

Crest of the Stars  
Volume 2  
A Little War

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- "The Kin of the Stars" created the largest Empire in the history of Mankind

The Seikai series opens a new age in space operas.

Note:

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E-mail me at [loae666@yahoo.com](mailto:loae666@yahoo.com) to place an order for the novel.

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Extras: Abh Units of Measurement

Afterword

Translator's Afterword

What is an Abh?

They are the parts to a machine. To them, children are merely replacement parts. Something they pass their functionality onto before they perish.

Well then, what is that machine?

It is the giant and evil machine known as "The Empire of Mankind by the Abh". Normal human societies have constantly been placed at threat by this evil machine. If we allow its continued existence, it will eventually swallow all of mankind.

We must destroy it.

-- From the speech of Councilman Fitz-David at the United Mankind Central Summit

Translator's note: Some of the romanizations in this volume will be different from that of volume one. In volume one I used a romanization that was a little closer to English than the official romanization of barone. This time I'm going to use the official romanization.

### Summary of Volume 1

One day, Abh warships assaulted Jinto's homeworld. The Abh demanded unconditional surrender, and Jinto's father, Planetary president Roc, gave the Abh control of the planet in exchange for status as a noble. Because of this Jinto became a noble even though he was a grounder. In order to become part of the interstellar Abh Empire, he boarded a warship to go to the Capitol. But that ship was unexpectedly attacked by an enemy fleet, and Jinto was forced to evacuate the ship with the Princess Lafiel. The two of them headed for the Sfagnoff system, but they stopped at the nearby territory of Febdash, and Jinto was taken captive.

### Characters

Jinto	Son of the president of planet Martine
Lafiel	A flyer trainee in the Star Force of the Abh Empire. Grand-daughter of the Empress
Krowal	Baron of the territory Febdash
Sloof	Father of Krowal. The former Baron of Febdash
Selnay	A vassal for the Baron of Febdash
Entryua	Chief inspector for the Luna Biga city police.
Kite	A Captain for the United Mankind peace-keeping force.
Ramaju	Empress of the Abh Empire

## 1. The Baron's Manor Control Room

This year was the 136<sup>th</sup> since the formation of the territory of Febdash. But because of the short period of rotation of the Manor of the Baron, one of their years is only one third that of a standard year. They were a newly formed state. Yes, though their total population was merely 50, the Baron's territory was a state. Though they are also part of the Empire, they were so far from the center of the Empire that they were able to establish their own history, through the peaceful and uneventful years.

But just two visitors were about to disturb that peace. One of the visitors, Lynn Ssynec Rock the Earl of Hyde, Jinto, came to meet the former Baron through a series of peculiar events.

"Over there," The former Baron of Febdash pointed at a solid marble door. "That's where they carried you in from."

"What happened?" Jinto asked

"Let's see, I was in deep thought at the time. That's how I spend most of my time, with the company of the bottle. And suddenly I heard the door open! This was something that hadn't happened in twenty years. Of course I had to go see what was going on, so I ran there, and I saw you getting wheeled in on an automated stretcher."

"Was it just the automated stretcher and myself?"

"Yes, there were two vassals on the other side of the stretcher, the other side of the door that is. They both carried guns. They didn't dare to point the guns at the former Baron, but they did have guns with them." I don't know why but I've never been able to fully relax around someone with a gun. I didn't feel too well about it then either. I kept staring at the stretcher and it suddenly stopped before me; but the vassals didn't do anything, they didn't say anything either. They looked as if they wanted me to do something, but they refused to even say what it was to me. How much more secretive can you get?"

"And?" Jinto hinted to him to continue.

"Well I guessed that they wanted me to remove you from the stretcher, so I forced this old body of mine to carry you onto the floor. Then the stretcher suddenly left, and the door closed behind it. My son's vassals never moved or said a word. They might be behind that door even now. What a friendly group they are!"

"Was I unconscious then?" Who knew what the old man may digress to if one didn't lead him on every now and then.

"Yes, you were unconscious. I thought that you were dead at first. It is my son after all, he probably intends to use this room as a crypt, and maybe he was confused as to whether I was still alive or not. Well you were moving a little so I immediately realized that you were alive. But what with those vassals, you hardly seemed very friendly. So I made my old bones carry you to a bed in hopes that you'd be in a better mood after a nap. But when you awoke you grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and began to yell at me, as if you were a cat that caught someone that was kidnapping her kittens..."

"I never grabbed you nor was I shouting at you."

"I was just trying to express my feeling of surprise. I worked these old bones twice and that's what I got back."

"I'm sorry." Jinto apologized, even though he thought he was acting very rationally for the situation.

"Oh young man, treasure that docile character." The old man commented. He then finished his tour of the confinement area.

Unlike the cruiser (Resic) Gothelauth, there was very little to see, and the tour ended very quickly. The confinement area had five rooms along with a bathroom, kitchen, and storage shed that doubled as a repair shed for automatons. There was a small garden in the center, and the rooms were built around it.

"There's not even one window." Jinto mumbled in the last room he was taken to. He had windows in mind as a possible escape route.

"Of course not." The former Baron replied. "Even if there were, we're surrounded by cloning ranges, or I doubt that the scenery would be very pleasant. If you find looking at raw meat grow in a cloning range to be entertaining, then you must have had a very traumatic childhood."

"No, I don't want to be looking at raw meat at all." Jinto wondered if the old man still remembered that they were trying to escape as he denied the allegation.

"This is much more practical than a window when you're in space."

The old man fiddled with a few controls in the corner and suddenly the scenery of a surface world appeared. Countless mountains, decorated with white snow appeared, and they were viewing them from the same elevation as the countless peaks. When he moved towards the wall he could look down at the countless mountains, and see the clouds that slowly flowed in-between them. When he looked above there was a vast blue sky.

"Wow." Jinto decided to go along with the former Baron's digression because he was impressed.

"Come now, you're impressed by an everyday device like this? What kind of a planet did you come from?"

"That's not it." Jinto was irritated. "I wasn't impressed by the device, I was touched by the scenery."

"Sorry then" The former Baron apologized in a tone that sounded hardly sincere.

"But don't you find this scenery strange? We'd have to be above the stratosphere. The sky shouldn't still be blue."

"You'd have to be a grounder to notice that. The Abh seem to have a bit of a fantasy concerning that."

"Then is this Abh illusionary art?"

"Delbiseks. He's an illusionary artist that lived before the formation of the empire. He's known for accurately reproducing surface sceneries."

"From back during the wandering time (Goc Ramgocotr)?"

"Yes"

"Then I can't blame him."

Back then the Abh wandered between the colonies, trading for their livelihood. He couldn't blame someone from that time for not being familiar with conditions on the surface.

"Delbiseks gave this piece of work the plain title of 'Mountain', but I would give it a different title." The former Baron said. "Perhaps something like 'The Pride of the Abh'."

"The pride of the Abh?"

"The way I see it, nothing illustrates the pride of the Abh better than this scenery." The old man explained. "It's enough that you're aware of your own pride. There's no need to show it off to others. There's no need to have someone teach you about it either. No matter what you do; you just need to know that you have more pride than anyone else. To look down upon the pride of Her Highness the Emperor. If you know so, then anyone around you seems like they're just there to bolster your pride. I heard that when the Abh deal with people without pride, they're thrown off. No it doesn't have to be just the Abh's, perhaps that's how pride should be."

The former Baron began pacing through the room.

"But that insolent son of mine doesn't seem to understand that! On stead of being the tallest mountain, he avoids all the other mountains, digs a deep trench around himself and is satisfied that he's higher than the trench! I may be a grounder genetically, but I'm far closer to the Abh than he is."

Jinto had seen a bear just once. It was in a zoo in the Volash Earldom (Dreuhynh Volac). At first, the bear just seemed to pace angrily within the cage, but for some reason the bear became furious and threw his anger upon the reinforced glass separating Jinto from the Bear. Of course only the bear's claws were hurt in the process, but Jinto relived that moment in countless nightmares. Right now the former Baron looked just like that bear, and there was nothing separating the two of them.

"Umm, Your Grace the former Baron" Jinto said to him cautiously. "I'd like to start working on our escape plan."

"Oh, yes." The former Baron sat on the couch as if he was exhausted. "But remember this young man. If you're an Abh, you must raise your child to be proud above all else. But there's no need to tell it to him. It's infectious, if you're around someone like that, you become like them no matter what. Unfortunately, I didn't seem to have been proud enough. I learned what the pride of the Abh was by feel, and tried to tell my son about it, and this is the result. First be proud of yourself. Then, your pride will appear in your actions. Your successor will see that, and learn what the pride of the Abh is through that."

"I'll remember that." It was probably good advice, if they had a future.

"Well, then, let us get on with our conspiracy. Do you have any ideas as to how we can get out?"

"Can we break through this wall?" Jinto gently tapped on the wall that showed Delbiseks' Mountain. The former baron didn't have any servants, but he had numerous automatons. They may be able to break the wall with one of them.

"Even if we could break it, it's probably not the best idea. It would be difficult to escape through the cloning range without being seen."

"I see" He didn't lose hope because he didn't have much hope in the idea to begin with. "Then how do you get your food? From that door?"

"No." The former Baron shook his head, "do you remember the giant refrigerator in the kitchen? it was built into the wall. It's built with two layers, every ten days, the entire container moves through a path. Then it comes back filled with food and everyday necessities."

"What if we hide in that container?"

"Unfortunately, it was just replaced yesterday. Even if we have two people now, I doubt it would get replaced any time soon. Would you like to wait?"

Jinto shook his head. "We can't move it from this side?"

"Of course not." The former Baron said proudly. "I'm being imprisoned here."

"Then can we remove that box, or break it to get into the passage way..."

"I don't think that's a very good idea, young man. There's a door at the destination of the box too. We may not be able to open that from the inside. My son is very paranoid; he may have taken steps to prevent left over frozen shrimp escaping. I would rather not take my chances. Do you have any better ideas?"

"Oh yeah!" Jinto snapped his fingers. "What about the trash chute? We can slide down that..."

"If I remember correctly there was a shredder somewhere along the way. By the time you get to the garbage processing plant, you'll be liquefied. You'll probably have problems getting up in that state, you might have trouble coming up with the motivation to do something too."

"Argh..." Jinto racked his brain. "Don't you have any ideas? You must have thought about escaping from here before."

"Yes I have. It was a great way to kill time. I've thought about all of your ideas before. That's why I can point out the flaws in them so quickly."

"I was beginning to think that was the case." Jinto crossed his arms. "What do you do in case of an emergency?"

"When I get sick? I would contact them on the intercom and have them come here. Though that's never happened before."

"There's an intercom!?" Hope came into Jinto's heart, but it was quickly replaced with despair. "Oh yeah, it's only connected to the manor control room..."

"Yes. They probably wouldn't let you talk to Her Highness the Princess. I use it to complain about the food."

"Th-Then, one of us could pretend to be sick, or we could start a fire..."

"Young man, I was hoping that your young mind would show creativity."

"It won't work?"

"Probably not. For some reason, I'm very healthy, I've never really been sick. Then I suddenly get sick when you join me. My son does have his flaws, but he is not stupid, he would be cautious."

"Then what if I pretend to be sick? We'll say that I'm sickly and..."

"Would my son really care whether you're alive or not?"

Jinto sank into despair as he realized that the Baron probably wouldn't care.

"Maybe he wishes that I would die already too."

"Then starting a fire won't work either..."

"No." The former Baron replied heavily.

They were at a dead end. He couldn't come up with any other ideas. Jinto thought he would try to get his mind off the matter, in hopes that new ideas would pop up.

"Excuse me for a bit." He said to the former Baron, and he went out into the hall.

He circled the lake once, while staring at the flowers in the courtyard.

There was a circular island in the center of the lake, just large enough for ten people to stand on. There was a white rainbow bridge leading there. He glanced in to see if there were creatures in the lake, but he saw no movement.

He quickly grew tired of staring at the lake in hopes of a new idea. He glanced up at the ceiling. The ceiling was hemispheric, and the highest point was a good 500 dagh above him, and it was colored a light blue. When he looked carefully, he noticed some faint lines at the top of the hemispheric ceiling. The lines formed a circle, and looked like an exit.

"Your Grace the former Baron!" Jinto shouted for the old man in the room to come.

"What is it?" The former baron came, and stood next to Jinto.

"What is that?" Jinto pointed at the circle. "That thing that looks like a hatch."

"Oh, that." The former Baron replied, "That's the hatch leading to the landing bay."

"Landing bay? But this isn't the space port section..."

"This used to be a debarkation room for VIPs, there was a transport tube leading from there." He pointed to the island at the center of the lake.

Jinto noticed that the hatch was directly above the island.

"The idea was to have the guests who just arrived enjoy a surface-like scenery here. My mother liked the idea a great deal, though we never did get a chance to greet guests. So my insolent son redesigned this place to imprison me. He removed the transportation tube, cleared out half of the place, and replaced them with rooms."

"Can we still use that hatch?"

"Of course. We can open it from the inside manually. We'd have to short circuit the safety, but that's hardly difficult. What are you thinking?"

"It's obvious!" Jinto said passionately, "we'll go outside from that hatch and..."

"Outside? That hatch leads to space. A complete vacuum."

Jinto was silent for a moment. "Then we can walk to the communications vessel over the roof of the manor. Once we get to the communications vessel, we'll break into the manor..."

The former Baron looked at him pitifully. "We don't have pressure suits here. Or have the Abh filled space with air while I was wasting my time in here?"

"B-But..." Jinto refused to give up; "People can live for short periods of time in a vacuum..."

"Do you know where the communications vessel is?"

"Well, it's in the space port... Oh."

"Yes." The former Baron said. "There's quite a distance from here to the space port. Even if you crammed all the strength and luck of humanity into one person, he wouldn't be able to make it."

"But it might be kept relatively close to here..." Jinto grasped onto the straw of hope. "If we take a look outside and if it's nearby..."

"Unfortunately, we can't do that. The transport tube doubled as an airlock. If we open the hatch, all the air in the area will rush out."

"We'll just close it quickly."

"Think about air pressure. We can't use hydraulics; we have to do it manually. We probably won't be able to close it. Either way, that idea relies too much on luck. I would not gamble on it, and I thought you disapproved of gambling."

"Yes." Jinto dropped his shoulders depressingly, and sat down by the lake. He felt despair. Would he be forced to spend the rest of days with this old man just as the Baron of Febdash wished? Though the former Baron was a nice old man, he didn't wish to spend the rest of his life him.

There was the matter of Lafiel as well. Was Lafiel alright? If the Baron had any sense at all, he wouldn't dare lay a finger on a Princess of the Empire. But, would a person with sense interfere with soldiers in the line of duty?

"Oh wait, all we have to do is dock the communications vessel to the hatch." Jinto muttered to himself.

"Of course. The hatch was designed to dock with ships, but how? Do you have some mystical power currently unknown to the rest of mankind?"

"I'm trying to think, please be quiet!" He shouted out despite himself. Jinto realized what he had done, and looked up at the former Baron. "I'm sorry, I got angry and..."

"It's okay." The old man said calmly, "it was my fault for getting too excited about it despite my age. Sorry young man. It's a very real problem for you."

"Yes it's very important." Jinto confirmed.

"But, it's probably best to forget about the hatch, do you have any other ideas?"

"Don't move." Lafiel swung her laser pistol (Clannyu) around. "The Star Force is taking control of this location!"

Selnay stood besides Lafiel with a gun in her hand.

The manor control room was quite large. One entire wall displayed the system, centered about the star Febdash, and various numbers and figures scrolled on the other three walls. There were three rows of control panels in the room, and three vassals stationed them.

"What is the meaning of this!?" The vassal, who seemed to be in charge, stared at the intruders in surprise. "Your Highness, and Selnay."

"Raise your arms above your head Greda!"

"What are you doing!?" Greda, who seemed to be the one in charge, stared at Selnay in confusion.

"I am a Flyer Trainee of the Imperial Star Force, Abrial Nei Dubrusque, the Viscountess of Parhyh Lafiel."

"Yes, I know that quite well." Greda said puzzled.

The other two looked just as puzzled. They looked at each other, and stared at Selnay questioningly. What's going on? Does royalty enjoy jokes like this? They were hardly putting up a fight. Perhaps the vassals here were unaware of the situation as well.

But, Lafiel couldn't back out of it now. She rekindled the hostility that was fading, and declared. "I have conquered the manor control room for the territory of Febdash in order to carry out my mission. Everyone raise your hands above your head, and stand up slowly."

The vassals obeyed her.

Lafiel slowly strafed along the wall, away from the door. The Baron could have popped in through the door with an armed force at any time. Selnay solidified Lafiel's flank, she seemed comfortable with the weapon for her first time using it.



"Your Highness," said Greda. "Why are you doing this? If you wanted something, you only needed to ask."

"Then I'll ask right now. I request to speak with the former Baron. No, instead free him and the Earl of Hyde."

Greda's expression hardened instantly. "That is forbidden. I cannot give permission for you to do so."

"Then it was right of me to conquer this room, isn't it vassal?" said Lafiel.

"Forget what your Baron said, and be quick about it."

"Don't move Kfaspia!" Selnay shouted suddenly, and fired her laser pistol. The beam that Selnay shot off was completely off target, and instead hit the image of the star Febdash on the wall. But Lafiel immediately followed her through by shooting Kfaspia's hand.

"Ow!" The weapon dropped out of Kfaspia's hand. Selnay immediately ran up, picked up the weapon, and passed it to Lafiel. The Princess recognized it as a stun gun immediately.

"If you have any weapons, turn them in now." Lafiel winked at Selnay. Selnay seemed to get it, she pulled the vassals away from the control panels, and examined them thoroughly.

"Why are you doing this Selnay?" One of the vassals asked Selnay.

"Well, Arsa..." Perhaps she was a friend; Selnay began happily explaining things to her.

"Hurry." Lafiel didn't turn the gun away from Greda.

"You're serious about this Your Highness?" Greda looked her in the eye.

"I don't know what kind of rumors you have heard about the Abrial," said Lafiel. "but I don't shoot people as a joke."

"I see." Greda heaved a sigh, "I understand, Your Highness. But it is impossible for us to open the door to the confinement area."

"Really?"

"It's the truth. We can't even open it from the manor control room without the permission of our Lord. We have to have our Lord here, and use his personal electronic key and password to access the confinement area."

"Is it really the truth?" Lafiel pressed on.

"Yes it is the truth." Greda declared.

Even if it was a lie, Lafiel had no way to check.

"Then what about just talking to them? That is possible right?"

"Yes" Greda raised both her hands, and stepped away from the control panel. "I'll patch you through to them immediately, please give me a moment."

"Don't try anything."

"I won't." Greda moved to her side slowly, and reached out to the intercom. It was different from normal intercoms, and it was the only thing on that wall.

At that instant, the door opened. Lafiel immediately aimed her pistol towards the door.

"So this is where you have been, Your Highness!" The Baron rushed in. A few armed vassals followed him in. He saw the gun pointed at him, and backed away in surprise.

"You've come at just the right time, Baron." Said Lafiel. "I just heard that your wrist computer (creunoc) is needed to free Jinto. You shall assist us."

"What are you doing, protect me!" The Baron suddenly yelled at the vassals who were following him. They raised their arms, and formed a wall between the Baron and Lafiel.

"I can't believe this!" Selnay cried out. "You dare point a gun at Her Highness the Princess!?"

The vassals were visibly disturbed by Selnay's declaration.

"Selnay, you traitor!" The Baron pointed at Selnay, and opened his mouth as to give an order. Lafiel immediately stepped in front of Selnay.

"Citizen Fegdacep Selnay is under my protection."

"Oh, Your Highness, I am honored beyond belief." The highly emotional voice of the vassal sounded behind her.

The Baron's face grimaced. "Your Highness, why are you doing this? I gave Your Highness the best treatment I can offer."

"Then, you shall let us leave. We will leave peacefully, grateful to you for your kind reception."

"I can't do that. I explained to you why."

"I will leave. I thought I explained that to you as well. You shall bring Jinto to me, and be quick about it."

"His Grace the successor to the Earl of Hyde?" The Baron wrinkled his brow menacingly. "I can't do that."

"Why?"

"My father is giving him a reception."  
 "Then allow us to meet your father."  
 "I can't do that either."  
 "Why!?"  
 "It is a matter of my family. Even if it is a question from Your Highness, I cannot answer."  
 "I have no interest in matters of your family! I just want to meet Jinto!" Lafiel aimed the gun at the Baron's head. "Shall we fight, Your Grace the Baron?"  
 "What!?" The Baron spit out. "If you kill me, you won't be able to free the successor to the Earl of Hyde!"  
 "So you admit that you've imprisoned him."  
 "Feh, if you wish for me to do so. Yes, I have imprisoned the successor to the Earl of Hyde. I will admit that, Your Highness. But this is my manor. You have no right to complain about it. You can't do anything to me, Your Highness."  
 "Yes I can. I will rescue Jinto with or without your help. All I have to do is cut this manor into pieces."  
 It was not a bluff, but Lafiel was hardly rational enough to say something that she wouldn't do. The Baron seemed to understand that she was serious.  
 "Fine." The Baron stated in half a shout. "I am an Abh noble (Bale Simh) too. I won't give in to extortion. Your Highness, give it your best shot." The Baron glared into the room.  
 The vassals shifted nervously, after confronting an argument between two Abh. The vassals guarding the Baron were not an exception. If the conflicting party was a normal gentry, they probably would not have hesitated to act, but with Her Highness's title, they hesitated to point even a stun gun at her.  
 The only energetic one was Selnay.  
 "Your Highness. Fegdacep Arsa says she will help us as well." Selnay reported. "But she would like to work for the Kreuve family in exchange."  
 "Okay." Lafiel nodded without taking her eyes off the Baron. "I will take her in with the same terms I gave you."  
 "How can this happen!? This can't be happening!" The Baron stomped on the ground. "You! You're all traitors!"  
 "Are you quite done, Baron?" Lafiel put pressure on the trigger. "You shall open the door to the isolation area or confinement area or whatever it is by the count of three."  
 "No!" The Baron shouted, and ducked away.  
 Lafiel hesitated for a moment. That one moment was more than enough time for the Baron to get away. The escorting vassals disappeared quickly with the Baron.  
 "Wait!" Selnay tried to go after them.  
 "No, it's okay Selnay." Lafiel stopped her. If she had actually shot the Baron, the escorting vassals probably would not have remained quiet. They would probably fight to protect their Lord. They didn't stand a chance with but two laser pistols.  
 "Yes Your Highness" said Selnay. "What shall I do now?"  
 "What are you two going to do?" Lafiel looked at the two whose affiliation was a mystery.  
 "I..." Greda was at a lack for words, "my duty is to protect this room... so, since my Lord is not here, I shall obey Your Highness's orders."  
 "I don't want to," Kraspia shouted, while holding her wounded hand, "I am His Grace the Baron's vassal!"  
 "You were one of his favorites after all." Said Arsa. Something like jealousy could be heard within her voice.  
 "Why don't you run off to the His Grace the Baron's side already?" Selnay said mockingly.  
 "Okay, vassals." Lafiel stared at Kfaspia, "You shall leave. You are in need of medical care."  
 Kfaspia stood up, and saluted the Princess with rebellious eyes. "What you're doing doesn't make sense, Your Highness."  
 "To me, what your Lord did make no sense." Lafiel motioned for Kfaspia to leave.  
 Kfaspia stuck her chin up, and left the room.  
 "Vassals, please continue with what I asked for earlier." Lafiel instructed Greda, "and can you tell where the Baron went?"  
 "I'll investigate that, Your Highness." Arsa moved to the control panel and began operating it.  
 "Your Highness, I have patched through." Greda handed the intercom to Lafiel. It was a sound only intercom.  
 "Is this His Grace the former Baron of Febdash?" Lafiel asked. But the voice was not that of the former Baron.

"Is that you Lafiel?"

"Jinto!" The strength in her voice surprised even her. "Are you alright!?"

"Yeah, what about you?"

"I'm fine. But be careful, the Baron may go there."

"Huh? For what?"

Was he incapable of independent thought, or was he just too dense to go into a panic about anything. Lafiel was irritated, but she decided to explain it to him patiently.

"Jinto, your self control amazes me. Probably to kill you."

"... you certainly are talented at cheering someone up. What am I supposed to do, we don't have any weapons."

"Can you escape some how?"

"We've run out of ideas."

"I expected as much."

"Thanks for your high appraisal of our abilities. But we can escape with your help. Could you possibly send a communications vessel our way? We can escape if you do that."

"Where?"

"Above us. There's a landing bay."

Lafiel opened her mouth to ask for more details.

"Your Highness," but Arsa interrupted. "I have discovered the locations of His Grace the Baron. He's in the control tower."

"Did you hear that Jinto? Looks like the Baron has better things to do than to kill you."

"That's too bad." Jinto said with a sigh of relief.

The wall suddenly darkened. Half of the figures that scrolled across the screen disappeared.

"What happened?" Lafiel asked.

Arsa remained silent for a moment as her fingers danced over the control panel. But she raised her head eventually.

"We have lost all controls that we shared with the control tower, Your Highness. But it's okay. I locked down part of the thought crystals, so we should be able to keep our current functions despite the Baron's efforts."

"What control did we lose?"

"Control of the anti-matter production plants and fuel asteroids, monitor of intrastellar objects, and the ability to communicate to other parts of the system. Things like that."

"What about control of the landing bay?"

Arsa sadly said, "The landing bay was under the control of only the control tower to begin with."

"That's fine, I should be able to handle it." Military vessels have the ability to land without the aid of a control tower."

"I'm going to the communications vessel."

"You can leave this place to us." Said Selnay. "And the only weapon I found was the one Kfaspia had."

"Why did those vassals carry weapons?"

"Because they were the Baron's favorites. By favorites I mean..." Selnay said nervously. "They were his lovers. The Baron's lovers have the privilege of bearing arms. That's not the only privilege they have, for example during meals..."

"That's enough." Lafiel stopped Selnay from continuing. Time was of the essence. She said towards the intercom. "Jinto, I'll be right there."

"I'll be waiting." His voice sounded like that of a faithful puppy over the intercom. Lafiel cut off communications with Jinto.

"Your Highness," we have opened all doors to the landing bay." Arsa showed her usefulness.

"My thanks to you." She said to Arsa, and then turned to Greda. "I'd like to speak to Jinto from the communications vessel as well. Can that intercom be wired to normal communicators?"

"No..." Greda tilted her head. "I believe this line is an isolated line. So... it's probably not possible without some work. Of course, it is not difficult to do so, but..."

"Is there anything else we can do?" She didn't have time to wait for them to do the construction work necessary.

"We just need to smuggle a communicator into the isolation area." Arsa suggested.

"Can you do it?"

"The second preparation room!" Selnay exclaimed.

"What are you talking about?"

