. This entire project is a fan project supported by other fans for the fans. I translated the entire novel in a span of two weeks (eight continuous hours of translating every day for 2 weeks). For most of the two weeks, I was exposed to more Japanese than I was English. Plus, it would be mucho expensive to have someone go through and do a professional editing job.

At this point, I have still not answered your question. Because of the above two factors, there may be some grammatical mistakes throughout the novel. I did get someone to read through it and change obvious mistakes, but please don't be angry if you spot a few here and there. Feel free to e-mail these mistakes to me so that I can change them.

Yes, that's why I'm putting a translator's after word here, to ask you, my audience to proof read for me. ^_^;;

In all honesty, I was rather reluctant to translate the novel at first. It was a little more work than I wanted to do. But once I started, it was a lot of fun. Morioka Hiroyuki's original source material is just wonderful. The numerous sarcastic and witty dialogues were fun to read, and even more fun to translate into English.

One line I'm particularly proud of is stated by the former Baron of Febdash to Jinto while the two of them are imprisoned. "To die of old age is a privilege that the Abh gave up". It's going to be the catch phrase for the translation of this first novel. This one line wasn't particularly strong in the original source material in my opinion, but I think it turned out really well in the translation.

Translating isn't an exact science; it's more of an art. There are numerous correct ways to phrase anything. But some of them are better than others, some are only better in certain situations, some should be avoided like the plague, etc... But I digress. I don't even know what I'm talking about any more.

One difficult thing in translating this novel is the background that Morioka-san set for the Abh. More details for this will appear in the later novels, so I won't spoil it for you here. I'll discuss this matter in whatever volume it is that it appears in.

So, see you in "Crest of the Stars II A Little War".

July 7, 2002.