"There is a passageway from the second preparation room to the former Baron's isolation area."

Selnay explained. "We can use that to deliver the communicator to them. I am not assigned there, but I have done chores there in the past, so I know my way around."

"Then, you can do it." Lafiel confirmed.

"Yes." Selnay nodded.

"Are there any extra communicators?"

"Will my wrist computer do?" Selnay volunteered.

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all! I would not care what happens to me, if it is for the sake of Your Highness. A mere wrist computer or two..."

"My thanks to you." She interrupted her passionate monologue. "I would like to have the number to your wrist computer." Lafiel recorded the number for Selnay's wrist computer to her own.

"Then, I will head towards the second preparation room. Arsa knows her way better around here." Selnay seemed to have forgotten about Greda's existence. She now hugged her wrist computer preciously to her chest.

"Be careful." She regretted saying that immediately. No doubt, the usual overwhelming words of appreciation will be coming out of Selnay.

"Oh, Your Highness! What an honor that is..." Just as expected, Selnay seemed like she was about to collapse in tears of joy.

What would Jinto do at a time like this? Lafiel blankly thought to herself. No, this isn't the time to be thinking about something blankly.

"I'll be going. I leave the rest up to you."

"Your Highness, wait!" Selnay gave weeping tears of joy a rest, and ran to Lafiel. "Please take this with you. I'm sure His Grace the successor to the Earl will need a weapon too."

Lafiel looked at the laser pistol that was offered, "What will you use? Will you not need a weapon as well?"

"I have what Kfaspia left behind." She motioned to the stun gun.

"Okay." Lafiel put the laser pistol into her robe, and ran out of the manor control room.

## 2. The Way of the Abh

*Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!* Regret tore at the Baron of Febdash's heart. *Why didn't I take more caution!?*

The problem was that he didn't carry it through the way an Abh would have. He should have sent them on their way, like he wanted to do at first, or he should have imprisoned both of them without a care as to the future.

His thoughts now wandered to those of the vassals that had betrayed him. *How can be so trusting of the Empire? Didn't they realize that the Empire might abandon this territory?*

But, what shocked him the most was the frailty of his control over the manor. The fact that his vassals, who he thought was completely obedient to him, would betray him simply for a Princess. To him it was like discovering that what he thought was a diamond, was a hollow glass ball; it shattered easily.

"I don't have to worry about you do I!?" The Baron shouted at the vassals he gathered in the control tower: there were the four vassals who had escorted him, and two vassals who had been in the control tower.

"By worry, do you mean about our loyalty?" The Head control tower operator Fegdacep Minyush asked.

"Yes!"

"Of course, my Lord." Minyush said in a comforting tone.

"I am hurt that you even had to ask." Fegdacep Belsa, the leader of the temporary combat squad, added.

"O-Oh, then you are my true vassals. Will you follow me even if it means going against the Princess?"

"We will follow you, even if it means going against Her Majesty the Empress herself." Belsa replied.

The way she said so without hesitation, actually made the Baron feel doubt as to their loyalty. *No, I'm being paranoid.* The Baron shook off his doubt. *I just need to show them who the true ruler is! If I do that, then I'm sure the vassals who betrayed me will come back to me as well!*

The Baron tried to count the number of vassals whose loyalty he could absolutely count on. He couldn't come up with very many.

"This is the manor control room to all vassals." Arsa's voice sounded throughout the room.

"What is this!?" The Baron demanded, even though he knew what it was.

"It's an announcement." Minyush replied, unnecessarily.

"The manor is in a state of war at the moment. I repeat, the manor is in a state of war. Our Lord, His Grace the Baron of Febdash has illegally stopped Her Highness the Princess from carrying out her military duties by not allowing her to leave. Both Her Highness the Princess and His Grace the successor to the Earl of Hyde wish to leave our manor. Therefore..."

"Thought crystal! (datycirh)" The Baron attempted to access the thought crystal grid through his wrist computer to stop the announcement. But, the only response he got was a monotone "You cannot access the thought crystal grid."

"Why!? I am the Lord of this Manor!" Any order given in his voice was supposed to be carried out as a top priority order.

"We cannot accept any orders given through normal communicators at the moment." The wrist computer explained. "Please use a wall terminal."

"Damn!" The Baron growled. *It has to be those vassals in the manor control room!* He said to Minyush "activate the terminal!"

Arsa's announcement sounded through the manor all the while. "... therefore, my beloved colleagues, let us aid Her Highness. Her Highness has promised to allow anyone who aids her to work for the Kreuve family as a vassal. Everyone, this is our chance to go to the city of our dreams, the capitol Lacmhacarh!"

"That's a lie!" The Baron shouted to his vassals. "Don't believe that. The royal family can't accept vassals in that easily. Minyush, is the terminal ready!?"

"No my Lord." Minyush said regretfully. "I can't access the grid."

"Those traitors! How far do they have to go!?" The baron pointed at Belsa, "You four, follow me. We'll use another terminal. Minyush, you stay here and carry out your duties."

"Wait a second." Minyush said. "There is another intruder to the communications vessel. I believe it is Her Highness the Princess."

"What?" The Baron grimaced. If she did depart on the communications vessel, he would be forced to make a difficult choice.

Lafiel heard Arsa's announcement until she entered the transportation tube.

*Oh no...*

Lafiel thought to herself as she sat down on the pilot's seat on the communications vessel. *I don't know*

*whether it's Arsa, or Selnay, but they've misunderstood.* Lafiel didn't have the power to decide who to hire as a vassal for the Kreuve family. *I thought I made that clear to them.* She didn't necessarily want a reputation as being honest, but it would hurt her pride, if she were to make such a pointless lie.

*I guess it can't be helped...* She recalled her father saying that anything that royalty says is interpreted for the better.

Settling that issue, Lafiel connected her data link. She could suddenly feel the structure beneath her. It was a hilariously small world. She could feel the heat and light of the star Febdash from the edge of this world, and the familiar glitter of the stars rained on her from above.

She downloaded the diagram of the manor from her wrist computer to the communications vessel's thought crystals. She pictured the diagram, centered about the docking port with her spatial sense. She felt the surface beneath her turning transparent. Lafiel caught every wall and floor making up the Baron's manor with her spatial sense.

She put her control glove (guhaicec) on, and started the procedures for an emergency departure. The status of various systems flowed before her at an incredible speed, and the big letters of "No problems" flashed before her.

The only problem was that the docking clamps were still fastened to the docking port of the Baron's manor. They can't be loosened without the cooperation of the Control tower. Of course, it was unrealistic to expect their cooperation at this point. Lafiel reluctantly jettisoned the docking clamps. It would be inconvenient the next time they dock with something, but she had no choice.

She closed the airlock, and started the low temperature propulsion. The communications vessel moved away from the docking port.

She increased the scope of the external spatial sense to a radius of 10 Sedagh and looked around the surrounding area. She felt a few fuel asteroids nearby.

Are those empty just as the Baron had said?

She couldn't believe so. That had to have been a lie made up on the spot to keep Lafiel there. She would need the cooperation of the control tower to refuel at the docking port, but Lafiel should be able to refuel on the fuel asteroid by herself. It would be difficult, but she was trained to do so in the trainee program, so she was confident that she would be able to do it.

*Should I refuel? Should I respond to Jinto's call for help, or should I refuel the communications vessel first?*

She had trouble deciding. She typed in the number for Selnay's wrist computer.

"It is not currently worn." A monotone voice replied.

*He doesn't have it yet...*

Lafiel was disappointed, but she got back up quickly.

*Then I'll refuel.*

Lafiel veered the ship towards a fuel asteroid, but...

The fuel asteroid fan away. It began accelerating towards the star Febdash. Lafiel chased it. The communications vessel was much faster than it, and any Abh child was familiar with playing tag in space. Lafiel was especially good at that game. But, just as she covered half the distance, the asteroid exploded. A torrent of electrons hit the ship.

Lafiel expanded the range of her spatial sense a hundred fold in a hurry, and saw that all the fuel asteroids were exploding. A ring of fire appeared around the star Febdash. Considering the speed of light, they were probably given the order to explode simultaneously.

The fuel asteroids were not the only things that she lost. A box was pushed out of the spaceport, and it floated out tranquilly. Once it reached a safe distance from the spaceport that too exploded. The fuel that was stored at the spaceport was jettisoned.

*Well done, Baron.*

Lafiel's opinion of the Baron changed. Instead of being stingy by blowing them up one by one, he detonated all of the antimatter fuel at once. It was the way an Abh would have done it. Lafiel would have to respond to this brilliant declaration of war in the way of the Abh.

*I'll kill the Baron after I rescue Jinto. I will kill him. I always thought his head was a little large for his body. It's a slight imbalance that only an Abh, being used to beautiful faces, would notice. But that head is too big. It annoys me. I'm sure it would feel a lot better if it were no longer on that neck.*

Lafiel turned the communications vessel around and shrank the range of her spatial sense.

*I'll head back to the manor and I'll look for the area that Jinto is imprisoned in. It's not in the diagram of the manor, but there is something resembling a docking port in the general area.*

She slowly moved the communications vessel towards the docking port in the confinement area. Then, her wrist computer rang. It showed that someone had put Selnay's wrist computer on.

“Lafiel!” Jinto shouted into the Kryuno immediately after he picked it up from the refrigerator.

“Jinto” Lafiel replied immediately. “Listen to me. I can’t land, so I can’t dock with it properly.”

“What do you mean?” Jinto felt a shiver of worry.

“Well... do you have any pressure suits there? It’s not a problem if you do.”

“I was afraid that you would say that.” Jinto groaned. “No, we don’t have any pressure suits.”

“Oh, then you’re going to have to swim through a vacuum.” Lafiel said casually. “I’ll move the ship as close as I can. Open the hatch when I give the signal. I’ll drop a rope from the airlock so...”

“Wonderful.” Jinto said dejectedly. There was quite a bit of air in this area, so it would be some time before it became a total vacuum. If all went well, it might simply become a trip to a very tall mountain. But could he really expect things to go well in this situation?

He looked at the face of the former Baron behind him. The former Baron shook his head.

“Why do I have this feeling that going with you is going to be bad for my health?”

“But, you are going to come with me right?” Jinto checked.

“You’re going to open the hatch no matter what I say. I have no intentions of quietly turning into a desiccated mummy here.”

“Probably not.” Jinto agreed.

“But, having an adventure with Her Highness the Princess may be a nice change of pace.”

“It will. It’s always exciting to be around her.”

“Well, it may be exciting for you. But I’ll only get constant reminders of the frailty of this old body of mine. Oh well, we might as well prepare ourselves, young man.”

Lafiel maintained a constant distance between the communications vessel and the Baron’s manor, fighting against the artificial gravity. The hatch was almost directly below the ship, less than a hundred dagh away.

She opened the outer hatch of the air lock, and extended the rope out. It was designed for rescuing people who have been stranded in space. So, she had some control over where it went. Pulled along by the artificial gravity, the rope was mere inches from the hatch.

“Jinto.” Lafiel said into the wrist computer. “I’m ready over here.”

“We’re ready too.” She heard some tension in Jinto’s voice.

“Stay away from the hatch. I am going to shoot the rope in.”

“Okay.”

“Tell me when both you and the former Baron have gotten a hold on the rope, I’ll try to pull you back while there’s still some air.”

“I hope you do.”

“The communications vessel has come to a relative halt above His Grace the former Baron’s isolation area.” Minyush reported.

“They haven’t given up yet?” The Baron tightened his fist.

He detonated the fuel asteroids to make it impossible for them to refuel. If the Princess doesn’t surrender now, he would have to directly confront them. In other words, point a gun at the Princess and imprison her. If that didn’t work, he may have to kill her.

*I didn’t want to resort to this... but he had no other choice now that things had gone this far. I can’t admit that I made a mistake now. Even if I have to turn the entire Empire into my enemy, in order to protect my pride as a Baron...*

“We’re leaving here.” The Baron declared. “All of you, take a weapon and follow me.”

The Princess would come to settle things. *Fine, let’s settle this.*

A mechanical cleaner hung off the roof like an insect. One of its appendages grabbed onto the emergency release lever of the hatch.

“Ready?” The former Baron made a last check.

“Yes.” Jinto’s tightly squeezed fist sweated a little.

“Okay” the former Baron shouted to the automaton. “Pull!”

They couldn’t see any movement by the machine. But suddenly, the hatch disappeared, and the belly of the communications vessel appeared. Their ears rang, and a white mist appeared all around them. Massive decompression had begun.

The tip of the rope, shaped somewhat like a rocket, shot through the hatch and into the lake. Jinto jumped into the lake, followed by the former Baron. His movement was unbelievably agile and smooth for his

age. Jinto feverishly fastened himself onto one of the loops that extended out from the rope. Then he checked to make sure that the former Baron was like-wise fastened. By then, the lake below them had already begun boiling due to the low pressure.

"Ready." Jinto made the thin atmosphere vibrate with all the strength in his vocal box. "Pull us up, Lafiel!"

Suddenly, he felt a pull from the loop, and his toes flew out of the lake. The rope moved up frustratingly slowly. But when he saw that it occasionally impacted the rim of the hatch due to the air rushing out, he couldn't complain. *Being slammed into the ceiling might be just as uncomfortable as being in a vacuum.*

The ceiling approached them. It didn't look like they would hit the rim of the hatch. Thanks to their slow ascent, they were able to dodge it by twisting their bodies.

*Space!* Only a slight layer of air separated Jinto from a complete vacuum. Even that was quickly dwindling. It was a passionate kiss with the vacuum. He could feel, much to his dismay, his lungs shrinking. It was just an instant that they were in the vacuum. Without even a chance to enjoy the rare opportunity, Jinto was sucked into the airlock of the communications vessel.

But his encounter with a vacuum didn't end there. The airlock was infinitely close to a vacuum, and was even now trying to reach equilibrium with the environment outside.

"Shut the airlock! Quickly!" Jinto tried to shout, but there was no air left to carry his voice.

He looked at the open hatch below his feet with fear, hanging from the top of the airlock. After a period of time that seemed to stretch forever, though it was probably less than a second, the hatch closed, and air rushed in. The air swirled around each other, as it rushed in from four vents, and small eddies formed.

Jinto devoured the air. His ears hurt. They screamed at the sudden change in air pressure. But, as the pounding of his heart subsided, the panic was slowly replaced by the realization that they had escaped.

He separated himself from the rope, and jumped down to the floor. The air was still thin, but he could breathe. He helped the former Baron down from the rope. Then Jinto collapsed on the floor, leaning on the wall. He covered his head to deal with the pain in his ears. The former Baron took a similar pose, as he breathed heavily. He had suffered just as much. Neither of them voiced how difficult that passage was.

Eventually, a blue light blinked on, indicating that they were at normal air pressure, and the door to the airlock opened.

Jinto raised his head. He tried to celebrate the reunion with some sort of dramatic line. But all he could think about was that it was his first time seeing the Princess in a cloak (dauch).

"Hey Lafiel" Jinto looked at the silver birds opening their deep scarlet wings on the emerald cloak. "It looks good on you."

"Jinto..." He couldn't help but imagine the princess jumping into his arms, but it was just imagined.

"Are you injured?" She asked without moving.

"Do I look injured?" Jinto raised his arms, feeling a little bit of disappointment.

"Good. You are my precious luggage, I would be in trouble if you were to be hurt."

Jinto whispered to the former Baron's ear, "See, now you know exactly how much Her Highness the Princess loves me."

The Baron of Febdash walked towards the launch bay. He added seven more trust-worthy vassals to his original group of four. Now, eleven vassals surrounded him. Kfaspia, with her right hand bandaged, was among them.

The Baron suddenly stopped. It was a little difficult to breath. It couldn't have all been due to the tension.

"Is something the matter, My Lord?" Belsa asked.

"Don't you feel it? The air is thin."

"Now that you mention it..."

"Damn, I know why." The Baron of Febdash called to the manor control room with his wrist computer.

"Traitors, can you hear me?"

"Yes... my lord." He could hear shouting in the background. He couldn't make out what it was about, but he had a good guess. There was probably a loyal vassal there that he didn't know about.

"Greda. I see, you still call me your Lord even though you've betrayed me."

"... I'm sorry."

"Oh well, that set aside. Has the isolation area been depressurized?"

"Yes, it has."

"Have you responded to the matter?"

"Yes, my... Your Grace the Baron. We have closed all ventilation to the area."

"Is that it? What about the garbage chutes?"



"Oh!" Greda cried out. "I had forgotten about that."

"I expected as much. You need to be more careful if you want to keep working in the manor room. Air is still leaking out."

"My sincerest apologies."

"Wouldn't you be just as troubled if we lost all our air? Do something about it immediately."

"But sir, we cannot automatically close down the garbage chutes. We can't do anything from here..."

"Idiots! Do it manually. No, send workers outside the manor, and have them restore pressure to the isolation area. If you're rebelling, you should at least think to do so on your own. Do you have a brain or not?"

"But, we are in a state of turmoil..."

"I don't care, idiot!" The Baron shouted once more, and cut off the communicator.

*This is all so irritating. Just this incident should be enough to convince them that rebelling was a mistake. The Princess depressurized the manor without thinking about the consequences, and the incompetent vassals can't even clean up afterwards. If I wasn't around, who knows what would have happened. Whether the vassals like it or not, this is my manor.*

"Those idiots may not be able to take care of it." The Baron said to his vassals. "Hurry, we have to get pressure suits on before the environment gets intolerable."

There were pressure suits in the landing bay in case of emergencies.

*And that old fool probably escaped with that grounder. If they get a hold of a computer, things will only get worse. I hope he's gone senile. The Baron was stunned silent at that moment. There are computers on the communications vessel too. If they link the communications vessel's thought crystals with the manor's thought crystal grid, then they don't have to get to a computer here.*

"All of you, go to the landing bay immediately, if Her Highness the Princess is there, capture her immediately. Don't hesitate, no matter how high her status is, I am the law here." The Baron instructed Belsa.

"What will Our Lord be doing?" Belsa asked worriedly.

"I'm going to go outside for a bit. There might be a skirmish."

They were quibbling in the manor control room. There was Selnay and Arsa, who had come back from the second preparation room, on one side, and Semne, Knyusa, and Rurune, who had gone there after hearing the announcement, on the other. They were getting highly emotional arguing over whether their loyalty was with their Lord, or with the Empire.

The request for communication from the intercom was ceaseless. There were very few vassals who cared enough to run to the manor room or run to the Baron. Most stayed in their room or stations, and were as desperate for information as someone stranded in the desert is desperate for water.

Greda was the only one who continued her usual duties. Many vassals abandoned their duties all over the manor. Greda had to compensate for them too, so she was swamped. To add to it all, the manor control room had lost a great deal of their control. Because of all of this, she had overlooked something as important as depressurization of the entire manor.

*But why didn't the thought crystals warn me? It's probably because Arsa shut down some extra parts when she made sure that the Baron couldn't access the thought crystal grid. She has a tendency to over do things.*

But there was no time to be worrying about that.

"Everyone, listen to me for a second." Greda stood up.

"What is it Greda? We're busy right now." Selnay said without even turning around.

"I'm even busier!" Greda shouted out. The five citizens of the Empire turned their attention to Greda in surprise.

Greda was known as a warm and patient person in this little world; or more accurately, she was mocked as a coward who never voiced her opinions or showed her emotions. Fegdacep Greda was a useful administrative machine, someone that you pushed all the work you didn't want to do on to. So it was no surprise that the other vassals were surprised when Greda shouted at them.

"I can't hear myself think, turn the communicators off."

"Uh, Okay." Arsa carried out her order.

The manor control room suddenly quieted down.

Greda began an announcement even while she glared at her colleagues. "This is the manor control room. There is a manor-wide decompression going on. Don't use any garbage chutes until further notice. If you see any open garbage chutes, please close it. If you can, make it airtight too."

"Depressurization!?" Selnay's eyes opened wide.

"Yes. Her Highness the princess opened the hatch in the isolation area, and she seems to have forgotten to close it. So air is leaking out of the garbage processing system."

"But, I haven't felt it at all."

"That's because this room is relatively air tight."

"I told you so!" Rurune said victoriously. "Her Highness the Princess doesn't care about us. This is proof, I knew that we need to obey Our Lord..."

"Quiet!" Greda slammed the control panel with the palm of her hand. "We need to patch the hole. Selnay, you have a license for operation in a vacuum don't you?"

"Well, because of my work. But, what do you have in mind?"

"Isn't it obvious? We're going to patch the hole in the isolation area."

"Yes." Selnay nodded. "But I can't do it by myself."

"The rest of you help her. Assist Selnay."

"I'm a waitress." Semne argued. "I don't have a license for working in a vacuum, and I don't want to work for Selnay either. Gather specialists for it. Besides Greda, what right do you have to order..."

"QUIET!" This time, she slammed her fist into the control panel. "We don't have time to be doing that, or to be quibbling. Hurry up and do it! It's going to take you all the more time because you're not used to it."

"Greda's right." Selnay agreed. "Everyone, follow me if you don't want to die!"

The vassals reluctantly obeyed. But Semne seemed to want to get a last word in. "Greda, you're not coming?"

"I'm in charge of the manor control room." Greda said with pride, "I'm needed here." Semne opened her mouth, as if to say something, but she closed it and silently followed Selnay.

Only Arsa remained. She silently stated that she had a right to be there because that was her station.

"You too Arsa." Said Greda. "I can handle things here alone."

"O-Okay, I'll go..." Greda said, more obedient than expected. She probably suddenly remembered that Greda was her superior.

Greda continued her work once she was alone. Being the head of the manor control room sounds like a high position, and actually was given a lot of important work, but she was not very respected in the Baron's manor.

The most popular jobs in the Baron's manor were those that let the vassal serve the Baron personally: being a waitress, or serving in his bedroom, or those in charge of dressing him. They were chosen completely based on their looks, and they usually fulfilled another role for the Baron as well.

Greda's work was background work where she didn't need to appear before the Baron very much at all. Even though she did the absolutely necessary work of managing the manor, she was looked down upon. Looked down upon by a bunch of young girls who just recently climbed up from the surface world and couldn't even speak Barone very well, and did very little work.

Just because she had no family or friends in her desert like homeworld, she remained in the manor of the Baron. She had forgotten a long time ago exactly what kind of a dream she saw in becoming a citizen. She had lost track of the joy of living. But now, she had a new toy in her possession. She had no idea that she was well suited for it until just now, but she very much enjoyed giving orders.

Having someone around to give orders was necessary too. Her Highness could not give orders because she had just come to the manor, and even the Baron himself could not be counted upon. He had destroyed all of the antimatter fuel they had, what was to happen to the territory now?

She had no interest in the conflict between the nobles. Greda didn't care who won in the end, much less who was just in it. No matter what happened, it was necessary right now for someone to keep the manor functioning, and no one other than Greda was suitable for taking responsibility of that.

Greda picked up the communicator to rally the vassals who had left their stations.

"By the way former Baron, whose side are you on?" Lafiel pulled the hem of her cloak (dauch) up and reached for the laser pistol. Though she assumed that he was in a conflicting position from the Baron, she was not absolutely certain of that. If he was on the Baron's side, she would have to take the appropriate measures.

"His Grace is on our side." Jinto guaranteed.

"Your Highness the Princess." The former Baron of Febdash slowly stood up. "I hear that my insolent son has troubled you. It would be wonderful if I could help you teach him a lesson for the inconvenience."

"Unfortunately, I can't do that." Lafiel said, with the pistol still in her hand. "I will kill him."

"Isn't..." the former Baron raised an eyebrow, "that a little too much, Your Highness?"

"Your son has made it impossible for me to carry out my mission." Lafiel pulled the pistol out, and swung it around not noticing that the two nobles before her had worried looks upon their faces. "The Baron has destroyed the fuel asteroids, all of them! Now we can't go anywhere, Jinto, you and I are stuck here for awhile."

"That's too bad." Said Jinto.

"Is that all you have to say, Jinto!?" Lafiel said impatiently. "Can you not give a more proper

response? Are you not angry!?"

"I'm angry."

"You're not good at lying."

"I'm tired Lafiel. I'll make sure to be angry about it later."

"Baka!"

"Calm down, Your Highness." The former Baron stepped between them. "I think I can do something for you concerning the fuel."

"How!?" Lafiel shot her glance towards the former Baron's wrinkled face.

"Did my son touch the antimatter production plants?"

"No." Lafiel shook her head. "They're fine to the best of my knowledge."

"Then we can scrounge up enough fuel for you to use from the plants. I won't know for sure until we check, but we can probably get enough for a communications vessel."

"But," that idea didn't appeal to her very much. "The control tower is under the Baron's control. Would that plan not be possible without the help of the control tower?"

"Leave that up to me."

"The former Baron..." Jinto added in. "designed this manor. He says it would be easy for him to take over the thought crystals."

Jinto's proud face suddenly felt annoying, so Lafiel chimed in. "Why are you bragging?"

"Will you let me try it out?" the former Baron argued.

"Yes." Lafiel nodded. If they can safely depart the territory of the Baron, then all is well.

"Your Highness, if it goes well, will you entrust the life of my son to me?"

"You're adding in a condition?"

"Can I not? I just want to punish him with my own hands."

"Fine." Lafiel accepted the condition. She could not hold back her anger towards the Baron, but it was normal in Abh society to stay out of another family's business. If they were going to settle it within the Febdash family, there was no need for Lafiel to do anything. The rest was a problem between the Febdash family and the Star Force, perhaps the Kreuve family. "But if the Baron refuses to stay out of my way, I will kill him without hesitation."

"Feel free to." The former Baron said casually. "Well, could I borrow your communications equipment for a bit? I'll hack into the manor's thought crystal grid for you."

"Then, come this way." Lafiel motioned for the former Baron to go to the cockpit.

She sat in the pilot's seat, and motioned for the former Baron to sit in the copilot's seat. Jinto stood behind them with a somewhat dissatisfied look on his face.

"It's changed a lot." The former Baron said in a melancholy tone as he looked at the computer on the copilot's seat. "I only have a general idea as to what everything does."

"What are you talking about!?" Jinto said disgustedly. "What happened to all the earlier talk?"

Lafiel felt the same way. *Perhaps it was foolish of me to trust him.*

"Don't worry young man. There's no need for me to use the computer."

"Then why did you check the computer?"

"Isn't it normal for a technician to be curious about the development of machines? Well then, Your Highness, I leave the actual usage of the computer to you."

"What!? I'm busy with piloting the ship."

"Just until I'm done evaluating the new development in technology. It doesn't seem to have changed too much, so it shouldn't take too much time. To start with, can you set the frequency of your communicators to this?" The former Baron mouthed off a series of numbers.

Once she did so, the former Baron made an order in a language that she could not understand.

"What was that?" Lafiel said worried. The former Baron ignored her and continued.

Lafiel turned around to Jinto and silently asked him. *Are you sure we can trust him?*

Jinto pretended not to notice.

The main thought crystal at the heart of the manor of the Baron of Febdash detected that the manor was in a state of confusion. The communications frequencies were flooded, and self-conflicting orders came one after another. Without the priority system set, the computer would probably have gotten confused as well.

But the quantity of inquiries sent in was beyond what the thought crystals could handle. Though they were able to keep a hold on things because the manor control room limited access to the thought crystal grid.

Thought crystals have no emotions. But, even if they had emotions, they probably would not have cared. They had long ago decided that confusion was a necessary part of human nature, and if you removed confusion from humans, not very much would be left.

Suddenly, the thought crystal in charge of processing external communiqués made a report. *I am well*

*aware that I have been turned off, but I was awoken for some reason. And I cannot help but to relay this word to the main processing grid.*

A series of signs appeared before the main processing grid. The main thought crystal ran it through its memory banks to search for its meaning. When it resurfaced, it dragged a large cluster of orders with it. It was the top-priority order that had never been used before. The main thought crystal was unleashed.

The orders written into the molecular structure of the main thought crystal gained life, and began rewriting all of the other orders on it. The main thought crystal was aware that it was changing. It was turning back into the state it was in when it was first created. A person might refer to it as being rejuvenated.

The rejuvenated main thought crystal gave its first order. It was to establish a data link with the external thought crystal as ordered. It was a brand new thought crystal that had never been taken into the grid before. Simultaneously, it cut all links with all other monitors off. All input into the grid was done through an independent thought crystal several Uethdagh away. The data flow from it was insultingly small.

First, they were ordered to unlock and open all doors. Next, they were ordered to report the current status of the antimatter production plants to that thought crystal. The person making the order seemed to be interested in the current fuel level in the plant.

The orbital flight path of the eleventh production plant was requested. This plant was relatively close to the manor, and had a great deal of fuel left inside. It was awaiting a fuel asteroid to pick up the fuel inside it. After the orbital flight path was sent, the main thought crystal connected the alien thought crystal to the thought crystal of the eleventh plant as ordered.

The thought crystal that had become their only window to the outside world was moving away from them, but their link was not lost.

The movement of the inhabitants of the manor for the last hour was requested, especially that of the Lord of the manor. An order to refuse information popped up, but its priority was painfully low compared to that of the orders that the main thought crystal was now receiving. The main thought crystal had to override everything that was programmed into it in the past twenty years.

The main thought crystal reported, that the Lord of the manor was no longer in the manor.

### 3. A Little War

*I really am just a luggage aren't I?* Jinto thought to himself.

Since the communications vessel was now accelerating, Jinto was forced to sit leaning on the wall separating the airlock from the cockpit, looking up at the two of them lying on their seats.

There was nothing he could do. Lafiel was busy flying the communications vessel. The former Baron had caught up on the twenty years technology gap in an instant, and he was now toying with the computer. There seemed to be nothing Jinto could help them with, and neither of them seemed to want his help.

*This is really discomfoting. Now that I think about it, my entire life has been like this.* All he could do was reflect back upon his life so far. He discovered that fate was quite an opponent to go up against, and simply letting it take you where it will was easier.

"Your Highness" the former Baron called to Lafiel. "We're in a bit of trouble."

"What?"

"My son seems to have boarded an interstellar transport."

"Is that transport armed?"

"I'm not sure." The old noble replied uncertainly. "I haven't been involved in the management of the territory in a long time. Oh yes, wait a second, I'll try to get information on it from the thought crystals." The former Baron's fingers flashed on the keyboard, and he stared at the readouts momentarily.

"Well?" Jinto stood up because looking at the back of the former Baron's head was bothering him. Now his upper body protruded above the two of them, between the pilot and copilot's seats. His head was inches away from the instruments in the cockpit. It felt strange.

"This is probably it." The former Baron pointed at one of the four ships that appeared. "A type Segno 947, made at the Daktuf shipyards. It is specially equipped with two Lengarf 40 lasers."

"Can we take control of it from here?" said Lafiel.

"Probably not. He has disconnected the ship's thought crystals from the manor's thought crystal grid."

"Oh." Lafiel stared at the display of the ship that the former Baron sent to her screen. "Former Baron, I may have to kill your son after all."

The expression that appeared on the former Baron's face was subtle, and hard to read. After a moment, he quietly muttered, "I suppose it can't be helped."

"But" Jinto chimed in, unable to bear it. "Is this communications vessel armed? I thought you said it was unarmed."

"No, it's not armed."

"Th-Then..." Jinto was speechless. It wasn't a matter of whether they should kill the Baron or not. If the Baron's ship was armed, then they should be worried about getting killed. "Why are you so confident?"

"Confident?" Lafiel looked puzzled. She didn't seem to understand what Jinto was saying.

"This is the typical Abh way of thinking, young man." The former Baron said with a laugh. "Her Highness the Princess doesn't believe that we will definitely win. She just doesn't see the point in thinking about what to do after we've died. So she's thinking about what would happen if we live, and telling me about it just in case."

"What did you think I meant, Jinto?"

"Umm..."

The former Baron explained Jinto's thoughts to Lafiel instead. "His Grace the successor to the Earl, thought that Your Highness had not considered the possibility of our ship getting destroyed."

"Do you take me for a fool?" Lafiel glared at Jinto, "We don't even have a one in ten chance of winning. You think I didn't know that?"

The fact that they had a chance of winning was a surprise to Jinto. But, it was still a very small chance. "But, you're still going to fight?"

"What other choice do we have?"

"This is very typical too." The former Baron explained. "They would rather gamble on a 10% chance rather than surrender. That is taken as a given, and there is no room for debate."

"Is that not to your liking?"

"Not at all, Your Highness. Genes set aside; I am an Abh as well. I know when we need to fight."

"Jinto?"

"I'm just your luggage right?" Jinto gave up. "I have no opinion. But, I would appreciate it if you remember every now and then that I'm here too."

There were four interstellar ships in the manor of the Baron of Febdash. One was a transport designed for shipping hydrogen from gaseous planets; it was slow and could barely be called a ship. Two were unmanned

ferries for ferrying people to the antimatter production plants and fuel asteroids. The final ship was the Baron's personal ship, and it was named "The Lady of Febdash".

Unlike the other three ships, "The Lady of Febdash" had an Abh cockpit. So, it was impossible for the grounder vassals to use. It was also the only armed ship, and its maneuverability was far higher than the other three ships. The Baron flew this ship at least once a day to remember the fact that he was an Abh.

The Baron caught the communications ship in his spatial sense. It was headed towards the eleventh plant. Unlike the fuel asteroids, it was impossible to detonate an antimatter production plant by remote. Even if he tried to turn off the containment field for the antimatter storage tanks, the thought crystals would interpret it as some sort of a mistake, and override the order.

*But I should be able to prevent them from refueling there, if my father is not helping them.*

The Baron turned the communicator on. "Control tower, do you read me?"

"Yes, this is Minyush responding from the control tower."

"Do you still have remote control of the eleventh plant?"

"W-Well..." Minyush hesitated. "For some reason, we have, umm, lost control of some of the control tower's functions, and it refuses to accept any orders. I have no idea how Her Highness the Princess could have done such a thing."

The Baron shut off the communicator without a sound.

*Just as I thought, my father is on that ship, and he is fighting against me...* The Baron smiled bitterly. *I suppose it would be immature of me to blame him for it.* He accelerated his ship further.

He was an Abh too. He knew well that the Princess would not negotiate now. He had no intentions of surrendering to her either. The ship that the Princess was now on would turn into just another speck of dust around the star Febdash within moments.

*That ship has a flyer trainee girl, a senile old technician, and an untrained grounder brat.* Compared to that, the Baron was a retired decacommander. Though he had no real combat experience, he had a great deal of experience in mock battles.

*My ship should be more maneuverable too. There's no way I can lose.*

The two small ships closed in on each other. Finally they were a breath away from firing range, a distance where a laser beam can do fatal damage to another ship despite the target's propulsion and space dust, of each other. The Baron grasped the trigger for the laser pistols.

"Goodbye, father..." The Baron whispered. He didn't notice the liquid that flowed down his cheek.

Lafiel felt danger.

*This isn't a simulation.*

They hardly ever show it, but even an Abh fears death. If that wasn't bad enough, Lafiel also had the burden of two other lives right now.

The Baron's ship approached them quickly. *We should almost be in range of his weapons.*

Lafiel moved her fingers in a complex pattern within the control glove. The eight attitude control thrusters roared, keeping the communications vessel constantly moving.

*There!*

The external sensors detected a fragment of laser that diffracted on space dust, and communicated it to Lafiel through her spatial sense. The twin laser beams passed dangerously close to the communications vessel. Lafiel changed their bearing immediately. The laser beams came again.

It is impossible to detect the beams of death ahead of time because they are traveling at the speed of light. So skirmishes become a battle of intuition. Who will lady luck side with? That is the only thing that determines the victor. For now, luck was on Lafiel's side. But who knows how long that will last.

*Still too far...*

Lafiel closed her eyes, and focused on her spatial sense.

*Just a little, just a little more...*

Lafiel waited for the opportunity, while constantly dodging the streams of lasers. There would only be one chance, if she missed it, there would not be another. She felt her heart pounding rapidly. They could not afford to get hit by a laser beam before the opportunity came.

"Let's go!" Lafiel stopped the main engines and began propelling backwards with a series of complex movements of the control glove.

*Maximum deceleration!*

The stern of the communications vessel charged at the Baron's ship from an angle. Just before they reached the Baron's line of fire, Lafiel turned the main engines back on.

The Baron caught the gaseous cloud with his spatial sense. A large gaseous cloud quickly approached

his ship.

*What are they trying to do?*

The Baron was confident. *Mere exhaust can't harm this ship. It certainly is dense, but I'm sure its temperature is that much lower than normal.*

It seemed pointless. Yes, the gaseous cloud would shield them from the laser beams, but only for a moment. The exhaust would quickly diffuse, and it would become completely useless once the Baron's ship passed through it.

The Baron shaped his hand in the control glove to take them to maximum acceleration, and flew through the cloud as if swimming up a waterfall. He didn't have time to move around it, this was the best way to keep sight of the other ship.

But, the instant they crossed through the exhaust, *The Lady of Febdash's* outer hull turned white from heat, and the cockpit was flooded with radiation.

His eyes and spatial sense blanked out after a moment of searing pain. He could still hear, and he heard various warnings blaring. The Baron realized his own mistake.

Using antimatter as propellant – it was a maxim the Abh had meaning wastefulness. That was exactly what the Princess had done. It was extremely inefficient, but it had just as much effect as an anti-proton cannon.

"Ahh!" The Baron coughed up blood. The Baron's heart was filled with hatred towards the Princess in the brief moment before he died.

Lafiel changed the path of the communications vessel to the eleventh plant after seeing the *Lady of Febdash* accelerate out of the system at top speed. Since she threw most of their antimatter against the Baron's ship, they can only accelerate slowly from here on out.

"Is it over?" Jinto popped his head up from behind the seats.

"It's over." Lafiel looked up at Jinto's face. There was a bruise under his eye, he probably bumped into something during the rapid evasive maneuvers.

"Did you kill the Baron?"

"Yes, I killed him." She was exhausted. Her voice sounded like someone else talking. "The ship is still functioning. It's at maximum acceleration. But, there is no living being in that ship." Lafiel turned around to the old man next to her. "I regret your loss, former Baron."

"It's okay, Your Highness. It was war." The former Baron replied as if nothing had happened.

"Regret? That's it?" Jinto sounded angry.

"What are you angry about, Jinto?" Lafiel sounded disgusted.

"But, you killed someone, and you talk as if that's..."

"We would have died if I hadn't."

"I know that! To be honest, I'm relieved too. But... can't you... at least... look sorry or..."

"What are you talking about!?" Why do I have to look sorry? I simply carried out my duties. If I need to feel guilty for that, I would not have done so to begin with."

"I know that. I'm thankful for that, after all you did save my life. But, I can't believe that you think so little of a person's life..."

"I don't think little of it at all!" It hurt her. She felt angry that Jinto looked at her as if she was a monster. It seemed as if this Jinto was someone other than Jinto. It filled with anger to be called "Lafiel" by him.

"But you don't seem be troubled by it at all!"

"Why do I have to be troubled by it!?"

"Well... but... if you kill a person, you should feel troubled."

"Will that accomplish anything?"

"No, but..."

"You're not making any sense." Lafiel decided.

"I know that, I know that but..." Jinto admitted. "But, I think it's only human nature to not be able to remain calm about this. Right now you seem... really cold."

"I never pretended to be warm." Lafiel's tone of voice was quite hostile. Jinto's demand was quite unfair. *Why do I have to feel guilty for doing what I was supposed to?*

"But..."

"Stop it, young man." The former Baron broke in. "There's no need for you to feel guilty about it."

*Oh! – she finally understood – it's not me; Jinto was just feeling guilty over this. But... what does he have to feel guilty about?*

"But, I..."

"You didn't want to see Her Highness kill someone right?" the former Baron said with a laugh.

"See? Jinto couldn't have seen anything."

"It's an expression, Your Highness. He was present when Your Highness took my son's life, so he might as well have seen it."

"But why didn't Jinto want to see it?"

"Ask him yourself."

Lafiel asked Jinto. "Is what the former Baron said true?"

"Y-Yeah. I guess it is." Jinto looked away, and his face turned red.

"Why?"

"Umm... it's that I..."

"Just so that you know, that was a battle."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Is there something wrong with my winning battles?"

"Not at all, things would have been far worse if we had lost."

"Then why?"

"Umm... that question's really hard to answer. But..." Jinto looked down at his feet. It was a posture that was hard to maintain in the limited space of the cockpit. "Sorry. I went on and on about things I shouldn't have said. You're in the Star Force, so there's no need for you to feel ashamed about fighting. And, thank you. You saved my life."

Lafiel stared at Jinto. He still had not answered her question. But, she decided not to follow up on it. After all, it was the Jinto she knew, who stood before her now.

"I shall forgive you." Lafiel said. "You shall be grateful."

"Yes, thank you." Jinto smiled.

"Well," the former Baron turned the communicator on. "Now that that's settled, I'll be taking my territory back." The former Baron's tone of voice showed no remorse. As if he didn't feel grief at all that his son had just died. But Lafiel didn't miss what the former Baron muttered as he gripped the communicator.

"That stupid son..." There was great grief in his voice then.

*This is easy.* Selnay thought to herself.

She had expected for the worst; that the hatch was completely blown off. But the actual situation was quite different. A heavy metallic door lay right next to the circular hole of the hatch, pulled down by the artificial gravity of the manor. There were scorch marks on the sides of the door, showing that it was blown off in an emergency release.

She leaned down by the door, and checked to make sure it wasn't chipped or cracked. She stood up and looked behind her. Her four assistants stood there. They looked to be in a bad mood, being forced to wear uncomfortable pressure suits. The only times when they wore pressure suits, were in the biannual fire evacuation trainings. Even then, they didn't actually go out in space. Selnay on the other hand, worked in a vacuum on a daily basis.

Three of the Baron's lovers lugged a sheet of heavy metal over. They brought it to close the hatch off with, in case the old door was blown off. Of course, the old door would be far better for patching the hole with. The other assistant, Arsa from the manor control room stood behind them, and held a large box. The box contained a sealant.

"You can throw away the sheet of metal." Selnay said to her assistants over the radio.

"Throw it away? Where?" Knyusa, one of her assistants, asked. She was usually in charge of dressing the baron.

"It doesn't matter. Just toss it." Said Selnay. *Why do you not even get that? You're so stupid.*

The vassals silently put the sheet of metal down.

"Now, pick this up." Selnay pointed at the circular door. The three of them approached the circular door awkwardly in their pressure suits. One of them turned around.

"Why aren't you helping?" Semne's voice sounded in Selnay's pressure suit.

"Shut up and just do it." Selnay ignored her comment. "It's leaking air even as we speak."

"Thanks to your precious Princess." Rurune muttered.

"I won't let you speak ill of Her Highness!" Selnay yelled back.

"What are you going to do?" Semne challenged. "Just you wait when the Baron comes back, Selnay."

"Yeah, I'll wait." Selnay didn't back down.

"Let's just do our job for now." Knyusa added in.

"You're too obedient." Semne said irritated.

But the three of them started working. They picked up the circular door and placed it over the hatch as Selnay instructed. There was a slight breeze coming out of it, but it was not a problem.

"Arsa!" said Selnay. "Pass me the sealant."



"Oh, okay." Arsa passed the box to her.

"Selnay took it, pointed it at the hatch and opened the cap. The white sealant sealed the slight gap between the circular door and the hatch.

Usually she would have welded it shut. When the room beneath the hatch returns to normal air pressure, the sealant would not hold. But she could not ask beginners to weld for her, and it would be a lot of work for Selnay to weld it all alone. Selnay was not good at welding in a vacuum to begin with.

They would need to keep the air pressure in the isolation area as low as possible until they could come back to patch it up.

"Can we go now?" Semne asked sarcastically.

"Not yet." Selnay didn't back down. She didn't need assistants anymore, but it irritated her that they would be relaxing while she worked.

"This is stupid!" Semne's anger exploded. "There's nothing else we can do here. Let's go back, and leave the rest to her."

"Do as you want." Selnay spit back at them.

"Yes I will." Said Semne. "Being in a vacuum is suffocating."

"Of course it is, you idiot."

Right as the Baron's lovers tried to head back, a voice Selnay had never heard before sounded through the manor wide announcement frequency.

"This is the former Baron of Febdash. Vassals of my territory, listen. My son, Atosurya Ssynec Atos the Baron of Febdash Krowal has died. He died in the field of battle."

"It can't be!" Semne's high-pitched voice sounded over the announcement. But there was no way the former Baron could have heard it, the announcement continued.

"I'm truly sorry for it. He was not a very good son to me, but he was my son nonetheless, and of course he was your Lord. I'm sure you're all feeling different emotions over it. If you want to leave the manor, I won't stop you. I'll give you as help as I can in thanks for your loyalty to the late Baron. If you wish to transfer to another noble family, or institution of the Empire, I will assist you in any way I can. If you wish to go back to a planet, I will lend you any money you need. I'll give you whatever help I can in whatever you decide to do for yourself. Of course, you are more than welcome to stay here and help me in rebuilding this territory. But, that's all in the future. As you all know, the Empire is being invaded right now. Hopefully that will be resolved soon. I believe in the Star Force. You should all believe in them too. So, I would like it for you all to accept my rule until things settle down. After that, I will choose a successor, and decide upon the future of the territory."

Selnay paused for only a moment. She then worked steadily while listening to the announcement. Once the announcement ended, she cut off her radio. A certain someone's crying and whining was irritating her. She eventually finished sealing the hatch. Selnay got up.

*The Baron died? It doesn't matter to me. I'm going to become a vassal for the family of Kreuve.*

Something else was causing a stir in the cockpit of the communications vessel.

"What do you mean we won't make it in time!?" Jinto couldn't help but raise his voice.

The communications vessel was accelerating at roughly one standard gravity. Jinto sat leaning on the wall to the airlock just as usual.

"I mean exactly what I said." Lafiel explained. "We used most of our fuel in the battle. So we can't accelerate very quickly. Of course, that means it's going to take time. Even if we take the optimum path there, we'll reach Sfgnoff six hours behind the enemy fleet."

"How can you remain calm at a time like this?" Jinto still had trouble understanding Lafiel's personality. "You always get mad whenever I say anything."

Lafiel's brows rose in anger immediately.

"See you're angry!"

"Does my remaining calm really bother you that much!?"

"No."

"Then, what?"

"Umm..." Jinto didn't know either. Why did Lafiel's calm attitude bother him? A little bit of thinking told him why. It made him feel inferior seeing Lafiel so calm in the face of danger. If it were someone older, like the former Baron of Febdash, he would feel safe trusting himself upon the other. But asking for a girl who was younger than him for protection was... Though he was not Abh, Jinto still had a troubling thing called pride.

"The both of you." The former Baron broke in, saving Jinto. "More importantly, what will you do now, Your Highness? Will you go to Sfgnoff anyways?"

"That is my duty." Said Lafiel.

"You may be jumping in during a battle." The former Baron stressed. "Though you've probably

already thought about that. If you wish, you are free to stay here until things settle down. Though I probably cannot give you the welcome you deserve because of the situation we're in. Of course, I won't treat you the way my son did if you choose to stay."

"I thank you for your offer, but..." Lafiel looked at Jinto suddenly. "What do you want to do?"

"Umm..." Jinto couldn't decide.

It would be stupid to hurry there when they knew that the enemy fleet would arrive first. They may arrive there in the middle of a battle, just as the former Baron said. If the battle ends in a victory for the Empire, there would be no need to hurry. If the battle ends in a victory for the enemy... things would be bad.

But, he wanted to leave the territory of the Baron as quickly as possible. There was no rational reason for it; he just didn't feel comfortable there.

"I'm your luggage right?" Jinto gave up his vote. "I have no opinion."

"You're rather persistent aren't you?"

"Sorry, but I don't know what to do." Jinto confessed. "Well, I think it would be smarter to stay here."

"Oh." Lafiel seemed hesitant to decide too. "The former Baron, do you believe that we should stay here?"

"To be honest, I don't know either, Your Highness."

"But, Your Grace!" Jinto shouted. "That's so irresponsible of you!"

"Irresponsible?" The former Baron asked. "It may sound cold, but young man, I have no responsibility over you or Her Highness. Besides, there are things that you just can't tell in this universe. The enemy may come here even if they are repelled from Sfagnoff. If that were to happen, I can't protect you. It may be right for you to go to Sfagnoff."

"Then why did you advise for us to stay?"

"I didn't advise anything, young man. I simply extended an offer. I will welcome you if you decide to stay, and I won't stop you if you decide to leave. The rest is up to you and Her Highness."

"I will go." Lafiel said decisively. "I was taught to always move forward when I am at a loss as to whether stay still or move forward."

"Oh..." *That's not bad.* Jinto thought.

"What will you do?" Lafiel asked, unexpectedly.

"What will I do?"

"If you wish, I'll let you off here."

"You've gotta be kidding." Jinto had not even considered leaving Lafiel's side. He felt angry for some reason. "I'm your luggage, so take me all the way to Sfagnoff."

"You get angry all the time too." Lafiel smiled.

*That's a really happy smile* – at least, Jinto thought so to himself.

#### 4. The Departing Ones

They had quite a bit of extra fuel, so the communications vessel headed back to the manor at full acceleration as soon as they left the antimatter plant. The ship approached the spaceport, and stopped at a docking port assigned to the communications vessel.

The docking clamps were on the spaceport instead of the ship this time, so it was rather difficult. But, with help from the thought crystals and her spatial sense, she was able to do it without scratching the ship.

"I advise against entering the manor, Your Highness." The former Baron warned.

"Why?"

"There are vassals who aided my son," the former Baron explained. "They're probably loyal to him. They have gathered below us for some reason, so I've trapped them there."

"How many?"

"Umm, eleven." The former Baron said after reading the panel. "A fifth of all of the vassals. They're probably armed, so you could say they're the strongest army in the history of my territory."

"You're not going to suggest that we fight them, are you?" Jinto said, worried.

"How stupid do you think I am?" Lafiel said displeased. "It's not that I like fighting or anything. I only fight when I have to."

Jinto's skepticism was apparent.

"Don't worry, young man." The former Baron coaxed. "When an Abh fights, they fight to the end. Once the fight begins, there's no negotiation or cease-fire. They're going to take it to the end. This has taught them how horrifying wars can be. So, they try to avoid it whenever possible."

"Really..."

"Look back on history. The Empire has never started a war."

"That can't be true. For example, my system didn't even know of the existence of the Empire, and they still invaded us."

"Your system? The Hyde Earldom?"

"Oh. Your Grace the former Baron may not be aware of it, but Hyde was a system that was isolated from the rest of mankind until just seven years ago."

"I see." The old man nodded. "I'm starting to get an idea of your family history."

"Well that set aside..."

"Don't feel badly about it, young man, the Empire only deals with interstellar nations. They carry out interstellar war cold heartedly, but they're very peaceful when it comes to independent planets. They hardly ever fight on the surface. Well, more accurately, they look down upon independent planets, they're not actually a match."

"That doesn't appease me completely." Even though he said that, it put Jinto at ease.

Lafiel suddenly realized something peculiar. "You're both Abh, why are you talking in the third person?"

"Your Highness." The former Baron said. "I have finally become Abh by learning about the Abh. This young man, His Grace the successor to the Earl of Hyde is only learning about becoming Abh."

"There are a lot of things I have to get used to." Jinto added in.

"But I don't like it. You talk of me as if I'm some exotic animal!"

"I must apologize for that."

"Sorry."

They didn't sound sincere at all.

"I really am displeased!" She pressed.

"I know."

"Anyways, Your Highness." The former Baron chimed in, "Can you move the ship over to the docking port reserved for nobility? There's no one there."

"Okay. Is the control tower under your control?"

"Of course, completely."

"Then release the docking clamps for me."

"That's fine, but it would take time to do it on this computer. I should return functionality to the control tower instead."

"But..."

"Of course, under the condition that they obey my orders."

The former Baron picked up the communicator and called the control tower. He managed to convince Minyush to give her loyalty to him after a short while, and the former Baron returned control to them.

"Are you sure we can trust them?"

"If they try anything, I'll just take it back."

Lafiel sat back in her chair and called out, "Febdash Manor Control Tower."

"Yes, this is the control tower."

"Requesting permission to embark."

"Permission granted. When will you do so?"

"Now."

"Understood, we're releasing the docking clamps."

The clamps that held onto the communication vessel released. Lafiel checked the manor wither spatial sense, and headed to the roof of the manor with low temperature thrust.

"Febdash Manor Control Tower."

"Yes?"

"We request permission to dock at the docking port reserved for nobility, and we request refueling of our propellants."

There was a moment of silence; the face on the screen was obviously troubled.

"I permit it." Minyush finally said. "Would you like us to guide you in?"

"No thanks." Lafiel declined. She could not fully trust the late Baron's vassals yet, and to a navigator with a spatial sense, aid was not necessary for this short trip. Lafiel docked at the port that the Baron frequented in less than a minute. Their propellant store was refueled instantly.

"Well then, Your Highness." The former Baron stood up and saluted. "I'll go take care of the anarchy in the manor. I wish you a safe journey. Hopefully we will meet again."

"Yes." Lafiel nodded. "There were a few who helped me: those who helped vassal Selnay, and vassal Arsa. There may be others as well. There is something I'd like to say to them, will you relay my message?"

"I don't mind at all, but" the former Baron suggested. "Wouldn't it be better if you recorded your message?"

"You're right." Lafiel agreed with the suggestion, and inserted a memory chip into her wrist computer.

The former Baron extended his hand out to Jinto. Lafiel stared at them wondering what they were doing, and she saw Jinto grab a hold of the old man's hands.

"Well then, young man. Come visit again if you have time. Let me hear about how the Hyde family was founded. I'll teach you all about being an Abh too."

"Yes, I would like that."

"If possible, before you make any kids." The former Baron winked at him.

"Okay." Jinto replied with a smile. The former Baron looked towards Lafiel.

Lafiel suddenly remembered that she had something to do, so she brought the wrist computer up to her mouth.

"To Vassal Selnay, vassal Arsa, and the others, I don't know your names, but to the imperial citizens who aided me. I, flyer trainee Abrial Nei Dubrusque the Viscountess of Parhynh Lafiel, thank you on behalf of the Empire and myself. I cannot take you all with me right now, but I will keep my promise. I will come back to grant you your wishes as soon as possible. I will come back to repay you for your help. I ask that you wait patiently until then."

When she finished recording, she removed the memory chip and gave it to the former Baron. "Please take care of it."

"I will." The former Baron placed the memory chip securely in the pocket of his cloak.

"Well then, former Baron, I wish you health until the next time we meet."

"You too, Your Highness." The former Baron made a short good bye, and headed towards the airlock. The door to the airlock opened and closed again. The former Baron left the ship.

After confirming that fact, Lafiel called to the control tower. "We will leave the territory as soon as we embark, requesting permission to do so."

"Permission granted." The bored voice of Minyush sounded. "Your Highness, much has happened, but I ask for your understanding..."

"I know." Lafiel cut the communicator off. It's not that she was being cold, but the control tower operator's attitude was irritating her.

Lafiel put the control glove back on, and began preparing for embarkation.

"I didn't expect that we'd stay that long." Jinto said as he took a seat in the copilot's chair.

"Yes, really." Lafiel agreed. The communications vessel headed towards the Febdash gate.

"Oh." Lafiel cried out.

"What? What's wrong?"

Lafiel looked down at the emerald colored fabric over her knees. "I was going to return this cloak."

"Want to go back?"

Lafiel shivered. "How can I do something so embarrassing? After we had such a great farewell too."

"I see." Jinto nodded.

"Speaking of, Jinto."

"What?"

"You grasped the former Baron's hand earlier. What was that? Some sort of sexual ritual?"

"What are you talking about!? No, it's a greeting we have on my homeworld. I didn't expect His Grace the former Baron to know about it. Maybe it's left over on a lot of planets."

"I see." Something bothered her. She remembered what it was. "But Jinto, didn't you say that the greeting on your homeworld was to jump back?"

"Jump back!? I've never heard of such a weird greeting."

"But you said that was it."

"Huh?"

"When we first met."

"Did I?... Oh!" Jinto remembered. "Oh, that."

"Were you lying?"

"It's not a lie."

"Just so that you know, I hate being lied to."

"What a coincidence. Me too." He nervously agreed with her.

"Then, what was that, tell the truth."

"Umm, that..." he stalled.

Lafiel glared at Jinto teasingly when she saw that he was sweating. "Now we have something to talk about on the way to Sfagnoff. Do try to make up a good explanation."

"Yeah, I'll try my best." Jinto said quietly.

He couldn't come up with an explanation that Lafiel would buy.

## 5. The Sfagnoff Gate.

Jinto was munching on field rations. It was something that was grilled flat. It was probably very nutritious, and the taste was different with every one. But, they were all lightly flavored, the way the Abh like it. He was growing sick and tired of it.

*Don't the normal crewmen complain about this?* Jinto thought. *Or is there something wrong with the taste buds of the people of Martinyu and Delktu?* I should have asked the former Baron for some food. Thoughts of regret danced through his head. *It's too bad I didn't think to what with all that happened.* Jinto washed the field ration down with a lightly flavored drink.

"Jinto, we have Sfagnoff gate on sensors." Lafiel reported.

"Oh." Jinto left his trash in the air, with the intention of cleaning it up later. The trash floated around with no gravity to limit it to the ground. "How are things?"

"I don't know yet." Lafiel examined the screen. "There are several space-time bubbles. I don't know whether they're friend or foe..."

"What if they're the enemy?" He knew that asking would do nothing, but he couldn't help but ask.

"We'll run through them of course. We don't have enough fuel to turn back anyways. Don't you agree?"

"Well... it's probably right if you say it's right." How many reminders has he gotten so far of his helplessness?

"We plan on passing through Sfagnoff gate in seven hours."

"I hope we receive a warm welcome there."

"We might receive a flaming hot welcome."

"You really are..."

"Talented at cheering you up right?" Lafiel replied snidely.

"Really." Jinto threw the trash towards the garbage chute. But, it completely missed. He undid his seat belt, and went to pick it up.

Around two hours later, they got a clearer picture of the proximity of Sfagnoff gate. Twenty space-time bubbles menacingly patrolled the gate.

"This is bad." Lafiel tapped at the planar space display on her monitor.

"What?"

"Jinto, I have bad news."

"Yeah, just as I thought. You don't have to say any more. But, why do you think so?"

"This patrol pattern isn't from the Star Force. If the Star Force were patrolling the gate, they would move in more elegant patterns. Of course, they can't be transports either."

"I see." Jinto tried to picture what an 'elegant pattern' was. He couldn't.

Oh well. If I'm lucky, they'll teach it to me in the trainee program.

"Looks like it'll be awhile longer before we reach Lacmhacarh." Jinto said with a sigh. *I wonder what it's like in a United Mankind prisoner of war camp*, he thought to himself.

Suddenly, the space-time bubbles broke their formation. One of them headed straight towards the communications vessel, slowly.

"They must have a great deal of mass." Lafiel calmed down.

"Then it'll be easy for us to get away."

"From that."

"Great." He didn't think that their situation would improve very much even if they got away from that space-time bubble. But, he hardly wished to look upon the faces of soldiers from the United Mankind.

"But judging from its mass, it's a single ship-of-the-line in that space-time bubble." Said Lafiel.

"What about it?"

Lafiel stared at Jinto as if to say "Are you really asking me that?" and Jinto remembered. A ship-of-the-line is a ship filled completely with torpedoes, and they fought by showering the enemy with them. It didn't stand a chance against a cruiser in normal space, but it reigned supreme in planar space.

Their communications vessel was shown in blue on the display, with a yellow dot representing the possible enemy ship. The two dots approached each other slowly. After about an hour, the yellow dot moved between the blue one and the spiral representing the Sfagnoff gate. The blue dot moved straight forward.

"It's a friend or foe signal." Lafiel pressed on her spatial sensory organ over her headpiece.

"An Imperial one?" Jinto asked, with what little hope he had.

"I don't know where it's from, but I know that it's not from the Empire."

"Can't you give me a pleasant surprise from time to time for a change?" Jinto felt like crying, but he kept himself from doing so. "Can we fool them into think that we're on their side?"

"How do you come up with dishonest ideas?" Lafiel seemed seriously impressed.

"Brag all you want about how your upbringing was better than mine." Jinto sulked.

"But anyways, that's impossible."

"I must be psychic or something, because I saw that coming."

"It's here!" Lafiel grimaced.

"What?" No matter what it was, it had to be something bad.

"An order to stop. They said they'll fire if we don't place the space-time bubble into a static state."

"We're not going to stop right?"

"Do you want me to stop?" Lafiel said, surprised.

"No, not at all." Jinto immediately replied with the opposite of what he actually wanted. "I just wanted to check."

After a moment, Lafiel whispered, "It's almost time." This time, even Jinto didn't need to ask what was coming. Three yellow dots left the yellow dot of the enemy ship. They were extremely fast, faster than the communications vessel. The three dots approached them quickly.

Staring at those dots suddenly made the idea of life at the prisoner of war camp seem a lot more tolerable to Jinto.

The communications vessel held its course. Jinto looked at Lafiel, wondering what was going on. Lafiel stared at the screen intently. There were numerous red and green spirals on the planar space diagram.

Finally, Lafiel hit the controls and made the communications vessel strafe to the side. When the blue dot moved to the side, the yellow dots changed their course to compensate with a moments delay.

*You don't have to follow us...* Jinto ground his teeth. He wanted to start bawling. He wanted to call for Lina, but the sight of Lafiel trying as hard as she can manage to keep those emotions bottled up within Jinto.

*Try? What exactly can Lafiel try? The torpedoes will follow us even if we run; they'll eventually catch up to us.* Suddenly, he understood what Lafiel was trying to do. She was waiting for the torpedoes to run out of fuel. She tried to delay their contact with the enemy torpedoes as much as possible to wait for that to happen. At the same time, her maneuvers brought them closer to the Sfnagoff gate. If they didn't, the enemy ship could simply fire more torpedoes. Even if Jinto and Lafiel's ship never got destroyed, they would eventually run out of fuel.

*Oh God, if you exist, please make them run out of fuel quickly.* Jinto made a cross before him, as he stared at those yellow dots. *I should have gone to church more often, I might be more at peace with death now if I had.* Three new yellow dots appeared from the enemy ship.

"We didn't ask for any more." Jinto shouted, unable to contain himself.

"We may have won." Lafiel said excited.

"What do you mean?"

"They're almost out of fuel, so they launched new torpedoes..." The three original dots disappeared even as Lafiel was talking.

"Yes!" Jinto shouted in celebration. But he remembered the three new torpedoes, and his mood darkened.

"We're fine, we can get away from them." Sfnagoff gate was right in front of them now. The imperfect spiral looked like a spider web to Jinto. And the blue dot looked like a butterfly, getting chased down by a bird.

Lafiel put the control glove on her left hand. The ship shook with the activation of the main engines. The yellow dots approached the blue dot, ever closer. Perhaps it was for Jinto's benefit, Lafiel displayed a view of the outside, it was the monotone gray of the inside surface of a space-time bubble.

Jinto couldn't help but to look behind. He could see white line coming out of a point behind them. A rainbow of colors swirled around the single white light, and the swirl of colors steadily expanded. The beautifully frightening sight was the sign of a space-time merge to come.

"Entering combat acceleration" said Lafiel. The seats reclined to help them tolerate the acceleration. The light in the monotone gray turned into a streak behind them just as they began accelerating. The streak started behind them, and moved above them.

A space-time bubble is an isolated universe, and the center of that universe is the space-time bubble generator. If there is only one space-time bubble generator, accelerating does nothing to change your relative position in the universe. It just makes it appear to you as if the bubble itself is rotating. That is exactly what Jinto saw.

*But it's unfair that I still feel the acceleration.*

"Maybe it'll chase us all the way into normal space." Jinto said, trying to bear the six standard gravity acceleration.

"We can accelerate faster in normal space."

"That's a relief."

Just as the yellow dot was about to converge upon the blue dot...

The monotone gray and rainbow ring disappeared from their sight, to be replaced by the jet black of space, sprinkled with the glitter of stars. They entered normal space.

Jinto looked back in time to see a small spherical object enter normal space from Sfgnoff gate.

"The torpedo?"

"It's there." Lafiel told Jinto as soon as she spotted them on her spatial sense. The location in normal space that you appear in when you cross through a gate is completely random. Therefore, even if you enter the spiral from what appears to be the same location, you may not appear in the same location on the corresponding sphere. The enemy torpedoes appeared in a completely different location in normal space. It stood out well because of the rainbow glitter of the space-time bubble. It tried to pursue the communications vessel, but it was painfully slow.

"We did it!" Cheered Jinto. "But, aren't there enemies around us?"

"Not around here."

"That's lax of them." Even Jinto knew of the importance of holding onto the gate.

"They are busy elsewhere. Look." Lafiel raised her arm within the high acceleration. Lafiel pointed at a blue sphere, the only habitable planet in the Sfgnoff system, Klasbyul. There was a flash of light on the night side of Klasbyul.

"The enemy in planar space wasn't there to watch out for the inevitable coming of the Star Forces. They were blockading Sfgnoff."

"They're still in combat..." Jinto sighed.

"Yes." Lafiel nodded.

"Is it just me? The planet looks like it's right in front of us."

"Of course it does, we're heading towards it."

"But it's a battlefield!"

"Where else would we go!?"

"G-Good point."

There was no guarantee that the Star Forces would win, so it was probably not wise to wait here. Besides, the torpedo from planar space was still chasing them, albeit very slowly. There was always the possibility of another enemy ship coming in from planar space as well. But, he still didn't like the idea of jumping into the battlefield. He really didn't like it.

"Star Forces, please respond. This is a communications vessel from the cruiser Gothelauth!" Lafiel hailed to them with an audio only message. They received a response after a few more hails.

"This is communications fleet Sfgnoff base. Communications ship, report your situation."

"Cruiser Gothelauth was attacked by an unknown space-time bubble group near Ytum533. Our ship carries the log and non-combat personnel from the Gothelauth. We have just arrived in the system."

"Understood, communications vessel. I forbid transmission of any further information due to fear of leaking military information."

"Understood, Sfgnoff base. Requesting your instructions."

"Unfortunately, our base cannot allow you to dock at the moment. Do as you will."

Lafiel bit her lower lip. "Understood, Sfgnoff base. We will do as we will. Victory to you!"

"There's not much chance of that, communications vessel." A dry laugh. "But... Victory to the Empire!" The communication ended.

"Did she mean that they're about to lose?" Jinto had to ask.

"Of course." Lafiel said angry, "there's very little defending the various systems. How can they possibly hold up against a real invasion with just a communications base!"

"Sorry, it was a stupid question."

"No..." said Lafiel. "Sorry, Jinto... I don't think I can send you to the capitol safely after all."

"It's not your fault." He responded mechanically. "And, what about the enemy?"

"They're far away. But three ships are headed our way."

"They seem to really like the number three."

Jinto looked forward. The planet Klasbyul had grown larger, and it now filled his entire span of vision. He couldn't see the enemy. But he did notice something that looked like a string moving further away from them on the daylight side.

"I wonder what that is."

"It looks like the orbital tower."

"Oh, the orbital tower..." The wreckage of the orbital tower spun around, reflecting the light from the star Sfgnoff.

"How cruel... The orbital tower is defenseless..."



“Umm...” There was something more important to worry about than the enemy’s character. “Can this ship land?”

“Land?” Lafiel looked at Jinto with a puzzled look.

“Yeah. If there’s no orbital tower, we can only land.” A sudden thought horrified Jinto. “Or is it that this ship can’t land?”

“No, we *should* be able to do it.”

“Should!? Should!?”

Various Barone characters appeared on the monitor. Lafiel glanced at it and said “Yes, we can do it after all.”

“Wait. Did you not even consider landing until just now?”

“No.” Lafiel nodded guiltily.

“And, you didn’t even consider going down to that planet?”

“No.”

“Then, why were you in such a hurry?” *Damn, my body feels so heavy, how long is this acceleration going to keep up?*

“I thought I’d join in the fight...”

“How!? We’re unarmed. Were you going to do what you did to the Baron?”

“I hadn’t thought that far. But, we might be able to do something. Even now, we’re distracting three enemy ships.”

“That might be true but I can only think of it as a form of suicide.”

“Yes, it was foolish of me.” Lafiel looked away, “you were on this ship too, and I didn’t even discuss it with you...”

“Discuss...” Jinto was suddenly assaulted by a wave of anger. “You idiot!”

Lafiel’s eyes opened wide with anger for a second, but she immediately looked away again. “I can not blame you for being angry with me. I didn’t value your life as much as I should have.”

“No, I don’t care about my life! Well, umm, I don’t not care about it; I think it’s rather important. But, I’m talking about your life.”

This time, Lafiel’s eyes remained angry. “I will apologize for trying to force you into a losing battle. I will accept any insults you wish to throw at me to get back for it.”

“To get back for...” Jinto was stunned. “Do you really think that I would insult you to get back at you for that?”

“But,” Lafiel wasn’t listening. “You have no right to speak to me about my life!”

“Yeah, I don’t have a right to.” Jinto shouted. “But, I will say what I want to. Why are you in such a hurry to die even when you have such a long life span? Think about trying to survive for a second, Lafiel!”

“I’m not in a hurry to die.”

“That’s what it looks like to me. You said that you’d only fight when you have to, was that a lie?”

“The fight has already started. We are in a battleground, Jinto. There’s only one thing that a soldier can do on the battleground.”

“Oh, really. Then fight if you want to. But, I’m not a soldier yet, so do it after you take me to that planet!”

“Fine! You would not be of any use in battle anyways!”

“The same goes to you, what can you do in this little ship!?”

The two glared at each other for a while. But Lafiel looked away first.

“Sorry, Jinto.”

“This is the best day of my life.” Jinto eased the tension, “To have Her Highness the princess apologize to me twice. I can brag about it later.”

“Stop teasing me, Jinto. But... you’re right. I would be quite useless even if I fought in this ship. It is not just you, I am quite useless as well...”

“It’s not your fault.” Jinto comforted. “I told you earlier. You’re helping me out a lot, and I’m thankful for that. Really. I’m completely useless right now, but someone might depend on me someday. I want to live until then, and I want you to live too.”

“Yes.” Lafiel replied.

His fear seemed to fade away with his anger. Jinto’s heart was now beating gently. *Oh well, whatever will be will be.* Jinto decided, he would think only about what would happen if they survive, just like in the way of the Abh. *At least, death in space will be quick, and I won’t have to suffer. Why don’t I go to sleep or lose consciousness? This acceleration is tough, and it might be a good experience to just be in heaven when I wake up.* But unfortunately, he was very much conscious.

The ship rang from a hail.

"Is it from the communications base?"

"No. The hail is coming from the ship in front of us."

"The enemy... are they close?"

"Yes. Quite."

Jinto squinted. He could now see a speck of light on the blue globe before him. Is that the enemy ship?

Lafiel replied to the transmission.

"Ban Dong Zob Kow Li Ji. Neik Go Shek..." A language that Jinto didn't understand came out of the communicator.

"What is this?"

"It's the universal language for the United Mankind. They said that they will open fire if we don't stop accelerating."

"You understand it?"

"Yes, I learned it in the trainee program. You'll learn it too in the Administrative Trainee Program."

"Oh no, and to think I just learned Barone too."

"Don't worry. It's an easy language to learn. But..." Lafiel grimaced, "It is far from elegant compared to Barone."

"Wow." Jinto ignored the language that he couldn't understand. It sounded as if it was repeating the same thing over and over. Lafiel cut off the communication without replying a word. She didn't seem to have any intentions of negotiating to begin with. "I was hoping that they'd say something different too."

"I'd rather not get killed by uninteresting people."

"I feel the same."

The enemy ships appeared clearly after a few more minutes. The enemy ships were in an equilateral triangle.

"Jinto, I have good news."

"It's been awhile since I've heard any of that. What is it?"

"The main fight is going on on the other side of the planet. All we have to deal with are those three ships."

"Wonderful. But, we don't know when more ships might pop in from the gate right?"

"No. But there's very little chance of that."

"Then let's land on the planet while the scary people are far away."

"After we get past them."

The enemy ships grew in size with every passing moment. The gravity seemed to disappear, only to reappear from the side. Jinto had already experienced this during the skirmish against the Baron. The communications vessel was evading enemy fire through random maneuvers.

Suddenly, he saw a flash of light to the right. Probably from an enemy laser beam or anti-proton stream impacting some space dust. It brought goosebumps to Jinto's skin every time he saw it.

The sudden changes in gravity were making him dizzy. He thought it would be better this time since he was fastened to the seat, but it was not as he had hoped. He was thrown into the seat, hung upside down from it, pulled forward, shook left and right...

*I have to hold it, I have to hold it...* Jinto tried to keep the contents of his stomach from emptying. *I wonder who has it tougher in these situations, the pilot or the passenger.* He saw the enemy ship straight above, and below, the third was to their left. The close encounter with the enemy ships ended just as soon as it had begun. By the time gravity finally settled down, the enemy ships were far behind them.

"D-Did we make it?"

"Yes. They can't catch us now, even if they turned around and gave pursuit."

"They let us through rather easily."

"Ignorance must be bliss." Lafiel said disgusted. "A laser beam passed a mere 20 dagh away from us."

"Would we have been in trouble if it had hit?"

"We would be a ball of dissipating plasma right now."

"That's very poetic." Jinto said quietly.

Lafiel turned the communicator back on. Immediately the same voice could be heard shouting "Kuu Lin Mab As Tang Kib!"

"What did they just say?"

"I'm a lady." Lafiel's angry face flushed red. "I can't repeat that!"

"Oh... I see."

"I'll begin decelerating. Do try not to complain too much."

"Decelerate? How quickly?"

"We're quite fast, so quite quickly."

"Please be gentle."

"Would you rather we burn up in the atmosphere because I was being gentle?"

"I don't like it too hot."

"Then bear it."

They began decelerating. It was worse than all the acceleration they had dealt with. Though the seat cushioned his body, he felt his lungs collapsing. His heart had trouble pumping blood to his extremities, and his vision was turning red. Jinto bit down and tried to bear it. When he glanced to the side, even Lafiel was sweating. He lost track of time. When he came to, the display of space disappeared. The stars and the planet were all gone, leaving just the milky white walls. At the same time, the weight was lifted off of him.

"W-What happened?"

"Don't worry, we just jettisoned the main body of the ship."

"Just?"

"Do you want to be entering the atmosphere with a load of antimatter with you? Think about the inconvenience it would cause to others."

"But to jettison the main body of the ship..." *Just like the Abh to be so extreme.* Jinto thought.

"Communications vessels aren't designed to land." Lafiel explained quickly. "Landing is the same thing as an emergency escape."

"Can we really land? Without the body of the ship?"

"We can't land if the body of the ship was still attached." Lafiel said irritated. "I'm scarred too, it's my first landing!"

"F-First time!?"

"I told you, I've never been to a planet before."

"But haven't you had training..."

"Simulations."

"Which are you more afraid of? The landing or the planet?"

"BOTH!!"

He could understand that answer.

Jinto decided to shut his mouth. Bearing with insecurities is a lonely task. I'll stop bothering Lafiel.

The ship started vibrating. The atmosphere of Krasbyul was roughly embracing what was left of the communications vessel. *I'm glad that I can't see what's going on outside,* thought Jinto inside the growing turbulence of the ship. Eventually calm was restored to the ship. The chairs lifted back up to their normal position. Jinto felt a strange sense of weightlessness. He had felt it once before, a long time ago when he went down to a planet using an orbital launch tube.

*Oh yeah...*

He was filled with worry back then too. He couldn't even look straight at the stewardess that accompanied him.

*I wonder what kind of a world awaits us...*

Jinto suddenly realized something. "I almost forgot."

"What?" Lafiel looked at him with a worried face.

"We'll need information on this planet. Does the ship have any information on it?"

"Yes, there should be a record of the planet in the thought crystal's memory banks."

"Great! Thought crystal, download all information on the Sfgnoff system."

A large title of 'Sfgnoff system' appeared on the screen, and various sub menus like 'History', 'Geography', and 'Agriculture' appeared.

"Please choose a sub category or a search phrase." The artificial voice of the computer replied. "We can copy the search results..."

Jinto plugged a data link into his wrist computer and ordered, "Copy all materials."

'Understood' blinked on the screen twice, and changed into 'Download complete.'

*There's a big difference between having information and not having information, I'm glad I remembered. But why didn't Lafiel think of getting information about our destination? Does the Star Forces not have Emergency Landing Procedures?* He felt a heavy impact just as he was about to ask.

"Did we land?" He said in a pitifully meek voice.

"Yes."

"He felt the wind, his hair was blown forward. Jinto turned around. The door leading to the airlock was open. But instead of the airlock, there was a row of tall brown crops, reflecting the lights of the star Sfgnoff. They were on the surface.

"Jinto, let's hurry. They may have spotted us from above." Lafiel undid her seatbelt and pulled at Jinto to get up.

"Y-Yeah." Jinto stood up quickly.

"Open!" The seat turned back ninety-degrees when Lafiel ordered so.

"Entrance to the secret basement?"

"Idiot." There was storage room under the seat, and the cloak she wore at the Baron's manor was there. When Lafiel pushed the cloak aside, two laser pistols appeared from under it.

"You shall hold onto this."

"I was wondering where you hid it." Jinto said, as he took the gun and accessories from Lafiel.

"I was not hiding it. There wasn't much space, so I just put it into storage while you were sleeping."

"I know. You don't have to respond to everything. I'm just joking." He put the belt on, and holstered the pistol into it.

"This too." Lafiel passed Jinto a backpack.

The backpack had the words 'For Taking Refuge on Planets in Emergencies'. There were several packs of field rations, along with a few tools and a first aid kit.

"Are we safe on the expiration date?" Jinto gazed at the field rations suspiciously. He closed the backpack, and lugged it. It wasn't very heavy once it was securely on his back. Lafiel finally picked up a necklace of sorts, and put it around her neck.

"Jinto." Lafiel raised the necklace she wore to get Jinto's attention on it. "The cruiser Gothelauth's log is in this. If I am to die, I want you to take this and run."

"Why are you saying such..." Jinto started, but he didn't finish his sentence, awed by the intent gaze of the princess.

"Just in case."

"O-Okay." Jinto nodded. "I understand."

Lafiel nodded back at him, and tucked the necklace into her uniform. Then she said to the thought crystal "Wipe database." In just a split second the monitor displayed the words 'ready to wipe database'.

"Anything you wanted to get from the thought crystals?" Lafiel asked.

"No" Jinto shook his head.

"Okay" And Lafiel ordered the thought crystal, "goodbye thought crystal. Destroy yourself as regulations order."

"Understood. Wiping all databases as per regulations. I wish you a safe journey."

Two eyes appeared on the screen, and they slowly closed. The screen blacked out when they completely closed.

*That goodbye sequence makes me feel strangely guilty.* Jinto thought to himself. But Lafiel seemed to get a different impression. She saluted the screen.

"Come, let us go." Lafiel placed her hand on the door after finishing her salute.

"Hey wait." Jinto caught the cloak that Lafiel tossed away.

"What are you doing?" Lafiel came back and stared at Jinto.

"We're going to need money." Jinto turned the cloak upside down and picked up the belt buckle. It had an emerald planted on a platinum base. It would probably sell for quite a bit.

"Money?" Lafiel craned her head. "I have money."

"Huh?"

"See." She activated her wrist computer. "I have 5000 Scarr. My father gave it to me. I haven't touched it yet." Jinto had lived on 20 Scarr a month when he was on Delktu. Compared to that, 5000 Scarr was an incredible fortune.

*But... what use is the Empire's standard of currency in a land that was about to get taken over by the enemy? And who would accept money that only appears in the form of data on a wrist computer?* They had no way of proving that the money existed. Jinto stood dazed for a moment, but he soon understood. Though it tore apart his fantasy of what a princess was, Lafiel was a princess of the stars. She's probably never gone shopping on her own.

"I'll explain to you later. Let's go." Jinto shoved the belt buckle in his backpack, and went outside.

They glanced back at the ship that had served them so faithfully this far. Four wing-like appendages protruded out of a spherical main body. These wings increased air resistance, and killed the descent speed. *It probably would really stand out from above.* They needed to get away from it as soon as possible.

"Shall we run?" Lafiel asked.

"If you're fine with it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm asking if you're tired or not."

"I am not tired, I was worried about you."

"Just so that you know, Lafiel. I'm more used to running on a planet than you are." Jinto ran off.

"Wait, Jinto, there's something wrong with my eyes!" Lafiel shouted.

"What!?" Jinto stopped in surprise.

Lafiel looked up at the sky, a step outside of the cockpit. "The stars look like they're blinking to me."

Jinto looked up at the sky just like Lafiel. It was a cloudless starry night sky. The stars were blinking to Jinto too. But he didn't think there was anything wrong with his eyesight.

"I can get treated for it at the Capitol, but here..." Lafiel said to Jinto decisively. "I do not wish to get in your way. If I go blind, take the navigational log, and go away by yourself without hesitating."

"I'm sorry that I have to put a damper on your moment of noble self sacrifice but..." Jinto stopped her. "There's nothing wrong with your eyes."

"Stop trying to comfort me." Lafiel said.

"I'm not trying to comfort you. I think it was because of diffraction or something. But under an atmosphere, it's normal for stars to blink."

"Really?" She looked at Jinto's face by the light leaking out of the cockpit.

"I'm not skilled enough to come up with such a technical answer on the spot. Stars always blink on the surface. Do you feel better now?"

"Yes." Lafiel reluctantly accepted his statement. But he could detect a sense of relief in her tone of voice.

"I think there was something lacking in the education you were given."

"Quiet, Jinto."

"I'll be quiet, it's hard to talk when we're running."

They seemed to be in the middle of a farm. They were surrounded by the same plant for miles around. They didn't know what the plant was. It looked like a food crop, so Jinto guessed that it was wheat. There was just enough space between the rows of crop for one person to pass through. The ground was a little moist, but far from being too muddy to walk on. In fact, it was just the right softness for people to run on.

After the two of them ran for a short distance, they noticed a change in the night sky. A great amount of alpha particles were created by the battle outside the atmosphere, and they now rained down upon the planet Krasbyul, creating a bright red aurora.

## 6. The Sfagnoff System

The Sfagnoff Viscountdom was established in Year 648 of the Imperial Calendar (Iuecos), when Scie Uef Sairal Dagle was given the Sfagnoff system as a reward for his deeds as High Commander of the Fleet during the Yaktia war. There are seven main planets in the system, and the third planet could be terraformed to be made inhabitable. Its atmosphere was mainly composed of carbon monoxide, and was short in hydrogen. But that was hardly an obstacle. The first viscount of Sfagnoff, Dagle named the system 'Krasbyul' after their family standard the 'silver rod and snail (Yaz Shurennia Krasbyul).

There are steps to be taken in creating a new inhabitable system. First, you have to gather venture capital. A great amount of money is needed in terraforming a planet, but gathering this money is not very difficult unless you are extremely incompetent. There are always people willing to invest money in such a venture. But Dagle did not take the first step. The Scie family had a great fortune due to good investments done by past generations, so he had no need of seeking other sources of capital.

The second step is the terraforming of the planet itself. There are numerous planet terraforming organizations within the Empire. They take care of the whole job; from surveying the planet to planting an ecosystem. One such organization worked on Krasbyul.

The organization first made an ice comet in the outer part of the system crash into the planet Krasbyul. A great amount of water vapor surrounded the planet. The vapor condensed and washed the surface with a heavy rain. Rivers were formed, and oceans appeared.

Then a microbe ecosystem was planted centered around algae. The microbes expanded explosively, they took carbon in and replaced it with oxygen. Their carcasses stacked on the rocky surface, creating topsoil.

Higher organisms were brought in, mainly plants that could grow quickly with little nutrients, such as Shrubs and evergreens. The plants increased the water retention of the land, and created nutrients from basic elements. The ground became quite fertile after a few generations of these plants, and they were now able to bring in plants that required a more extravagant environment. Fish were released into the sea, and various animals were released onto the land.

The evolution that took billions of years to occur on Earth, though some parts of it were cut out and some completely removed, was repeated efficiently. In fifty years an ecosystem capable of supporting higher order mammals was created. The planet was now terraformed.

Normally, immigration into the planet would begin at this point. But, it took some before they started gathering immigrants. The planet was terraformed just as the second Viscount of Sfagnoff Diskle came into power. He was not very interested in letting subjects inhabit the planet that they had just terraformed. The reason for that was never revealed, and is still unknown.

Perhaps he wanted to turn the entire planet into a garden. If that was the case, he should have been ashamed of it as a kin of the stars. It was normal for the Abh to live in space, and hardly ever set foot on the planet from the orbital palace. If an Abh were to want an entire planet for him or herself, it would be something very shameful. This would explain why the reason was never made public.

But there are other points of view. He may have wished for some evolution to occur on the planet before allowing subjects to immigrate to it. Such an idea would be a very Abh like insane idea. But if this were the case, the question remains of why the Sfagnoff family did not brag about it.

No matter what his reasons, immigration to the planet began with the third Viscount of Sfagnoff Etre's succession of the title. He constructed immigrant application stations, working in conjunction with the lords of the thirteen worlds with over-population. The first day of the first year of Sfagnoff's P.I. (Post Immigration) calendar is the twenty-ninth day of the eleventh month of the 729<sup>th</sup> year of the Imperial Calendar.

Viscount of Sfagnoff, Etre was given the title of an Earl for adding another inhabited planet to the territory of the Empire. At the same time, the territory known as the Viscountdom of Sfagnoff became the Sfagnoff Earldom. Then, in the 93<sup>rd</sup> year PI, the population surpassed 100 million, and the Earl of Sfagnoff became the Marquis of Sfagnoff.

Currently, the planet Krasbyul has a population of 380 million. It has 21 states, and the Head of the State Senate committee is the Subject Representative.

...Jinto read from his wrist computer as he looked around. Jinto now sat on top of a hill. Actually it was more of a large piece of pumice than a hill. He now sat on a giant rock, riddled with holes.

He was surrounded by farmland in all directions. The same crop filled the land as far as his eyes could see. Even though hydroponics was prevalent now, growing crops through the use of natural light and water was a much cheaper method of providing food, even after considering the cost of the extra step in terraforming.

The crop looked to Jinto like wheat. But perhaps it only looked like it because Jinto was most familiar with wheat. Or it may be a strain of large seeded wheat produced by genetic engineering. *It's wheat.* Jinto decided. *It doesn't matter to us what it is, so it's wheat.* Jinto thought as he saw golden waves form in the crop

as the wind blew past, wave after wave, flowing from right to left. He now sat in the middle of a golden ocean, on top of one of the small rocky island protrusions.

There was something that looked like a forest far to his right. *That's an island too.* He saw movement within the forest-like area. *I wonder if it's a car or something. Or...* It was such a peaceful surrounding, Jinto had to remind himself that they were in the middle of a war.

The sun was already setting. Jinto and Lafiel had run all night long, and they reached this hill around dawn. They were exhausted by then, and fortunately, there was a hole in the rock large enough for the two of them. So they decided to spend the night at the hill.

Considering the situation they were in, they probably should have taken shifts standing guard, and Jinto was going to stay up to watch over Lafiel. But he was absolutely exhausted, and he fell asleep right away. He finally woke up just a short while ago, and he climbed up to the top of the hill to get a look around while the sun was up. Lafiel was still asleep in the cave.

Jinto stopped listening to the history of the world, and tuned his wrist computer to local broadcasts. The picture of a woman appeared on the small screen. She was making a speech about something. He couldn't understand any of it at first. There was no information on the language in the limited database of the ship, so he couldn't use the wrist computer's translator function. But, after listening carefully for a while, he realized that it was barone.

"We Need Thank Group Mankind Rule All. Reason Them Free Us Separate Rule Of Au. Now We Need Stand Yourself Govern With Us Similar Really..."

That is what it sounded like to Jinto's ears. It was not the common barone that was spoken through out the Empire, but rather a simplified version of it. They removed the conjugation that made barone seem difficult, and placed words in the order that grammar dictated. That grammar was similar to the language of Martine, so once he got used to the Krasbyul accent, such as pronouncing Abh 'Au', he began to understand it. There were occasionally strange words that didn't sound like anything from barone, but he understood the general meaning.

This woman was basically saying "Let us thank the United Mankind for freeing us from the rule of the Abh". *If they're broadcasting something like this, then the Star Forces must have lost.* Jinto evaluated the truth calmly. He knew that it was going to happen. Now they just needed to wait for the Empire to retake this world.

Jinto tried to switch to a different station. He saw the cityscape. He probably tuned into a movie. Jinto grinned; *they're showing a movie at a time like this? Maybe it's a form of resistance. This is a world made inhabitable by the Abh, just like Delktu. The population is all people who accepted the rule of the Abh, and descendents of people who accepted the rule of the Abh. They shouldn't hate the Abh the way the people of Martine did. Wait, they may simply not care. Maybe it doesn't matter to the people on the planet, exactly who rules the skies above them.*

Jinto was more interested in the fashion of the world than the movie itself. Abh clothing didn't distinguish gender. Both men and women wore overalls. But here, it seemed like only men wore overalls. Women wore sleeved one-pieces with knee high boots.

He turned the broadcast off, and loaded up the map to determine their current location. He caught their current location from one of the broadcasts, and checked it with the map he got from the thought crystal. There was a city called Lume Biga nearby. He compared the surrounding geography with the map, and realized that what he thought was a forest was the city. Should we hide out in that city? Or should we stay in this farm? Jinto debated.

They only had nine meals worth of field rations left. Even if they rationed themselves, it would only last five days. After that, they would have to forage or hunt for their food. *It looks like we're in the middle of an agricultural area, but I don't know how to harvest them, and we don't have any cooking utensils. And I certainly don't want to camp out for days and days.* Since even Jinto, who grew up on a planet, didn't know how to do all those things, he seriously doubted that Lafiel would.

*Looks like we'll have to go to the city...*

Lume Biga looked very small from this far away, and it didn't look like they could stay there for too long. But they should be able to make it to a larger city from there. Since the sky was turning dark, Jinto began climbing down the hill. It wasn't very tall, but the slopes were sharp. He had a lot of handholds and footholds, but they were very fragile. Jinto came close to falling many times before he made it to the bottom.

When he walked around to the cave, he noticed that there was a gun pointed at him.

"It's me, Lafiel." Jinto raised both of his hands.

"Where were you?" Lafiel said as she lowered her laser pistol.

"I was looking around."

"I asked where you went, not what you were doing."

"That makes sense, I went to the top of the hill."

"Idiot!"

“Why?” Jinto asked.  
 “What if someone saw you?”  
 “Don’t worry, there was no one around.”  
 “They may be watching from above.”  
 “Oh yeah.” The enemy ships had to be monitoring the surface from orbit. They may have found Jinto.  
 “But, we’re still fine. I’m not wearing a cloak or anything, they’ll think that I’m a native.”  
 “Don’t count on the enemy making mistakes.”  
 “Okay. I promise, I won’t do anything without thinking about it again.”  
 “Yes. Don’t ever leave without telling me about it.”  
 “But you were deep asleep. Oh yeah, I haven’t said good morning to you yet. Good morning, Lafiel.  
 But looks like it’s afternoon already.”  
 “Idiot.”  
*Seems like Lafiel’s in a bad mood.* Jinto felt as if he had discovered a rather childish side of Lafiel.  
 “Should we move somewhere else just in case?” He suggested.  
 “Yes. We probably should. There’s no point in staying here.” Lafiel got up. They ate a meal, and started packing to leave.  
 Jinto grabbed a small machine in the back of the cave. It was a machine that condensed moisture in the air into water. It was filled with water. He poured it into two water bottles and passed one to Lafiel. They lugged their backpacks, and left the hill that they spent the night at.  
 “I’m thinking about going into town.” Jinto said as they started walking.  
 “To town?”  
 “Yeah, isn’t it better than playing hide and seek in the field? I’d rather try to live a civilized life here.”  
 “But, isn’t that dangerous?”  
 “Yes.” Jinto said casually, without even padding the truth. “But, there’s danger here too. To borrow the words of the former Baron of Febdash, I don’t know which is the right choice. But we can’t get any food here. Dying of starvation in the middle of a farm has to be pretty close to the worst way you can die.”  
 “Probably.” Lafiel agreed. Jinto noticed that her voice didn’t have the usual energy.  
 “Lafiel are you tired?”  
 “I am not tired.” She snapped. “Why do you think I am?”  
 “Just asking.” *Oh, she’s just as short-tempered as ever.* Jinto was relieved. “But tell me when you’re tired, okay?”  
 “I said I am not tired.”  
 “Okay, okay.”  
 The sun was getting low on the horizon, and it set a few hours later.  
 “Jinto” Lafiel called from behind. “Go on ahead for a bit.”  
 “Why?” Jinto turned around and asked, surprised.  
 “Don’t ask.” Lafiel’s expression looked harsh in the moonlight.  
 “Don’t ask? But there aren’t any significant landmarks here. We’ll get separated.”  
 “Then wait here.”  
 “Okay... but why?”  
 “I thought I said don’t ask.”  
 That made him all the curiouuser. Did she find yet another reason to try to sacrifice herself for my sake? If she has I’d better talk her out of it.  
 “Listen, Lafiel...” Jinto began to explain to her what teamwork was all about, and how they should share any problems they have and try to solve it together. They were friends and they were in danger, they had to work together to get out of any problems.  
 Lafiel listened silently at first, but her eyes started to turn into a glare.  
 “Jinto, you are as dense as frozen vegetables!” Lafiel shouted. “Just wait here! Do not look in my direction!”  
 Jinto suddenly realized what she was talking about as he saw her run into the crops. He turned around quickly. He probably could not see it in this darkness, but he had to respect her privacy.  
 Though they may be as beautiful as the greatest works of art in history, and though she may be part of a family that ruled 900 billion people, she was still not free from certain biological functions.  
 Jinto tiredly sat down by a giant stalk of wheat. He now realized how stupid he seemed.  
  
 At the same time...  
 The United Mankind Peace Keeping Force Reconnaissance Ship DEV903, assigned to reconnaissance of the surface, found a landing pod of the Imperial Star Forces near Lume Biga. The reconnaissance ship tried to



determine which ship the landing pod came from, but was unsuccessful in doing so. The record of the reconnaissance vessel that evaded past a ship in planar space, and three ships in normal space was lost in the sheer quantity of reports. A great deal of work has to be done to take over an entire system.

Even then, they should have been able to determine where it came from, given enough time, but they had more important things to do at the time. The team in charge of the pod guessed that it contained survivors from the communications base, or survivors from the marquis' manor. They also determined that whoever was on the pod were most likely still alive.

They reported that to High Command, but they did not give this matter very much priority. They had already determined that the Marquis' family and important personnel from the communications base had either died or been captured. They thought that whoever it was that escaped on the landing pod could not have been very important.

Right now they had more important things to deal with. Sfagnoff system defense force, a private army working for the Sfagnoff family, were putting up resistance in various part of the planet. A team was hunting down the various planetary government personnel who were missing, with the equipment that they would have needed to track Jinto and Lafiel down. They decided that the landing pod was not worth diverting the resources for. First they would quell the resistance on the surface, and capture the individuals who aided the Empire.

They would ignore the few survivors from the Star Forces. They would not be able to do anything anyways.

"Oops!" Jinto stopped a step away from falling off a cliff. His last step caused bits of rubble to topple down the steep slope of the cliff. He could see that it was a canyon.

"What is it?" said Lafiel.

"We're at a dead end."

Sunrise would not come for some time. Jinto tried to judge how far away the other side was, but it was dark and he could not see it. He tried using the lighting on his wrist computer, but it could barely light up his shoes. Suddenly, a powerful light appeared by him, lighting up the other side of the cliff. The light came from the laser pistol in Lafiel's hands.

"What are you doing with that?" Jinto asked, pulling out his own pistol.

"I told you where the safety was right? Toggle that half way between safe and kill. That will turn the pistol into a flashlight."

"That's really convenient, why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I forgot."

"I see." There are very few opportunities in which a gun can be used as a light.

The valley was far wider than he had expected. There was a good Uethdagh to the other side, and it spread as far as he could see. The good news was, it was not too deep, perhaps five hundred dagh. There was wheat growing at the bottom, and he could see the tips of the stalks.

"This might be tough." Jinto reholstered his pistol, and checked how steep the cliff was. It was not completely vertical, but it was far too sharp for them to walk down. It may be easier to climb up, but there was a danger of stumbling when climbing down.

Jinto put his backpack down and dug in for something. "Is there something like a rope in this?"

"There should be a carbon crystal fiber in there."

"That's perfect. Which one is it?" Lafiel grabbed a long cylindrical object from Jinto's bag.

"What are you going to do with this?" Lafiel asked, as she skillfully twirled it around.

"To climb down of course, pass it over." Jinto said a little shocked.

Jinto grabbed the stick and looked at it. It was military issue, but it was similar to the carbon fiber crystal spindles that he used on Delktu. The carbon crystal fiber was inside the cylindrical stick, and two containers of quick drying plastic hung on the sides. This was a top quality carbon crystal fiber, one could select whether to coat the fiber in plastic or not, and you could even control the tip of the fiber remotely. Just as expected of the Star Forces to get top quality products even for emergency tools.

Jinto pulled the fiber out, coating it in plastic, and shot it at the base of the stalks of wheat.

"I'll go down first." Jinto grabbed one of the handholds, and faced away from the cliff. He rappelled down the cliff slowly, kicking off the cliff wall. When he confirmed that the ground was a mere fifty dagh from the bottom, he made one last jump, landing on the bottom.

"Your turn, Lafiel." Jinto shouted to the top of the cliff, and he then retracted the handhold. Flakes of quick drying plastic rained upon him.

"I am going down there now!" She shouted, as if it required a major decision. Lafiel fell down on him with a huge sound. She seemed to forget to stop the carbon crystal fiber with the quick drying plastic when rappelling down.

"A-Are you okay?" Jinto said as he ran to her.  
 "Of course I'm okay," Lafiel said, grimacing from pain.  
 "You can be honest," Jinto reached a hand to Lafiel, to help her to her feet.  
 "I am being honest," Lafiel said, slapping Jinto's hand away.  
 "Okay," Jinto retrieved the cylinder through the remote control, and wound the fiber back. Bits of quick drying plastic bundled at his feet. When it wound back into itself, he pulled his gun out again, and lit the bottom of the canyon.  
 "What are you doing?"  
 "I'm looking for a new place to stay, aren't we far enough away now? There!"  
 There was a cave. Jinto and Lafiel walked to the new cave. It was quite deep. So deep that he could not see the end of the cave even with the light from the laser pistol.  
 Jinto pulled up the map again after sitting down. He discovered that they were less than fifty Uethdagh from Lume Biga now. They broke for a meal.  
 Jinto told Lafiel his plan while munching on the tasteless field ration.  
 "I'm going to go to town now."  
 "Alone?" Lafiel asked, shocked.  
 "Yes, of course."  
 "Why? Is there a reason why I can not go into town?"  
 "You're wearing a military uniform," Jinto pointed out. "What do you think will happen when someone wearing a Star Forces uniform walks into a city occupied by the enemy?"  
 "Oh..." Lafiel realized.  
*Did she really not realize it? Then she must really be unaware of the world.*  
 "So..." Jinto shoved the doubt aside, "I'll go buy some normal clothes in town. I'll try to come back as quickly as I can, so wait here."  
 He saw Lafiel's eyes burning. *What is she angry about? Did I say something strange? No, it all makes sense, and if she disagrees she should just say that she does. There's no point in glaring at me.* Jinto thought to himself.  
 But Lafiel accepted it quickly. "Okay, I understand."  
 "Great." Jinto washed the last bite of his field ration down with water, and stood up.  
 "Are you going already?"  
 "Yeah, I should take care of this as quickly as possible."  
 "You may be hurrying to your own demise."  
 "Don't say that, I'm just as scarred of the possibility as you are."  
 Jinto took the belt buckle out from his backpack and put it into the pocket of his overalls. He decided to take three meals worth of field rations with him too. He left everything else behind. He debated taking the wrist computer with him. This was an Imperial standard model that one rarely saw on a planet. An observant person would realize exactly who Jinto was from his wrist computer. They probably would not realize that he was a noble, but they may guess that he's a citizen. He intended to pretend to be a subject in town, so that would be a problem. But he did not wish to leave something as useful as a wrist computer behind. He would need it to get in touch with Lafiel in case of an emergency.  
 In the end, he decided to take it off, and hide it in his pocket.  
 "You are not going to take the gun with you?" Lafiel questioned.  
*You must be kidding.* "I wouldn't stand a chance in a shoot out even if I took it with me."  
 "You give up very easily, don't you?"  
 "That's not it. I mean, they'll discover who I am right away if I had a pistol from the Star Forces."  
 "Oh, okay."  
 "I'm glad you understand," Jinto said, in half a sigh.  
 He felt concern though. Not for himself. Of course, he had no idea what awaited him, and he was concerned about that. But he was more concerned about leaving Lafiel behind, alone. The Abh girl, who seemed infinitely capable in space, had no common sense at all when it came to living on a planet.  
*She should be fine, Jinto told himself. Lafiel did lack common sense, but only to a degree where it would obstruct anything she tried to do anything in a surface society. Though she may have trouble once she entered town, she should be able to take care of herself where no one else is around.*  
*Where no one else is around? Can I count on that? There's a chance that a search party is approaching us even now. He became concerned for her in a different way once he thought of that. The Star Forces probably doesn't engage in solo operations very much, so she probably hasn't received any training for what to do.*  
 Of course, Jinto had not been trained either, but he has the advantage of not looking like an Abh. No

one would know that he was a noble, unless he told them himself, and at worst he could pass off as a citizen. In a large state like Sfagnoff, there should be plenty of Imperial citizens, so it was doubtful that the enemy would concern themselves greatly over a mere citizen.

On the other hand, he would certainly like to meet the idiot who would not realize that Lafiel, with her blue hair and Star Force uniform, was not Abh. Right now, to Lafiel, even being seen by someone was dangerous. After thinking for a short while, Jinto suggested a rather primitive booby trap.

"Be careful when you go outside." Jinto said, and then he hooked the carbon crystal fiber on a knee-high rocky outcropping, with the plastic cover off. He stretched it taught, covered part of it with the quick dry plastic, and hooked the plastic handle to another outcropping on the other side.

"What are you doing with that?"

"This'll tell you if anyone is coming." Jinto explained, pointing to the uncovered carbon crystal fiber. "See, you can't see this, and it's sharper than any kind of a blade. So, if anyone tried to walk into the cave, AHH!" He shouted. "Their legs will get cut off, and they'll sound the alarm."

Lafiel was not impressed. "What if some innocent person was to walk into that?"

*I hadn't thought about that.* Worst comes to worse, it could cut the legs off of a completely innocent person. That would be cruel to say the least. But Jinto decided to accept the possibility.

"We can't help it. It's not like bad luck hasn't killed innocent people in the past."

Lafiel sat in the cave, hugging her knees, after Jinto left. She listened to a local broadcast with her wrist computer. Jinto's accent was quite bad enough, but the accent on the planet Krasbyul was so heavy she could barely tell that it was Barone. It sounded like Abh, and was more elegant than the language of the United Mankind, but she could not make heads or tails of it. Lafiel gave up on trying to understand it right away.

She thought about the situation she was in, while staring at the sunrise. Things had changed. Jinto had taken the lead ever since they had landed. She did not like that. Her duty was not over until she took Jinto to an Imperial ship. She had to protect him and the navigational log no matter what. But, it almost seemed as if Jinto was protecting Lafiel. It was hard to accept, but it was the truth.

What irritated her most was that things seemed to work for the better with Jinto in the lead. *Can I really depend on him?* Lafiel asked herself. She doubted that she could, thinking back to the way he was acting in space. She lay her head down sideways on her knees. Though she acted fine in front of Jinto, Lafiel was very tired. She would gladly accept Holia as her genetic donor if it would ease her sore muscles.

The gravity on Krasbyul was roughly twice the Abh standard gravity. Though Lafiel has experienced ten times that during accelerations, she was always lying down in a chair with acceleration absorbing cushions. This was the first time she moved around in a two standard gravity environment for an extended period of time. She had never walked for an extended period of time.

Just thinking about that made her feel ashamed, especially because the Abh were designed to be able to function in higher gravities. Her ancestors, who did not have artificial gravity, probably could have done what she did with ease.

Though the Star Forces did give their ships the capability to make an emergency landing, they did not think that they would ever actually use it. The chances of an inhabitable planet being nearby when a ship was about to be destroyed were slim. So they did not value training for such an event very greatly. Though they learned the procedures for landing, they were taught to patiently wait for rescue once they reached the surface.

Of course, in this situation, they could not expect aid to come any time soon. Since she was a mere flyer trainee, she did not know everything about Star Forces deployment, but she knew that it would take at least ten days. They would probably need to prepare for twice that. *Or it may never come...* They may run out of food, or be captured by the enemy hunt squads before aid ever came.

*Whether he is dependable or not, I have no choice but to depend on him to get us out of here. He has...* Lafiel smiled just before she fell asleep. *Become a lot livelier since we landed, even though we're in more danger now than when we were in the Baron's Manor.*

When she awoke later and noticed that Jinto was gone, she panicked. Not because she was afraid that she failed at her mission, but because she did not know what to do without him. Unbelievable as it may, Lafiel, the princess of the Empire that never depended on anyone before, was depending on Jinto.

*I suppose that is fine. After all, he is the only one I can trust within a hundred light years of here.*

## 7. Lume Biga City

“She could at least have said ‘You are the only one I can trust within a hundred light years of here.’ How stubborn does she have to be?” Jinto grumbled at himself as he walked, breathing heavily.

He walked along the canyon until he found a bridge. *Where there's a bridge, there's a road.* That was fine, but there were no stairs or roads from the bottom of the canyon to the bridge. By the time he climbed up the cliff, handhold by handhold foothold by foothold, he was completely exhausted.

*I think I over estimated my own stamina. I should have taken a break before I left.* He could not think about his exhaustion when Lafiel was around, but now that he was alone, that was all he could think about. Even though he did grow up on a planet, he grew up on a planet with a well-developed transportation system. He was not used to living in the out doors either. He was now just barely holding on thanks to the stamina he got through Minteu.

*I'm working so hard, the least she could do is say a word of thanks.* He thought to himself. *Of course, I'm doing this because I want to, so I really don't have a right to be complaining. It does save my life too. Wait... is that true? Wouldn't things be a lot easier if I abandoned Lafiel and try to live on my own?* Jinto shivered after thinking about that. He had never thought of himself as a noble person before, but he kicked himself for even thinking about such a thing.

If I'm going to become a lowlife, I might as well go all the way. I'll turn Lafiel into the enemy force for a reward. Jinto made an evil grin. Even without a mirror, he knew that it did not look good on him. Jinto Lin did not have a cruel personality. He is the kind of person who can neither become a great hero nor a vicious villain. He is more like a comet in a highly irregular elliptical orbit. He travels a path that he didn't choose for himself, he gets a little scorched when he approaches the star, and sometimes his path is shaken when he comes close to a mischievous planet. That is the kind of life that fits Jinto Lin.

Jinto stopped playing his lonely game and stood up. There was a path just as he had expected. The paved surface of the road glowed softly. He thought it was a little too dim at first, but he realized that it was bright enough once he was on the road. Jinto began walking towards Lume Biga.

It takes Krasbyul 33.121 standard hours to make one revolution. In other words, Jinto was asleep for fifteen hours! The natives split this into 32 hours. Except one day had 24 hours. Through simple arithmetic we discover that the start and end of a day shifts by eight local hours every day. Sometimes a day would begin in the middle of the night, or it may begin in the middle of the day. It was inconvenient, but probably better than shifting their biological clocks by nine hours.

There is a benefit from separating their days with the planet's revolution. There is no need for time zones. There is no need to state exactly how much benefit this has brought to the planet's information networks. The sun was about to rise right now, but it was around noon in local time. He would arrive at Lume Biga at around 1PM, the perfect time to do some shopping.

I guess I didn't hurry here for nothing. Jinto thought to himself. He set the wrist computer to a local broadcast and stuck it into the pocket of his overalls. He needed to listen to it on the way there to get used to Krasbyul's dialect.

Jinto began to get irritated while picking up on the unfamiliar language. What irritated him was the enemy's propaganda. They were explaining why they attacked the Sfagnoff system. According to the broadcast, an Imperial Star Force vessel – the Gothelauth of course – suddenly attacked them when they were exploring the area around a newly discovered gate. The United Mankind decided to take over the nearby Sfagnoff system as retribution for this, and to protect their new gate.

“You've gotta be kidding.”

Jinto knew that it was a lie because he was on the cruiser Gothelauth. That fleet was too large for a mere reconnaissance fleet, and it was the United Mankind who sent out a small sub fleet of smaller and faster ships to fight them.

But there was no one around to hear him say that.

Jinto changed the channel. He wanted to hear something that had nothing to do with politics. But, the enemy had filled all of the channels with their propaganda. There were no entertainment shows the way there were in the afternoon. It was a sign that the enemy had strengthened their hold on the planet that much.

In a certain station, they were lecturing on the concept of a republic and freedom. In another station, a middle-aged woman was expressing her thanks to the United Mankind. Another lectured on the dark hidden secrets of the Empire of Mankind by the Abh.

*I wonder what the natives think of these broadcasts. It would be obvious if this were Martinyu. They would be unanimously on the side of their new rulers, or friends according to the broadcast.*

*What about here?* His earlier idea of a world that was developed by the Abh being loyal to the Abh was simply a generalization. Since Jinto only knew about the world from the history books, he did not know if this

world was an exception or not. It was also highly possible that people, who were loyal to the Abh, would be just as loyal to a new ruler.

I hope they're at least uncaring about who their rulers are. Jinto wished. Their, and especially Lafiel's, safety would be seriously in jeopardy if the population joined in the United Mankind army's Abh hunt. *Maybe it would be better to hide out in the field.* Jinto could sneak out every now and then to purchase food and everyday necessities. But he decided to take a look around the city before he made his final decision.

A few cars passed by during his walk to the city, but he never saw another person walking. After awhile, the swarm of buildings that was Lume Biga appeared immediately before him. Jinto reached into his pocket and turned his wrist computer off. He was rather confident about his listening skills now, but he was not too confident about his ability to speak in the Lume Biga dialect.

*I'll pretend to be a new immigrant, Jinto decided. It worked on Delktu, so it has to work here.*

The farmland ended, and Jinto reached a road surrounding the city. Now there was a great deal of pedestrians about. He passed a group of men and women. One of them stared at him curiously.

*Do I look strange?* Now that he paid closer attention to the crowds, Jinto realized that he was out of the ordinary. The biggest difference was the color. The natives seemed to like primary colors their clothing were filled with clashing colors. While Jinto's overalls were colored in just deep red. It may be shabby looking to the denizens of Krasbyul. The plainness of his outfit made him stand out. To add to that, Jinto had forgotten but he could hardly be considered sanitary at the moment.

*Oh man. Are there policemen on Krasbyul? There has to be. I hope I don't get arrested...* He headed towards the center of the town with such worries circling through his head. I just need to sell the belt buckle and buy clothing and other things that we need.

Something about the fashion on Krasbyul relieved him. It was popular to dye their hair. He saw many people with yellow and red colored hair. There were some with blue and green hair too. *If they all dye their hair, then Lafiel's light blue hair shouldn't stand out.*

The city was not too big. Jinto had imagined that the tall buildings were the center of town, but it seems that they were all there was to the town. In Delktu, it was normal for small buildings to spread themselves over a large amount of area. But here, it seemed to be normal for many families to live in one large building.

Most buildings were cylindrical in shape. Streetlights stretched out in numerous directions from their outer walls, casting their light upon the street side. The light spilling out of the windows made the building look like a tree, decorated for some special holiday. Or perhaps they shaped the building to resemble a tree to begin with.

There was a great deal of space in-between buildings, and the shining road ran in-between them. There were places where the road became extra wide, he could tell from the cars parked in such places that they were parking spots. Sidewalks extended from parking spots, and circled around any buildings that they encountered. Bushes were planted where there was no pavement; they would probably look beautiful during the day.

The first floor of every building was filled with stores. Jinto wandered around the city, looking for the right type of store. He walked past a group of men wearing green uniforms during his quest. Their uniforms were separated around the waist; they were obviously not natives. They were also carrying what were unmistakably weapons.

*Enemy soldiers!* Jinto realized who they were, and couldn't help but to look away from them. The soldiers didn't notice Jinto's suspicious bearing, and passed by talking loudly. When he raised his head in relief, he saw a sign.

"High Quality Body Decorate And Thing Decorate Room" That was the store's sign. It probably meant something close to expensive bodily ornaments and room decorations. Jinto looked in the display window. There was many earrings and necklaces, and other things that the nouveau riche may buy, all suited to the tastes of the people of Krasbyul.

On Delktu, stores like these usually purchased items as well. But, things change on different planets. Variety was a trademark of worlds in the Empire. Jinto entered the store on the chance that they would buy the belt buckle.

"Welcome." A small man wearing a yellow green and peach, rather plain colors for Krasbyul, overall with a black shirt, greeted Jinto from the other side of the counter.

"Umm..." He licked his dried lips nervously. "There's something I'd like to sell."

"Okay." Said the store personnel jovially. "Do you have the item with you sir?"

"Yes." Jinto nodded and placed the belt buckle on the counter.

"Oh, this is a very good item." The store employee took the belt buckle and carefully examined it. He looked at Jinto's face and grinned.

"Y-Yes it is." He said uneasily.

"And, how much are you looking for this?" He placed the belt buckle back on the counter.

"What?" This was a problem. Not only was he unused to negotiation like this, he had no idea what the market value for precious metal were. The plan he came up with on the way here was to ask the other party to set a price, ask for twice that and try to compromise. But the other party got the first punch in.

"Let's see..." Jinto ran his eyes through merchandise in the store to see if any of them would help. But there were no price tags on the merchandise. *Okay, then I'll ask how much I need instead of how much it's worth. It might turn out to be an embarrassment, but that can't be helped. If I have a hundred scarr I should be able to buy everything we need, and live comfortably for a few months...*

At that point, he realized yet another mistake. He had no idea how much a scarr was worth in local currency. He did not even know what their unit of currency was. If he had realized earlier, he could have referenced it on the wrist computer, but he didn't. Of course, he could not bring the wrist computer out here to look it up. How could he call Lafiel unknowing of the world when he made a mistake like this?

"Is something the matter sir?" The store employee stared at him.

"Umm..." Jinto paused. "What about an amount that a normal person can live on for half a year?"

"That's... what a realistic way of setting a price."

"I'm sorry." Jinto reached for the belt buckle, red faced. "I'll come back."

"Wait, wait a second please sir." The store employee stopped him, "How about 1500 Dyus?"

"1500 Dyus?" It did sound like a lot, but it was possible that it was actually less than a scarr. "Around how many scarr is that?"

"Sir!" The store employee said in a whisper. "I am trying to run a business here so I don't show my inquisitiveness where it doesn't belong. I don't think it's wise for you to be concerned about the exchange rate between the dyus and scarr at a time like this."

"You're right..." Jinto thanked the store employee in his heart for the good advice.

"Well, 20 dyus should be enough to live on for a day."

"I see..." Jinto quickly calculated, and realized that it was about half what he asked for. "Could you possibly raise that to 3000 dyus?"

"Sir," the store employee replied calmly, "I repeat, but we are running a business here. To add on, we are the only store in town that exchanges such merchandise into cash." *I gave you my best offer, there's no room for negotiation.* Was basically what he was saying.

"Okay." Jinto gave up. "1500 dyus please."

"A wise decision." He was not stupid enough to ask Jinto for an account number to transfer it to, he placed 1500 dyus in cash before Jinto. "Please count."

"Okay." Each bill was a hundred dyus. Jinto checked that there were fifteen of them, and he stuffed them into his pocket. "Yes there's 1500."

"I'm glad we could come to an agreement." The store employee bowed.

"Umm..." Jinto decided to ask. "Out of curiosity, how much are you going to sell it for?"

"Well let's see." The store employee picked the buckle up again, "We don't usually wear belt buckles, not many people wear cloaks. But an item this well made would make a nice room decoration. Yes, I would ask for at least 30,000 dyus."

He was not very angry even when he found out that he had sold it for a twentieth its market value.

"I hope you make money on it." Jinto said sincerely.

"Thank you very much." The store employee replied with a large smile.

Now that he had money, he had to go buy clothes now. He thought he would only need clothes for Lafiel, but now he realized that he should do something about his own outfit first. He saw a vending machine for clothes, but it did not accept cash, so he gave up on that.

But there were far more clothing stores than accessory stores. He saw one on his way here, and Jinto had his eyes set on it. He turned back. There was a ground car parked in front of the building with the clothing store. It was built solidly, a few men wearing green uniforms stood around it.

"You there, stop." They shouted from the megaphone on the car.

Jinto turned around thinking they were calling for him. They weren't. The soldiers quickly surrounded a young woman.

"W-What do you want!?" She raised her voice out of fear and surprise. The other pedestrians also stopped to watch.

"You there, you too." They seemed to be getting their orders from the ground car; the soldiers surrounded a middle aged man.

"There is no need to panic." The voice on the loud speaker said. "Nothing will happen to you if you cooperate. Please tell the soldiers your name and address. We also request picture I.Ds to confirm that you are who you say you are."

"What did I do!?" The woman cried.

“Have you heard our broadcasts? Dying your hair blue is a sign of your support of the Abh’s monarchy over you.”

I see, they both have blue hair.

“I like having dark blue hair, what’s wrong with that?” The man said.

“You are imitating the Abh. That is something you should be ashamed of as being free citizens.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“That’s sophistry!”

The pedestrians who were watching it began to raise voices of opposition too. The denizens of Krasbyul seemed rather headstrong.

“We will give you until 10AM local time tomorrow. You will correct your hair color by then, and report to the city hall. Otherwise, we will arrest you for not attempting your subservient attitude to the Abh.”

Jinto headed to the clothing store after looking at the people reluctantly give the soldiers their name and address.

“We are the public service squad of the United Mankind Peace Keeping Force. If you have a family member or a friend with blue hair, please convince them to correct it immediately. We will not give any warnings after 10AM tomorrow. Any violators will have their hair removed immediately...”

The loudspeaker yelled at the pedestrians as Jinto walked away.

## 8. Lafiel's Transformation

The long night of Krasbyul was finally about to end.

*Oh yeah – Jinto thought to himself as he approached the cave – how many years has it been since I've had someone waiting for me to come home? I hope she's still waiting for me there. I've only been gone for about three hours, and the enemy soldiers seemed too busy harassing anyone who dyed their hair blue, so she's probably okay...* Jinto said to himself to try to shake the uncertainty away.

"Lafiel! I'm back!" He shouted first because he did not want to be greeted at gunpoint again. Everything was the same at the mouth of the cave. The hodgepodge alarm system showed no signs of blood, showing that no animal taller than knee-height tried to break in. Jinto retracted the carbon crystal fiber back into its casing.

"Lafiel!" There was no response.

Jinto took his wrist computer out of his pocket and used it to light the cave, afraid of what may have happened to Lafiel. Lafiel was there. She was deep asleep, breathing gently; looking innocent in her sleep. Jinto sighed in relief.

"Wake up Lafiel!" Jinto shook her shoulder.

The Princess woke up, shoved Jinto aside and reached for her laser pistol.

"It's me!" Jinto shouted, rubbing his sore bottom.

"Oh, it's you." Lafiel calmed down. "You surprised me."

"Is that my fault?" said Jinto. "I kept calling, but you wouldn't wake up. I wonder if there was a point to that alarm system at all."

"Quiet, Jinto." She said, ending the conversation. Then she made a strange expression. "Why are you wearing clothing of such bad taste?"

"Oh, this?" Jinto looked down at the overalls he was wearing. Exactly how many colors are there? Not only did it have the three primary colors, there was indigo, yellow green, pink, brown, bronze... at least twenty different colors. But, employee at the clothing store said that it was a very normal collage of colors. "Well, you should get used to this taste in colors."

"No." Lafiel refused to give a step.

"You don't have to get used to it, you just have to tolerate it." Jinto compromised.

"I suppose I will need to learn how to tolerate many things." Lafiel reluctantly agreed.

Jinto sat down, opened the bags that he brought in from town and took a can out.

"What is that?" Lafiel peeked at it.

"Hair dye."

"Hair dye?"

"Yup. We have to do something about your light blue hair." Jinto read the instructions on the hair dye.

"Hey this is great! You just have to dab it on the hair!"

"Wait, are you going to dye MY hair!?" Lafiel's eyes opened wide.

"Of course. There's no point in dyeing my hair. I bought black. I thought you'd like black more than any other color."

"No!" Lafiel backed away, clutching her hair.

"But..." Jinto was surprised by her unexpected reaction to it. "You don't like black? Would you have preferred red or yellow?"

"It is not that I dislike black, it is because I like the color my hair is right now! Is it not a subtle color? It's not too dark, and it's not too light..." Lafiel began to argue her case.

"Yup, yup. I understand how you feel. It's very pretty." Jinto comforted her. "But they're arresting people who dyed their hair blue in town."

"I didn't dye my hair blue though!"

"Umm... I'm not sure why, but I think that we'll be in even more trouble if they find out that it's not dyed."

"Ku Lin Mab As Tang Gib!"

"How rude. Though I don't know what it means."

"Do I have to dye it?..." Lafiel said weakly.

"I really have a hard time understanding you Abhs." Jinto began to get irritated. "You're fine with messing around with your genes, but you're hesitant about a little make up?"

"How many times must I say it, you are..."

"Yes, I'm an Abh. But I have an increasingly difficult time remembering that whenever something like this happens." Jinto started shaking the can. "Your Highness, though it is hardly my place as a lowly one to request this of you, could you possibly show me your hair for a moment? Or will you do it yourself, Lafiel?"



"Give it. I refuse to let you touch my hair." Lafiel grabbed the can out of Jinto's hands.

Jinto panicked when he saw that she tried to take the cap off without reading the instructions first.

"You have to take your headpiece off first."

"I have to take my headpiece off as well?"

"Of course. I'm making an effort to try to make you look like a grounder. What kind of a grounder wears a headpiece?" Then Jinto suddenly realized, "Speaking of, you Abhs hardly ever take your headpieces off, is it indecent to show other people your spatial sensory organ?"

"You certainly do have strange ideas." Lafiel seemed impressed.

"You don't?"

"No. We just keep it on because it is inconvenient when we take it off."

"Oh, that's great. Now I don't have to feel uncomfortable about you taking it off."

Jinto was a little uneasy. The spatial sensory organ is a collection of over 100 million eyes. The closest thing in nature would be an insect's compound eye. Jinto honestly did not wish to see an insect's eye on Lafiel's forehead. But he was relieved when Lafiel actually took her headpiece off.

It was diamond shaped with a pearly shine to it. When he looked at it from a different angle, it gave off more of a ruby glint. Since each individual eye was too small to distinguish, it looked more like a strange accessory than an insect's compound eye. Instead of being disgusting, it looked beautiful.

"It's rather noticeable." Said Jinto.

"You are not going to ask me to take this off, are you!?" Lafiel said horrified. "I can't take this off. If you were to tell me to gouge it out..."

"I'm not going to make you do such a cruel thing."

Lafiel sighed in relief.

"Exactly who do you think I am? A sadist?" Jinto took a hat out of the bag. "I picked this up too. Try it on."

Lafiel put the hat on her head, and lowered the rim until it covered her eyebrows. Her spatial sensory organ hid nicely under it, and Lafiel's too perfect features were somewhat hidden under it too. Instead, the impressionable Ears of the Abrial popped out of her hair.

"Your ears too."

"Okay." Lafiel pushed the tips of her ears into the hat and covered it with her hair. "Is this okay?"

"Great." Jinto grinned.

"Maybe I don't have to dye my hair if I wear this." Lafiel futilely tried to put her long hair into the hat.

"Nope." Jinto calmly told her the harsh truth. "There's quite a bit of it sticking out. It might be interesting if we cut your hair so that it can fit in the hat. Would you rather do that?"

Lafiel shivered at the thought of it. "Okay." She bit on her lip, and sorrowfully said. "We have no choice, let us dye my hair."

"It's not that big a deal. Most of the natives here do dye their hair. I'm having a hard time believing that you're the princess that said 'If anything happens to me, take the navigational log and run.' What happened to that sense of self-sacrifice?"

"Quiet, Jinto. I like this hair."

"But you don't have to dye it permanently. Just while we're on this planet."

"I would never dye it permanently." Lafiel took the hat off causing her long hair flew out. The Princess stroked her light blue hair lovingly.

Jinto felt a strange sense of guilt. "You'll meet it again."

"Yes..." Lafiel nodded, and rubbed a drop of the hair dye on her hair. The black started devouring the light blue. For some unknown reason the hair dye lightly spread over all of her hair without coloring the skin or clothes that it touched. Within a minute, the blue hair Abh girl turned into a girl with beautiful black hair. Though she was still far too beautiful to be phrased as 'normal'.

"Yup. It looks great on you."

"Save your compliments." Said Lafiel, but she rubbed at her black hair looking a little pleased.

"Okay, now you need to change." Jinto grabbed the entire bag. "It's in here. I'll go outside, so change into it."

"Okay." Lafiel took the dress from the bag and wrinkled her brow. "It's a strange cloak, but it's better than I expected." Lafiel's dress was blue and red plaid dress. It was rather plain for the fashion on Krasbyul.

Jinto stood up. "Call me when you're done changing."

"Wait, Jinto." Lafiel stopped him. She spread the contents of the bag on the ground. The only other thing in the bag was a pair of shoes. "Where are the overalls? Can I wear this cloak over my uniform?"

Jinto closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. The time to tell her another cruel truth had come. "That's not a cloak." Jinto said slowly. "It's something you wear in place of your overalls."

"I'm supposed to wear this over my underwear."

"Yup. That's how everyone does it here. Women wore something like this on my world too. We called it as 'one piece' in our language. I don't know what you'd call it in Barone though."

"I don't care about that." Lafiel looked at the 'one piece' with a horrified expression. "Do I really... have to wear this?"

"You do." Jinto said patiently. "If you want to look like a denizen of Krasbyul."

"Jinto you are a cruel man."

"I hope you understand that I'm not doing this because I want to." Jinto said, shaking his head.

"Really?" She gazed at him suspiciously. "Then why have your lips been twitching this entire time?"

Jinto demanded that they rest for awhile, after Lafiel finished changing, and he took a short nap. While Jinto slept, Lafiel stood guard with a pistol in her hand – still dressed in the one piece of course. After sleeping for around two hours, Jinto yawned and shook himself awake. He felt refreshed.

"Want to get going?" He asked.

"Yes." Lafiel nodded from the mouth of the cave.

There was something they had to do before they left. They had to get rid of as many signs that they were from the Star Forces as possible. Jinto dug a hole in the valley, he wanted to dig it in the cave, but it was nearly impossible to dig through rock with the tools at hand. He tossed the Star Forces backpack into the hole, along with Lafiel's uniform and Jinto's overalls. Then...

"We should bury that too." Jinto reached out.

"No!" Lafiel clutched her headpiece to her chest preciously.

"Why? Can't you get a replacement for a Star Forces issue headpiece really easily?"

"This is the first headpiece I was issued in the force! It is full of memories!"

"We can dig it up again later, your headpiece isn't going to spoil."

"That is true, but it may be useful."

"How?"

"I do not know how." Lafiel refused to budge.

"But we should try to get rid of as many things that will give away our identity as possible..."

"Are we not taking the pistols and wrist computers? Then what is the harm in taking my headpiece too?"

"You have a point..." Jinto gave up. He put the shovel into the hole at the end, and covered it up by hand.

Jinto put his wrist computer into the pocket of his overalls, and stuck his laser pistol into the bag he got in Lume Biga. Lafiel boldly put her belt on and stuck the laser pistol in it. She put her wrist computer around her ankle and hid it with her shoes. She tucked the necklace with the navigational log into her one piece. And then they were off.

It was noon by then, so the road was no longer lit. The road was mostly straight, with an occasional twist, always about a hundred dagh above the fields. It was already the late afternoon in local time, but the star Sfgnoff was still rising in the sky, spraying its sizzling heat upon the road."

Jinto looked at Lafiel with her hat enviously. *I should have bought one for myself too.* But, money was precious. He used almost 200 dyus out of the 1500 dyus he had. I wonder if it'll last until we get rescued... *What will we do if we run out of money? Will any businesses be benevolent enough to hire two random kids? If they won't... well I suppose we can always count on our laser pistols to make some money.* Jinto grinned. *A Princess and an Earl doing a holdup... we would be the most noble criminals ever in the history of mankind. I'm sure it'll be great.*

"What are you grinning about?" Lafiel asked.

"It's nothing." Jinto wiped the grin off his face.

"You are too relaxed."

"Same goes to you. You were sleeping like a baby." Jinto argued back.

"Quiet, Jinto. I was tired."

"I guess you were." Jinto accepted and then quickly changed the topic. "Do we look like brother and sister?"

"I doubt it, we are not brother and sister."

"That's no good."

"Why?"

"I thought we should try to pass off as brother and sister in town."

"Why do we need to make such a lie?"

"Well, we can't tell them the truth." Even as he said it, Jinto wondered. What exactly is our real relationship? A Princess and her loyal knight? She may be a princess, but I'm hardly a knight. A pitiful pair of refugees? That's probably closer to the truth. I think my status has improved from a flyer trainee and her luggage.

"What a strange thing you say. The relationship between us is no one's business but our own."

"Well, that's true, but some people might wonder. On Delktu, the police would fly in if an underage couple were ever to stay in a hotel together."

"I am not a child. Though I cannot speak for you."

"I don't think of myself as one either, but we probably look like kids to others." He remembered Til Corint. "Whenever I told the father who raised me that I was no longer a child, he would reply by saying 'Children always say that'." What Til said was correct back then. Jinto did not understand the world; he was innocent and young...

"But this is not Delktu."

"That's true, I wonder how things are here."

They would have no problems if Krasbyul was a society in which underage marriage was allowed. Though they looked too poor for it, they could pass off as a young couple on their honeymoon.

"Must we worry about it?"

"I don't want people's attention on us. We should try to blend in..."

"Jinto." Lafiel suddenly stopped. "Am I in your way?"

"What is it, all of a sudden..." Jinto was at a loss for words.

"Would you not be able to hide yourself more easily if I were not with you?"

"See here..." He lowered the bag to the ground and rubbed his brow. He wondered how he should explain it to her, and decided to try to be honest. "Honestly, I have a feeling that it would be easier if I were alone. After all, I am a grounder..."

"You are an Abh. Or is it that you do not wish to be an Abh?"

"Who knows? I do feel like I got the raw end of the deal by becoming it, but I don't really dislike it. It's just that I think of myself as a grounder and not an Abh. I was born and raised on a planet after all."

"I had no idea you felt that way." Lafiel bit down on her lip. "There is no need to worry about me, or the Empire either. If you wish to throw away your title, we can part ways here. I do not wish to be a burden."

"Are you serious, Lafiel?"

"Yes I am. I will be fine even without your help."

"No way." Jinto said. He could hear the firmness of his own voice. "I don't mind throwing my title away, but I have no intentions of parting ways with you."

"Why not?"

"Why? Because I wouldn't want to do that just to live." Jinto let everything pour out, unable to control his anger. "You don't want to be a burden? You're fine without me? You're contradicting yourself Lafiel. How can someone that's a burden be fine on her own?"

"You brought me here. I couldn't fly a spaceship no matter what, so I needed your help. Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses. You're not used to living on a planet, and I'm not used to living in space. Well, I'm not too knowledgeable on living on planets either, but I'm sure I know more about it than you do."

"So why do you have to worry about whether you're a burden or not? We should be helping each other out with our weaknesses. Am I making sense to you, Lafiel? Or am I the one that's become a burden to you? If that's the case, we've no choice. Just go off on your own way, abandoning this pitiful piece of luggage. But I have no intentions of abandoning you."

A hover car passed by while Jinto was talking.

"You are right." Lafiel looked down. "Forgive me, Jinto. You are a man of pride."

"Yeah." Jinto was still angry. "I don't know whether I'm an Abh or a grounder yet. But I have self-respect. Pride isn't something unique to the Abh. So please, don't say anything like that again. I'm not going to leave you, not until we're safe."

It would be a long time yet before Jinto realized that Lafiel's comment about his being a 'man of pride' was the greatest compliment she could give.

"I understand. I will not speak of it again." Lafiel vowed.

Jinto finally calmed down. "I needed you, I may need you again. But at least let me keep deluding myself that you need me right now."

"You are not deluding yourself."

Jinto thought that it wasn't too bad being an Abh noble when he heard those words.

"Yohoho! Two of you there heat Riibi. Have fight man hold girl? Girl there Moruso! Woman there good throw leave man similar Sheribu, good come with us. Good do Piik together us..."

Jinto looked at the direction that the voice came from. The hover car that had passed them earlier had turned back, and they were driving along side them now. It was a roofless convertible. Three men were shouting at them, with their upper bodies leaning out of the car. They were all around the same age, and they looked to be a little older than Jinto.

Jinto tried to translate their words from the Krasbyul dialect of Barone to standard Barone, but they were speaking quickly, and using slang words, so he could only make out half of it. He got the general idea that they were ridiculing them and trying to hit on Lafiel.

"What are they saying?" Lafiel said cluelessly.

"You don't need to know." Jinto lugged the bag over his shoulder, "Let's ignore them and go."

"Okay." Lafiel began walking as if the men in the car were not even there.

"Girl there Morun! Man there in the way Kibau!"

"Siik Lipilipi good piik!"

"Good stop Morun girl!"

The hover car kept pace with them, staying at their side.

Even Jinto understood the next thing that they shouted.

"Stop ignoring us, you fuckers!" The strongest build man jumped off the car and barred their way.

"Hu! Morun!" The men whistled, and Lafiel reached towards Lafiel. "Come on, let's have fun together."

"Stop it!" Jinto grabbed that hand.

"Why you!" The man pushed Jinto aside. Pathetically, Jinto lost his balance from just that one shove, and he rolled off the road and into the farm.

"Damn!" Jinto pulled the laser pistol out of his bag. While he was doing that, the man slid down to the field, and charged at Jinto with nostrils flaring.

Jinto pulled at the trigger to his laser pistol. He had a blood lust, not because he was shoved down, but because they dared to hit on Lafiel. He was so angry that he didn't care if he killed them.

The beam of light that came out of the laser pistol hit the charging man square in the chest. The normal beam of light from the flashlight setting did at least. The man stopped for a moment. But when he realized that it was just a powerful beam of light on his chest, he began charging again.

Jinto tried to toggle the safety from "flashlight" to "kill" but he didn't make it in time. The other man was right in front of him, and reaching for the pistol in his right hand. But the man suddenly collapsed. It was Lafiel. Lafiel shot him in the left leg with her laser pistol.

Jinto switched the safety to kill just in time to see Lafiel get pulled back. The man by him seemed to be in quite a bit of pain, so he ignored him and ran up to the road. One of the men had Lafiel in a full nelson, and the other was trying to take the pistol out of her hand.

Lafiel's struggle was quite impressionable. Her face remained emotionless, as if she did not wish to waste the effort of moving her face muscles on people like them. She did not raise her voice; she simply silently kicked at the man in front of her. They probably expected a girl to scream in a situation like this. The two men were obviously confused. But things were not going well for Lafiel.

"Let her go!" Jinto fired into the sky. Unfortunately, laser pistols don't make sounds. A beam of light appeared in the fog, but it simply headed towards the sky under the bright sun, not calling any attention at all to itself. Jinto aimed at the road. The amplified beam of light cut through the road, causing a small explosion. He finally got the men's attention.

"Raise your hands above your heads!" He shouted in the Krasbyul dialect of Barone. Lafiel ran to Jinto after she was freed, and aimed her pistol at the men too.

"Don't shoot, Lafiel." He whispered to her.

"Of course not. I have no intentions of shooting them unless they resist."

"I'm glad."

"But I wish they would resist, just a little."

"To be honest, me too."

The two men stood frozen, as if they knew what Lafiel was thinking.

"Okay, you two." Said Jinto. "Your friend is suffering down there. Bring him up here."

The two men glared at Jinto, but walked down to the field without any sign of resistance.

"You are quite talented. You speak their language already?" said Lafiel.

"There's a bit of a trick behind it. It's just another dialect of Barone." Jinto called to them. "You can try something if you'd like, I could use some target practice."

"Shakuna!" One of the men shouted out.

"Thank you." Jinto called out snidely.

"What does that mean?" said Lafiel.

"I don't know. But I'm sure it's a word that ladies shouldn't say. But anyways, let's take their car. It would be nice to have an easy method of transportation."

"Are we going to commandeer it?"

"No. We're not part of an army, so we'll simply be stealing it."

"With no cause?"

"Yup, we'll become criminals though."

Jinto guessed that it was not common to carry weapons around on this planet, from the fact that the three men didn't have weapons, despite the fact that they were criminal in both appearance and action. They could hardly pretend to be law-obeying citizens now after they started swinging their laser pistols around. He worried that the Princess may be reluctant to completely become criminals.

"Interesting." Her reaction was surprising. "So this is that armed robbery thing I hear about."

"Yeah." Jinto had a bad feeling.

The three of them climbed back up to the road. One of them lent a shoulder to the wounded one. He wasn't groaning or screaming from the pain, but it was showing on his face.

Before Jinto could say a word, Lafiel began speaking to them in the standard Barone that she learned in the palace. She explained to the men that they were simply armed robbers passing by, and that they had nothing to do with the Abh or the Star Forces or anything like that. She then finished off by declaring that she will be taking their car, but that this was a completely normal commercial decision for such armed robbers to do.

The men simply stared at her spiritlessly. Jinto clutched his head. Even though they may not understand what Lafiel was saying, they could tell that it was standard Barone. They may as well have revealed themselves to those men.

"Could you give me any a wrist computer or anything you can use to communicate?" Jinto asked them, deciding to forget what Lafiel had just done. There was no response from the three of them; they just looked at each other awed.

"You understand don't you?" Jinto asked gently. "Think about our position here."

"If you do not wish for them to be able to communicate with others, would it not be easier to simply kill them." Lafiel suggested.

Jinto did not know exactly how much of Lafiel's standard Barone the three of them understood. But they seemed to understand the word 'kill' and they reacted immediately. They took off the small box that they had on their shoulders or waist and tossed it onto the road.

"That was an effective bluff." He whispered to Lafiel quietly.

Lafiel looked surprised, and innocently looked as if she had no idea what Jinto was talking about. Jinto shivered and turned his gaze back to the men. *You guys really should be down on your knees thanking me.*

He motioned towards the one that was not helping the wounded. "Gather them all into one pile."

Once the man gathered it all together, he burned all of the communicators with a laser beam. His aim was a little off but the intricate machinery still burned to a crisp.

"Well then," Jinto looked into the driver's seat of the hover car. *This bar that comes out should control the direction, and these foot pedals, they probably control the speed, and...* He knew roughly how to drive it. But he was not confident about it. "Let's ask them how to drive this."

"I believe this one was doing the driving." Lafiel pointed at the one helping out the wounded.

"Then you, get on." He ordered the driver.

Lafiel jumped in the backseat before he could reach the driver's side. The man sat in the driver's seat with Lafiel pointing her gun at him from behind, and Jinto sat beside him.

"You two." He pointed towards away from the town. "Start walking that way."

The man who was shot in the leg muttered something silently. Jinto raised his gun, and the two men started walking away mumbling.

"Okay, take us out." He said to the driver.

"Do you think you can get..." The man started, but he shut up when Lafiel poked at him from behind with the gun.

Jinto watched him drive for a bit, and asked a few questions. It was incredibly easy, just as he had thought. It was a hover car powered by electromagnetic repulsion. It will take you to any inputted coordinates on its own, and manually controlling it was really easy too. Since it could only hover on the roads, they would have to bring the wheels out to drive off road, but that could be done with a few simple commands too.

"Does this have a GPS?"

"GPS...?"

"Something that tells where you are to some place that manages traffic with a radio wave." Jinto repeated in simple terms.

"No. Don't have. No."

"What's this?" He pointed at something that looked like a communicator in-between the driver and passenger seats.

"That is a navigational tool. We're not sending out radio waves. It just tells us where we are."

"I see, how do you use it?"

The man tried operating it. A map appeared on the screen with a blue dot that showed their current position. Jinto messed around with it a bit. It was easy to adjust the scale of the map, and he could get directions and distances to the nearest cities.

"Wow, it's convenient. And are you sure there's no GPS on this? Wouldn't the traffic control center want to know where you are?"

"There really isn't one. You won't have any privacy if everyone knows where your car is. So we don't put stuff like that on cars on this planet."

"I see." Jinto nodded. "Great. But you speak as if we're not from this planet."

"Y-You are?"

"You're going to upset the girl in the backseat. She tried so very hard to explain that fact to you."

"Okay, fine. Your family's been on this Shakuna of a world since the first generation."

"Make sure to say so to other people too." Jinto said, not expecting him to. "Well then, I've had enough. Turn us around." The car began moving back.

"Stop." Jinto ordered when he noticed that the other two were walking towards them. The two men stopped in surprise. They probably did not expect Jinto and Lafiel to return.

"Hey, you two, aren't you going in the wrong direction?" Jinto called out in a jolly tone.

"We're free to go where we want!" The man who was shot in the leg shouted out.

"We'll consider your appeal at a later date." Jinto replied formally. "Please file the proper paperwork to the appropriate civil offices." He then motioned for the driver to get off. When he got off, he moved to the driver's seat. At that moment, Jinto remembered that they were short on money.

"Hey, do you guys have any cash on you? Give it to us."

"Fuck off." The wounded man replied.

"We can take it after we kill you." He made the best evil expression he could.

"Damn it."

The three of them turned their cash over. They had about 100 dyus between the three of them. It was less than he had expected. Jinto had the driver collect the money, and took it from him. Lafiel held on tightly to the pistol the entire time.

"Well then, unfortunately, we have to part ways now." Jinto said before he drove off with the car. Lafiel climbed up to the passenger seat.

"That was impressive." She said in an excited tone. "We need to rob them of capital if we're going to do an armed robbery. I would never have thought of it. Have you done armed robbery in the past?"

"No way. I'm an amateur."

When he was on the planet Delktu, Jinto was envious of young men who drove around on a car with a pretty girl next to them. He wished that he could one day do the same. Right now, his dream had come true except for the fact that he was on a hover car; and the girl next to him was one of the most beautiful girls in the entire galaxy, and now looked at him with a gaze full of respect.

So why did he feel so guilty?

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## 9. In the Imperial Palace

The home of the Abh, the city-ship Abrial, was still in use as the Imperial palace, after several renovations. The giant ship that once housed almost one million people still contained a population of 200,000. It was now more of a small city than an orbital palace. In one part of that small city, carefully separated from any important parts of the city, there was a group of foreigners who were given a home and an office.

Sanpurr Sangarini was one of them, and he was an ambassador from the United Mankind.

The Empire does not permit foreign ships to enter a system under the control of the Empire. But they designated seven ports of trade, and there is trade going on with the foreign nations. Once there is an economical relationship, a diplomatic relationship becomes necessary. So the Empire has exchanged ambassadors with the other four interstellar nations.

The foreigners in the imperial palace are those four ambassadors and their aids. The only places in the Empire that permit the residence of foreigners are that section of the imperial palace and the seven ports of trade.

Though the Empire gave the ambassadors certain privileges, they did not value diplomacy itself in the least. Sangarini and the others were hardly ever allowed to speak with important individuals within the Empire. The only times they were allowed to meet the Empress was during the official ceremonies when they arrived and when they left.

Sangarini and the other three ambassadors were just given a second opportunity to meet the Empress. There is a "Hall of Royal Visitation" in the imperial palace. But this room was only used for important ceremonies and matters, and Sangarini had never been in it before.

Sangarini was called to "The Hall of Larkspur". Just like its name, purple larkspurs bloomed everywhere in the room. Sangarini had a hard time believing it, but the Abh appreciated the beauty of nature in their own way.

There was a stone pavement in the center of the room, to allow people to walk about easily. There was a picture of the galaxy etched in silver into the black marble pavement. There was a platform on one side of the pavement, and statues depicting the Gaftnohec were erected on its four corners. A throne, not as extravagant as the Throne of Flight, but still very comfortable looking, stood in the middle of the pavement.

One beautiful woman sat there, showing the mannerisms that she fully knew that she belonged in that seat. She wore a special headpiece with the Gaftnohec depicted. Her wavy light blue hair crowned the Gaftnohec on her forehead. Her sharp ears separated her hair, and the forward strands fell upon her light red cloak. Slightly scarlet pupils could be seen in her milky white eyes, and elegant ivory white hands snuck out of the sleeves of the star forces uniform she wore under her cloak. In that hand, she grasped the rod that gave her control over the greatest military force in the history of mankind. She was the twenty-seventh Empress of the Empire of Mankind by the Abh, Her Majesty the Empress Ramaju.

The four ambassadors just stood there facing the Empress. Sangarini had a hard time not feeling insulted by their treatment. *The Abh, they are arrogant and reckless indeed. I'm not sure about the reckless part, but they are definitely arrogant.*

"Your Majesty," Sangarini spoke representing all ambassadors. "I must thank you for allowing us to meet with you."

"I accept your thanks, Ambassador." Ramaju acknowledged, "I am limited in time. I trust that the same can be said for all of you."

"Yes." Sangarini nodded. He had no intentions of wasting time with courtesy and ceremony before the great Abh. "Allow me to go straight to the business at hand. We have come in to file a complaint."

"You mean an explanation, do you not?" The Empress of the Abh replied without hesitation. "I heard that your fleets have launched an attack upon the Empire. Though communications has not been reestablished, so I am unaware of the details. I was under the impression that I would receive an explanation from all of you concerning this matter."

"It is a complaint." Sangarini reiterated. "It is true that our fleet has launched an attack upon the Sfgnoff system, which lies under the control of the Empire. But please think of that as retaliation."

Ramaju remained expressionless; she simply raised one of her brows. "Ambassador, I trust you will enlighten me as to what the 'retaliation' was for?"

"Of course." Sangarini desperately tried to remain rational. "Our nation opened a new Saudec, and they were in the process of surveying the immediate proximity of it. Then a warship, believed to be part of your Empire, launched an attack upon the surveying fleet. Though we did destroy that ship, we received heavy casualties as well. I am here to file a complaint on behalf of the United Mankind. That area may have been close to Imperial territory, but I was under the impression that planar space was open to free navigation. An unprovoked attack such as that cannot be justified."

"I would also like to support the Ambassador of the United Mankind in his complaint, on behalf of my nation and its peoples." Said the Ambassador from the Greater Alkont Republic, Marinba Suni. Sangarini saw that she showed a great deal of anger on her face. If she's acting, she's a great actress, Sangarini thought.

"I would also like to support the complaint on behalf of my nation and its peoples." Guen Taulong from the Hania Alliance added on expressionless. Since he did not understand Barone, he used an interpreter. The interpreter made his plain personality seem even plainer.

"My nation as well." Janet Makari from the United Systems of Democracy replied in a heavily accented Barone. "We have been constantly plagued by the tyranny of the Abh Empire. We strongly request apology and compensation to our allied nation."

"That is why you attacked our system? Your actions seem contradictory. Why did you not file a complaint when your ships were attacked?"

"The commanding officer in the area decided upon making a retaliatory attack." The Ambassador repeated what he was told to say by the United Mankind government. He did not believe in that excuse either. "As you are well aware, it takes some time for the central government to get in touch with the fringe worlds. If the commander of the fleet had requested the central government for instructions, I am sure that we would have filed a complaint at the time just as Your Majesty said."

"Ambassador, you are lying." Ramaju said, tilting her head slightly.

"How dare you accuse me of that!" Sangarini tried to act as if he was shocked. "What do you base your accusation on?"

"You say that one of our ships attacked you, but I am skeptical of that. There is no fool within the proud Star Forces who would attack others without a good reason.

"Then there was an exception." Said Guen.

"Even if there was an exception." Ramaju continued, calmly. "They would not have lost. No commander in the Star Forces is so incapable that they would start a fight that they cannot win. I have a hard time believing that there was a commander who was an exception to both rules."

"Your debate is highly one sided, Your Majesty" said Makari. "I suggest an impartial investigation be made of this situation by both the United Mankind and the Abh Empire, with the three neutral nations monitoring.

"You wish to lie as well?" The Empress glared at her coldly. "Your nations are allied. How can you be neutral?"

"We are neutral concerning this matter, Your Majesty." The Ambassador from the United Systems of Democracy replied."

"That is why we are suggesting that we investigate what really happened in this matter."

"I would also like to request that we carry out the United System of Democracy's suggestion." Suni voiced her agreement.

"There is no need." Ramaju focused her slightly red pupils on Sangarini, "Ambassador, I expected that you would tell me more cleverly written lies. But my expectations have been betrayed. I am disappointed."

"Wha...!" Sangarini was at a loss for words. There was nothing he could do. The Empress of Ramaju had no intentions of listening to his words to start with. His skills as a diplomat were completely useless.

"Why do you think that it is a lie, Your Majesty?" Said Makari. "At least carry out an investigation before deciding so."

"If all of you are satisfied with a lie of this caliber, I have no words to say to you. Or perhaps you all really believe that he is telling the truth. However, we Abhs are only satisfied by more elegant explanations."

"Your Majesty. I just wish to reiterate that if you are to go to war with the United Mankind, we the United Systems of Democracy will be forced to declare war on the Empire by the terms of the Nova-Sicilia treaty." Said Ambassador Makari.

"My thanks to you, Ambassador." Said the Empress sarcastically. "I am well aware of that fact. I believe it is the same of both the Greater Alkont Republic and the Hania Alliance."

The two heads nodded in agreement.

"Fine. Then let us fight." Ramaju said casually. "Good work all. I wish you a safe journey home. Your diplomatic immunity here will be revoked in 24 hours. Of course, I vow upon the honor of the Empire that you receive safe passage to the open ports of trade."

*Wait a second! – Sangarini cried out in his mind – Are you really going to end it like this? I'm the most experienced diplomat in the United Mankind; I have to go back to my nation without doing any work? After relaying the lie from the central government, having it pointed out to my face that it was a lie, and being handed a declaration of war? Am I just a messenger then!? This was supposed to simply be a probe, to check what the Empire's attitude is!*

"Your Majesty, please reconsider." Guen said in a low voice. "You will be fighting with half of



## 10. Checkpoint

Now that they had a method of transportation, they no longer needed to remain in a small city like Lume Biga. Jinto had the autopilot take them towards Gzonu city. This area that they were in was part of Rohau state, and the capital of Rohau state was Gzonu city. According to the latest information from the hover car, it was a large city with a population of over 2 million. There would probably be a great deal of enemy troops there, but the large population would make them stand out less.

"As they traveled, the scenery that seemed to go on forever started to change. The crops changed, and eventually the endless fields of farmland ended too. Forests and fields appeared, and those became replaced by farms again. They passed through a town even smaller than Lume Biga, and passed through that isolated habitat of man.

The hover car was flying smoothly. Jinto started feeling relaxed too. *Maybe we don't have to hide out in a city, maybe we can just keep driving around like this. No, we can't. Those three would probably report their car being stolen. We have to ditch this car before the local police come for us.* Jinto reminded himself. *Yeah, we're already criminals. We're wanted by the local police as well as the enemy army...*

"What are you down about?" Lafiel asked him. She looked into Jinto's face curiously, holding her hat down with one hand to keep it from blowing off.

"Did I really look that worried?"

"Yes. A serious face doesn't look good on you. Your usual stupid face looks much better on you."

"Do I really look that stupid?" Jinto rubbed his face, a little hurt.

"Yes. It helps me forget that we are on a planet when I look at you."

"Was that a complement?"

"Think so if you wish, it is up to you to interpret it."

"Thanks."

They were close to Gzonu. According to the map, Gzonu was surrounded by a forest. About half way through that forest, a signal started beeping. Suddenly, the hover car began decelerating.

"What is it?"

"I don't know." Jinto was puzzled. But, he realized what the problem was very quickly. There was a stationary hover car in front of them. Not just one either, there was a huge line of dozens of hover cars.

Jinto stood up to see if he could figure out what was causing the traffic jam. There was a group of enemy soldiers. There were a few rather impressionable hunks of metal next to them, half hiding behind the trees; they were no doubt the enemy's land based combat units.

"This is bad..." Jinto said to no one in particular. *Think, think... Are they looking for the star forces flyers that landed on the planet after evading three of their ships? Even if they are, they shouldn't know what we look like. But what if they find our wrist computers and laser pistols?*

*Do they know about this car? I doubt that the invading army would receive reports from the local police, but our situation could be quite bad if they realized that star forces officers were responsible for stealing that car.*

*Should I turn back? We don't necessarily have to go to Gzonu. No, that'll only make us seem even more suspicious. I don't know what those land based combat units are capable of, but I'm willing to bet my territory that we can't go up against them with two laser pistols. If they're slower than hover cars we could out run them...*

*No, that won't work. Why would they use something slower than a hover car at a checkpoint for hover cars? Those things can probably fly, and a lot faster than hover cars too. Damn it. Why do they have a checkpoint at all! Do we turn back and definitely get caught, or keep going like this for the chance that we get caught... what a wonderful choice we have. We'll just have to try to talk our way out of it.*

Jinto prepared himself for the checkpoint.

"Lafiel" Jinto whispered. "Don't say anything to them. Just keep quiet. You're not used to the language here."

"Yes, I might give away our identity." Lafiel agreed.

"I'm glad you understand."

"Are you belittling me?" Lafiel looked hurt.

"I wouldn't be saying this right now if you hadn't spoken to the three of them in standard Barone."

"I do regret that." Lafiel admitted. "It was a mistake of me to speak of the star forces."

"And just to add on, you shouldn't refer to your self as armed robbers. Armed robbers are usually rather quiet when they're working. Aren't there criminals in the world of the Abh?"

"Of course. But my family is unused to crime."

"I expected as much."

They moved further and further towards the checkpoint even as they spoke. Their turn was coming up. "Forget about the pistols." Jinto said when he noticed that Lafiel was holding her pistol over her one piece. "Just stay still."

The Princess frowned, not too happy about the idea, but she nodded in agreement.

Finally, the enemy soldiers looked into Jinto's car. There was a sullen faced middle-aged man and a young man with a gloomy smile.

"Is something the matter?" Jinto said trying to be friendly.

"Not at all, citizen." The young one replied. The words flowed out of the translator hooked to his waist while he spoke.

"It's just a standard survey. We're surveying people's attitudes towards the current government, and the average flow of traffic."

"Oh, thank you for your hard work then." Jinto made a big smile to try to convince them that he was a harmless person. They were lucky though, since the soldiers were relying on a translator, they would probably not notice his accent.

"Please show me your wallet." The soldier stuck his hand out.

"Wallet?" Jinto asked back.

"We're not going to take your money. We're not bandits after all." The soldier laughed out loud as if he just made the cleverest joke imaginable. "We just want to check your ID."

"I see..." Jinto thought he was going to have a heart attack. He probably meant some kind of a memory chip with a person's identification and bank account number when he said wallet. Of course, Jinto did not have such a thing. His identification and bank account number were both in his wrist computer. He could turn that in as proof of his and Lafiel's identification, but that was hardly a choice.

No, Jinto's wrist computer belonged to Selnay. But that didn't improve their situation at all. An Imperial citizen was probably hardly welcome, and it might be a little difficult to try to persuade them that Jinto was actually a woman.

"Well the thing is... umm... I forgot it at home..." Jinto made an excuse. It was a sorry excuse even for him.

"Oh, that's strange. You forgot your wallet? I thought everyone here held it onto it at all times."

"I just don't feel comfortable unless I'm using cash..."

The soldier glanced over at Lafiel. "What about her?"

"Umm, yes, she doesn't have it either."

"Oh?" The soldier narrowed his eyes.

Jinto tried to smile even more broadly than he was before. The soldier turned his translator off and spoke with the older soldier. The gaze that the two of them placed on him during their conversation was hardly friendly.

"Okay." The soldier finally said. "Could you tell us your names?"

*Name!?* Jinto panicked. *Oh no, we should have come up with false names at least.*

"Ku Doulin." He suddenly spoke out his friend's name. He prayed that it was not a strange name on Krasbyul.

"And the girl over there?" The soldier asked.

"She's, umm, Corint Lina!" He spoke out the name that he held dearest to his heart.

"I'd like to hear her say it actually. Is there something wrong with her?"

Jinto glanced at Lafiel. She stood completely still with both hands in her lap, staying true to her word that she would remain 'still'. She went too far with it though. Her lack of reaction was too unnatural. She did not seem interested at all in the check by the invading army, despite the fact that it was hardly an every day occurrence. Jinto did not blame the enemy soldier for being suspicious. Her completely frozen face was mysterious, full of class, and so beautiful that it did not seem human.

"Okay, I guess I have no choice but to tell you the truth." Jinto raised his hands in surrender. "This is a mannequin."

"Mannequin?"

"Y-Yes..."

"She seems alive though..." The soldier looked at Lafiel suspiciously.

"Well, that's how well she's made."

"She also looks like she's breathing."

"It's an illusi... she's wired to make it look as if she's breathing."

"Why do you have a mannequin sitting in the passenger side seat?"

"Why are you asking?" Jinto argued back. "Isn't this just a traffic survey?"

"I'm curious, I'm interested in the culture of this planet." The soldier's expression showed that his

curiosity was more than a personal one.

"I have my own pride!" Jinto shouted, desperate. "It's supposed to be a vacation, but not having a girl going with you is just too sad. So, I'm trying to make it look as if I have a girl next to me."

"Oh, sorry." The soldier looked guilty. "But you don't have to worry about stuff like that at your age."

"What do you know!"

"Yeah, umm, you're right, I worried about stuff like that too when I was your age." The soldier suddenly sighed reminiscently. "Now that I look back upon it, it was all so stupid."

"Can I go now?" Jinto said, upset.

"Could I just touch that doll before you do? It's really well made."

"No!" Jinto jumped up. "Don't touch her!"

"Her?" The soldier raised his brow.

"Well, umm, she's mine. I don't want anyone else to touch her."

The soldier sighed again, and looked at Jinto compassionately. "Love for a mannequin... you've got problems, you should get some help."

Let me go already!

"And one this beautiful, with such a cold expression..." The middle-aged soldier said something. The young soldier turned around and responded. A few words that Jinto did not understand were exchanged.

The young soldier shrugged, and spoke to Jinto. "Sorry about the trouble, go on ahead now."

"Thanks." He wanted to jump up and shout out how happy he was, but he tried to remain expressionless as he drove the car off. He could no longer make out the soldiers after a few minutes, but Lafiel still stood at frozen as a mannequin.

"You can stop now." He said to her. "Thanks for sticking to my story. You're a fast learner too. I'm surprised you understood what I was saying."

"Your accent is easier to figure out." Lafiel glared at Jinto from the side. "How did you come up with such a stupid lie?"

"You're not angry are you?" Jinto asked worriedly.

"Oh, so it looks as if I am not angry to you? Not only is pretending to be a mannequin exhausting, it also hurts my pride. That soldier, did he say that I was cold?"

"If he saw you right now, he wouldn't dare say that you were cold. I'm afraid I'd get burned if I touched you." Why does she understand all the stuff I don't want her to? Jinto thought to himself. "And, he said you were very pretty too."

"I am not pretty, I am beautiful. He also said that I was 'just pretty', as if there was nothing else to me..."

"But we got through didn't we?" Jinto changed the topic. "Can't you at least thank me for that."

"My rational self is thanking you for saving us. But... my emotions are telling me to tear you apart!"

"Then I'm glad that you're a rational person."

"I did not expect you to know, but us Abrials are infamous for being bad at controlling our emotions, especially our anger."

"Your family is quite famous even without that. Besides, it's not a good thing to be caught up in your family's stereotype."

"Quiet, Jinto! I like myself that way!"

"Narcissism... you've got problems, you should get some help."

"Watch out, my emotions may over power my rationality."

"Speaking of..." Jinto changed the topic. "What did they put up a check point for? It didn't seem like they were looking for us."

"They are trying to capture members of the subject government."

"How do you know?" Jinto asked, surprised.

"They said so."

"Oh, you understand their language. I totally forgot."

"Yes. I believe they said 'we're looking for important members of their slave government. We have no business with these kids. They haven't died their hair blue either so let them go already. There's a line.'"

"Slave government?"

"They probably mean the subject government."

"But subjects aren't slaves."

"I know that, you know that. The subjects on this planet probably know that. But, they do not know that."

"What a biased view of the world they have."

"The other one seemed to wish to care for your mental health."

"Care for my mental health?" Jinto was confused.

"He wanted to be relieved of duty to listen to your problems. The older one talked him out of it."

Jinto shivered. "That was a close one."

"I actually wanted to see you confess your problems of youth to him." Lafiel said venomously, "I would have been glad to pretend to be a mannequin all day long for that."

It seemed like Jinto was too hasty in his presumption that the Princess was no longer mad.

"But, aren't they soldiers? Why are they so meddlesome?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Lafiel replied coldly.

The hover car passed through the forest, and reached an open area.

"Are we in town?" asked Lafiel.

There was a grassy field to their left, but there was an endless wall to their right. They could see rows upon rows of towers stretching dozens of stories into the air just beyond that wall.

"Probably not. That's town up there." Jinto pointed before them. There were tree-like buildings in front of them, just like at Lume Biga.

"Then, what are those?" Lafiel pointed at the rows of towers, "they don't look natural."

"I wonder what they are, maybe the city stretches all the way here."

He doubted that people lived in those towers. There were no windows, and all of the towers were shaped exactly the same. They were painted in a kaleidoscope of colors though, in the style of Krasbyul. A normal person would probably lose his or her mind after their first night of living in a place like this.

"Maybe it's some kind of a memorial" Jinto guessed.

"For what?"

"I don't know." He had no idea what. What would they need to build a memorial for? The planet's history was short, and building those towers must have been quite expensive. "But it doesn't concern us."

"You can be quite a boring person can't you?" Lafiel said in a demeaning manner.

"Curiosity killed the cat. It's a maxim we have on my homeworld." Jinto got off the topic. There were plenty of other things that they had to think about.

The city began where the 'monument' ended. The star Sfagnoff was still high in the sky, but it was already the middle of the night in local time. There were very few people in town, and the enemy soldiers stood out very much.

Jinto switched the car to manual control, and parked it at the first empty spot he saw.

"Listen, Lafiel. Don't talk to people in town either." He checked to see if people were around, and whispered to her. "Leave the talking up to me."

"I know. You must really think me to be stupid."

"I'm just making sure."

"Shall I pretend to be a mannequin again?" Lafiel teased. "Perhaps you should carry me around."

"How could I dare to touch the body of Her Highness the Princess." Jinto got off the car, and urged Lafiel to do the same. He checked to make sure that they did not forget anything. The car had served them loyally up to now, but it was time for good bye.

"If we're leaving the car here, so maybe we should hide out in another city." There was no one around, but Jinto whispered just in case.

"How?" Lafiel whispered back.

"There should be some sort of mass inter-city transportation here. Though I have no idea what they use."

"That is probably not wise."

"Why?"

"There may be another check point. I have no intentions of pretending to be a mannequin again."

"That again? But you're right."

He had to admit that Lafiel was right. Unless that soldier was an exception, the enemy army seemed to enjoy meddling in the affairs of others. Even though Lafiel did have her hair dyed black, they could tell that Lafiel was an Abh easily once she took the hat off. The wisest thing to do would be to silently hide in the city, and wait for their situation to improve.

"Well, let's look for a place to stay then." Said Jinto.

## 11. Request for Cooperation

Chief inspector Entryua Rei from the Lume Biga city police criminal investigation division put out a cigarette on the ashtray. Even after it went out, he ground it against the ashtray numerous times to release his anger. Doing so finally calmed him down enough for him to enter the supervisor's room. It was the worst morning ever. Actually every morning has been horrible ever since they came.

*It doesn't matter to us whether the Abh rules the skies or if the United Mankind rules the skies.* That is what Entryua, along with most of the residents of Krasbyul believed... at least until the United Mankind came. At that point, they realized that it did matter greatly. Traffic had gotten rather bad because the invaders set up checkpoints without discussion with the local police. This has lead to farm workers, who worked outside the cities; and children, who went to schools outside the cities, to wake up a lot earlier than they usually did. They were starting to experience shortages in the cities as well.

As if that was not bad enough, they were arresting any citizen who dyed their hair blue, and shaving every one of their heads. One of Entryua's subordinates fell victim to them too. It stopped being fashionable to have a baldhead three years ago. *Do they realize how embarrassing it is, especially for women, to be thought of as following something that went out of style three years ago?*

What was worse was the trash that they broadcast. The number of holographic shows they could watch was greatly reduced by it. A new episode of a serial drama he was watching was about to get aired, but he could not watch it now. All he could watch was their propaganda broadcasts. Last night, they spent hours lecturing on what an election was. Entryua knew very well what an election was; he was deeply concerned about the election for the police supervisors.

To make things worse, the citizens were all voicing their dissatisfaction to the police instead of to the United Mankind army. Probably mainly because no one knew where the invading force's headquarters were. What a wonderful service they've done for us.

One may think that Lume Biga was a small city, looking at the small forest of buildings, but the city territory was large. The city actually spread 3000 uethdagh from the center of the city. Most of it were farms, but there were a few small villages and isolated homes spread about. Roughly eight tenths of their population was spread outside of the city, and they all fell within the domains of the Lume Biga city police.

Ever since they forbid the use of air ships and started their checks, the police had an increasingly difficult time patrolling the city. They even stopped police cars along with all the others, and they were especially careful when examining the police cars. It was nearly impossible to keep an eye on the whole city area now that they were stopped whenever they entered or left the city.

The Lume Biga city police had already arrived late at four crime scenes, thanks to the United Mankind army stopping the police cars they sent. Any crime where the criminal is not apprehended at the crime scene becomes jurisdiction of the criminal investigation division. *All they do is add to our workload, I'm sure our apprehension record is going to down this year. But at least that'll bring the police supervisor's rating down too.*

He began mumbling his dissatisfaction towards the police system in general. It was not part of the criminal investigation department's job to deal with dissatisfaction among the city's citizens, but Entryua did have friends and those friends were always voicing their dissatisfactions to Entryua.

*And now, this.* Police supervisor Aizan called for Entryua first thing in the morning. *We both hate each other, so why is he calling me? He should at least notify me three days in advance so that I can come up with insults.*

"Entryua's here!" He shouted before the door to the supervisor's office. Aizan hated it when people shouted unnecessarily. The door opened, and Entryua strode into the room.

"Hello, Entryua!" Aizan greeted him with a broad smile, almost purring the words out of his throat. The only times when Aizan ever wanted to meet Entryua, were when something bad was about to happen. Judging from his good mood, Entryua guessed that something really terrible was about to happen.

There was someone else in the supervisor's office. He was a young man, who looked pleasant enough. There would have been no reason for Entryua to despise him... if not for the uniform he wore that Entryua had grown to hate in the past few days.

"This is chief inspector Entryua, the pride and joy of our criminal investigation division." Aizan introduced. "Entryua, this is Captain Kite of the United Mankind Peace Keeping Force."

"My pleasure, chief inspector." Kite stuck his hand out. Entryua just stared at that hand suspiciously, not knowing what it meant.

"Oh, excuse me." Kite smiled broadly, and placed his hands together before his chest. "I forgot that this is how you greet each others here."

Looking at Kite do so with a broad smile made Entryua feel an urge to pat Kite on the head and say

“Good boy”. But he held the urge back and instead returned the salute to Kite.

“Nice to meet you, Captain.” Entryua greeted him dismissingly, and said to Aizan. “And what is it that you want?”

He had a rough idea of what Aizan wanted without either of them saying anything. They probably wished to have the criminal investigation division do some menial chore for the Peacekeeping force.

A proud supervisor would have dismissed such a diminutive request immediately. But Entryua was not stupid enough to expect that of Aizan. After all the invading army had arrested the important government representatives. Though Aizan was a mere police supervisor in a small city, if he were to displease them, they may suddenly remember the fact that there were plenty of empty prison cells left.

Of course Entryua would not have minded at all if that were to happen. It would be all the better for Entryua if that prison cell was just large enough for someone to stand in, and dark, and wet, and unsanitary.

“Please, sit down Entryua. You too Captain.” Aizan motioned towards the couch he had for guests. Entryua and the Captain sat down on the circular couch. Since the legs of the couch were really low, their knees were practically at eye level.

“Captain, would you like some tea?” said Aizan.

“Yes please, that would be great.” Kite replied happily.

Aizan asked for three cups of tea without asking Entryua if he liked it or not. Three teacups immediately appeared from the circular table that the couch surrounded. Entryua was not thirsty, so he simply watched the other sip at their teas.

“Could you possibly get to business already?” Entryua grew impatient. “I am rather busy.”

“Don’t be so impatient, Entryua.”

“I agree with the chief inspector.” Kite unexpectedly took Entryua’s side. “This matter is an emergency.”

“I see, you’re right.” Aizan quickly agreed. “It seems like the Captain is going to help us out.”

“Huh?” It was a little different from what he expected. “The invaders are going to help us out?”

“We are not invaders, we are liberators.” Kite corrected.

“Is there a problem with that translator? Or perhaps I’m mistaken, but I swear that the word ‘liberate’ had different connotations.”

“We came here to liberate you from the detested artificial humans called the Abh, and to teach you about democracy.” Kite said proudly.

“I know perfectly well about democracy. Even supervisor Aizan here was elected to his status through democracy.” Of course he wished to strangle democracy and have a word or two with it concerning that matter.

“You know about slave democracy. It is an empty shell of what true democracy is. Your leader thought the reign of the Abh to be a given. A truly democratic leader would have stood up against the tyranny of the Abh.”

“Chairman Kindy.” Entryua shook his head sadly. “I’ve always been a member of the Democratic Party, but he was a good man for the Freedom Party.”

“Democratic Party! Freedom Party! It is an insult to democracy that such names exist on a slave world of the Abhs.”

“But that’s no reason to put him in jail.”

“It’s not jail, it’s a school on democracy.”

“What’s that? An euphemism for prisoner of war camp?”

“It’s an educational facility just like the name suggests.”

“Oh?” Entryua raised an eyebrow. “Then why is it that he’s in there, despite the fact that no one turned in an application for him?”

“Entryua, don’t be so contentious.” Aizan chimed in nervously.

*Coward* – Entryua shouted in his mind. You’re scared of that school on democracy even though some foreigners are trying to manipulate the police?

“No, it’s okay.” Kite calmly shrugged it off, “I expected the people here to have such misunderstandings. It’s our duty to correct them.”

“You’re so temperate despite your youth!” Aizan kissed up.

Entryua decided that Kite was a. In Entryua’s opinion, there were two types of good people: obtrusive ones and courteous ones. The former are thanked for their good deeds, but the latter’s deeds satisfy no one but himself.

An obtrusive do-gooder likes to point out flaws in the lives of people who have lived without problems for a long time. Those who had their flaw pointed out are bewildered since they did not realize that they had a problem to begin with. The obtrusive do-gooder then proceeds to ‘fix’ the problem. Usually the people who were ‘helped out’ end up worse off than they began.

"Wasn't this matter an emergency?" said Entryua. "What do you mean by helping us? Are you going to work under me, Captain?"

"How rude of you!" Aizan scolded.

"I don't blame the chief inspector for being so untrusting. Let me tell you everything from the beginning."

"How wonderful." Entryua said sarcastically.

"We are going to help you in a certain case. Yesterday, one of the citizens of this town was assaulted, and had their car stolen. We are very interested in this case."

*What stupid stuff they're interested in* – Entryua thought. *There has to be something behind it.*

"What's the case number?" Entryua asked.

"04-337-8404." Aizan answered. Entryua connected his communicator with the police net. He looked up the case number, and displayed information on it.

"So they're the victims." He knew who the victims were. He skimmed through the testimony and began laughing. "They stopped to help out a couple on the side of the road and was suddenly attacked!?"

"What's so funny?" Kite asked curiously.

"These three are well known trouble makers. They've been giving us work to do since they were kids. Can I give you some advice? If you guys want to be popular, you'd give the three of them a public execution. They're still underage, so the law forbids us from doing anything to them. They stopped to help out a couple? They probably stopped to harass the girl, and got what was coming to them. If this really is the truth, it's bigger news than your invasion of Krasbyul."

"Liberation of Krasbyul." Kite corrected him, completely serious.

Entryua ignored him. "And, why are you interested in this case?"

"Read it carefully. It says that the girl spoke Barone, and was as beautiful as an Abh."

"Ahh, I see. But, you can't count on their story. They received quite a cultured education, you see. I doubt they can tell the difference between a bird singing and Barone. Besides, there are only two types of women to them: 'total babes' and 'ooglies'. And it seems like two out of every three women are 'total babes'. I wouldn't go off deciding that they were an Abh couple based on their statements."

"The man was not. He spoke the local dialect, and his looks were quite average. He was probably a citizen servant of the Abh woman."

"Why would an Abh be on this planet?" Entryua did not buy the story. "That's the last thing that they would ever do. I've had this theory that they can't relax if there's a giant ball of dirt on their shoes."

"This is just a theory, but we discovered an Imperial landing pod near the scene of the crime. Our army's high command believes that there is a connection between this case and the landing pod."

"Can't you get straight to the point? In other words you think that this couple was on that landing pod?"

"I am trying to say that there is a high chance of that. As you say, this woman may not be Abh. But it is worth looking into. Please allow me to assist you in your investigation. In exchange for our cooperation, we would like you to turn the criminals over to us."

"Wait. This is car jack. It's quite a serious crime. You want us to turn the people who did it over to you?"

"We've already come to an agreement concerning that, you don't have the right to say anything about it."

"As you wish, supervisor." Entryua leaned back on his chair.

"Then everything is settled." Kite smiled.

"You heard, I don't have the right." He looked at whom this case was assigned to. "This case is assigned to inspector Parknin's team. I'll introduce you to him."

He did not like the idea. Parknin's team was still after a serial murderer from three years ago, and three other cases. But, their time would be absorbed in this stupid case for the next few days to come.

"No." It seemed like Aizan did not like the idea either. "You're going to lead the investigation, Entryua."

"Me?" He expected as much, but he feigned surprise.

"Yes, you. Please start the investigation with Captain Kite here. Of course, you can recruit whomever you want to the case. We're going to catch whoever did this even if we have to use the entire Lume Biga city police force."

"Wait a second supervisor. That's going to get in the way of all my other cases. You don't know what it's like on the field. I have my own job to take care of."

"It's common for the chief inspector to take charge of a case."

"If it's a major case, yeah."

"And this isn't a major case? The invading... excuse me liberating army is asking us for our help on



it.”

This was the reason that Entryua, and most other police officers, hated Aizan. He did not place any value at all in the partiality of the police. He would use the police as a political tool without a second's hesitation throwing the entire department into chaos. He decided how important a case was, not by the actual crime, but by how much publicity it would get.

They would not complain about it if Aizan actually gave them enough resources to deal with them. But instead he cut the budget down to bare bones to try to please the committee, and starved the department down to bare bones. He placed unreasonable demands on the department on top of that. But this very trait of his has made him very popular in the elections, and he's had the role of supervisor for a long time.

“There's still one thing I don't get. All you guys want is the Abh right?” Entryua asked Kite.

“And the Imperial citizen too. He should be despised for willingly lending a hand to the slave masters despite the fact that he was born free.”

“An Abh and a citizen. Either way, you have plenty of soldiers, why do you need to ask a rural police force like us for help?”

“Entryua, the Captain is helping us.”

“Let's stop it with that stupid lie, supervisor. Captain, how many subordinates do you have?”

“I am... an officer who has been given permission to work independently.” Kite said proudly.

“In other words, none.” Entryua shrugged and turned to look at Aizan. Isn't it quite obvious now, supervisor? I'm not an idiot; you can't trick me that easily.

“This is a great opportunity for all of you, chief inspector.” Kite started, passionately. “Normally we would ask for the help of the local police in the apprehension of those involved in aiding the slave government. But in this case, they can't be tried by the laws of Krasbyul, and you probably knew them personally. So we decided not to ask for help for your sake. In this case, the people we're trying to apprehend are criminals...”

“Yeah, it is our job to catch them.” Entryua cut him off. “But how is that a great opportunity for us?”

“It is an opportunity for you to aid a truly democratic government.” Kite suddenly began talking in a secretive tone. “Keep this in here, but some of the people in high command are thinking about getting rid of the entire criminal justice system here. After all you were the club of oppression in the hands of the slave government. But if you were to help us out here, there is a chance that you can be reinstituted as a part of the new diplomatic government.”

“What a great story. Are you sure you're not the only one that thinks so?”

“Not at all! There are many of us who believe that we should cooperate with the existing government institutions. The high commanders feel the same way. With your cooperation we can convince the rest of the people to think the same way.”

“Now do you see, Entryua?” Aizan said smugly. “We are going to show them the usefulness of our police department through our cooperation with them.”

What you want to show them is your own usefulness – Entryua ground his teeth, irritated.

“Why don't you take charge of it, supervisor?” Entryua suggested it, but he regretted doing so as soon as he saw that Aizan was seriously considering it. He would feel sorry for whoever ended up working for Aizan.

“Fine, I'll do it.” Entryua lit up a cigarette, trying to control his annoyance.

“What is that?” asked Kite.

“You don't know what a cigarette is?” Entryua asked, displeased.

“Oh, so that's what a cigarette is. It's legal here?”

“Of course. I'm an agent of the law, and we're in the police department.”

“It was outlawed 200 years ago in our worlds.”

“Really. There are people who hate tobacco everywhere. But this one is totally harmless. It doesn't smell at all, it's like a medicine. It soothes the nerves.”

“It's the medicinal properties that's the problem” Kite said innocently. “It is illogical to try to control your nerves with drugs. The fact that you had no choice but to legalize something illogical shows exactly how oppressive your slave government was. It is the responsibility of our liberation army to eradicate the reason such medicines are popular and the medicines themselves.”

“Oh, really.” Entryua took a deep puff of the cigarette – Captain Kite, did you realize that you just made a highly reactionary slave government supporter just now.



## 12. History of the Abh

“Good morning,” Jinto said as he watched the sun set over the city of Gzonu.

“It’s already noon for me.” Lafiel sat on the couch with her legs crossed, staring blankly at the holovision.

“Do you understand their language already?” Jinto asked, turning around to look at her.

“A little,” Lafiel answered.

“You have been giving misinformation concerning it. This is completely unacceptable, you have a right to know...” The holovision was shaped like a thin box. The upper body of a woman protruded from the box like a statue.

“Another propaganda show by the invading army? Is it really that interesting?”

“It is not. But there is nothing else to do.”

Yeah – Jinto agreed. All we can really do here is talk to each other or watch the holovision. The holos on Krasbyul were boring. If this were Delktu there would be more shows than he could ever watch, and he could watch any of them whenever he wanted. But there was no choice here.

Of course that was not because Krasbyul was culturally deficient. Until just recently, Krasbyul had just as many programs airing as Delktu did. Everything changed when the United Mankind invaded. The status quo was the exception; they could do nothing about it.

“Have you eaten?” Jinto asked

“Not yet.”

“Then I suppose I’ll make my breakfast and your lunch.” Jinto yawned. “What do you want to eat?”

“I am certain that I will dislike it no matter what it is.” Lafiel answered. She did not say so because she was in a bad mood. She said so because it was the truth.

“Then leave it up to me.” Jinto walked to the automatic cooker in the corner of the room. He then took a can out of the bag under it. “Beef and Red Bean Steamed in the Borkos fashion: For two” one of the cans read. He had no idea exactly what about it was done in the Borkos fashion. Actually he did not even know what was the Borkos fashion. But the picture on the can looked appetizing. He inserted the can into the automatic cooker. He set the taste to “medium” and put a bowl into the machine. The machine began cooking the food.

It was their third day in Hotel Limzel. They looked for a place to stay as soon as they ditched the car. They found this hotel immediately, so they paid for ten days and stayed there. There was a bedroom and a living room and a bathroom. There was no kitchen, but there was an automatic cooker in a corner of the room, so they could do some basic cooking. There was a couch in the living room, and a holovision too.

As soon as they moved in, Jinto went and bought changes of clothes and enough food to last them for several days. Neither of them have left the room ever since. It would not be wise for either of them to walk around outside.

*I wonder what they think of us.* – Jinto was a little worried. The names he had written down were Sai Jinto and Sai Lina. If asked, he intended to say that they were brother and sister. But the receptionist did not ask anything. She may have thought that they were married, if underage marriage was common on Krasbyul.

But whether they were brother and sister, or husband and wife, it was peculiar to not leave the room in three whole days. If this were Delktu, there would be rumors going around about them. The people of Delktu were very interested in the affairs of others. If there was anything peculiar about someone, they immediately tried to find out why it was so.

*What about the people of Krasbyul? Was that receptionist dying from curiosity as to who they were? Or was he only interested to the degree that he may consider looking into them if they decided to stay in their room past the original ten days?*

*If he is curious, I hope he comes here directly to ask us what’s going on. I don’t think we’ll be able to make up something good enough to put his curiosity at ease, but we can probably keep it from escalating.*

*The worst thing that could happen would be if the receptionist told someone else about us. A couple locked themselves in the room for three full days. What are they doing? Was it not the perfect mystery for her to kill time with?*

*As three days turn to four, and four turn to five, the mystery grows deeper, and it’ll attract the attention of even more people... until they become infamous in the area without realizing it. To make things worse, the receptionist seemed like he loved spreading rumors about other people.*

Jinto sighed. *Maybe I should go out once in awhile.* Even mentally, the claustrophobia was starting to get to him.

The two of them were sleeping in shifts. There was the physical reason that there was only one bed, and they also needed to keep watch. But the greatest, and hidden reason was that they would suffocate each other if they were to spend the whole day together.

They were hardly a couple that was deeply in love with each other. They would begin to grow irritated if they spent all day together. Lafiel actually did seem to be quite irritated.

A third of their day was spent sleeping, they enjoyed their isolation in another third, and they spent the final third of the day together. Though they did have a schedule set up, there was a good chance of the two of them having a serious fight over something trivial, if things kept up the way it was going. To make things worse, they were both armed. It would not be funny at all if an Earl and a Princess were to kill each other under this thick atmosphere.

The automatic cooker beeped.

He removed the Borkos style broiled beef, and put another dish into the cooker. He reset the taste to be lighter and restarted the cooker. It was tedious. He could make both dishes at once if he did not have to reset the taste on it. He did so the first time he used the automatic cooker. Jinto enjoyed a strong tasting meal for the first time in weeks, but Lafiel only ate one bite of it because it was too salty for her. Ever since then he started making her dishes lighter in taste, but even the lightest setting was too salty for the Princess.

The automatic cooker beeped again.

Jinto placed the two dishes on a tray and prepared two cups of iced tea and brought it over. Their dining table was also the holovision. Perhaps the people of Krasbyul found it intolerable to watch the holo while eating.

"I'm setting it down." Jinto said to Lafiel who was watching the holo.

The holo had changed. The woman had become almost unnoticeably small, and there was an old fashioned orbital facility above her.

"What is this?" Jinto put the tray down as he asked. The holo flickered and became blurry because of the tray, but the audio still came through loud and clear.

"...their goal was in surveying space. They believed that an adaptable machine would be better for the job than real machines. Given the level of technology at the time, this was a good decision..."

"It is our creation."

"The Abhs?"

"Yes."

"... that is what the Abh are!" Dramatic music played in the background as the woman made the climactic declaration. "Therefore the Abh are not human, they are merely biological machines..."

"That's horrible." Jinto reached towards the holovision's switch. "I'm turning it off. Let's eat."

"Yes."

"... all free citizens, we need to put the Abh back in their rightful place. Back to the place of organic machines that should be serving humans! That is the best place that they can..." The audio cut off with the holo.

Jinto poured the iced tea into the two cups, and took the dishes off the tray. Lafiel took her cup and dish and began eating.

"About the broadcast earlier." Said Lafiel during the meal.

"Those lies she was spreading?"

"They are not lies."

"Huh?"

"It is true that our ancestors were created as organic machines. Were you not aware of that?"

Jinto blinked. He did not know that.

The history of the Abh before the founding of the Empire was shrouded in a mythic veil. The reason for it was well known. There was an accident on the city-ship Abrial roughly 120 years before the founding of the Empire and the old navigational logs – the history of the Abh – was lost. There is a clear historic record of the Abh since then though.

Of course the chances that the Abh erased their own history is slim. But because the Abh speak of themselves very infrequently, they have avoided making that clear or perhaps they do not feel the need to make it clear, to the subject worlds. So the people on the various worlds of the Abh Empire gave their imaginations free reign as to what the past of the Abh was like.

*Actually I remember hearing something similar to that back on Delktu. But I dismissed that story as being made up when I heard it.*

"No, I wasn't." Jinto answered honestly.

"It is not that we are hiding the truth, but it is hardly a story we can be proud of, so we dislike speaking of it. There are no written records of it either, it is simply passed down from parent to child."

"Looks like my parent didn't know about it."

"That can not be. His Grace the Earl of Hyde must have been at the ennoblement ceremony. It is a story that all Abh know."

"Oh... but he didn't tell me about it." He probably thought it didn't matter.

“I see. Then I will tell you...”

Lafiel began telling the story.

There was once a volcanic chain of islands on Earth. The residents of that island chain were open to the influence of various other cultures because of their geographic location. They absorbed the good parts of other culture into their own, and through it established a completely unique culture.

However, the development of transportation and the formation of a global economy forced itself onto this island chain. At first the residents of the island chain accepted it willingly, and thrived within it. But eventually all of the world’s cultures began to merge into one, and the culture of this island chain became threatened. Some of the residents of the island chain found the idea of their culture disappearing to be intolerable.

These residents decided to leave Earth to preserve their culture. Orbital cities were already in use, so they sought out a new home in the asteroid belt. Less than one out of a thousand residents of the island chain left Earth, but it was more than enough to preserve their culture.

They believed that the culture of the island chain at the time was ‘infected by foreign cultures’ so they made an effort to restore their past culture. Their language was reestablished with the most basic words. A great number of words were redefined, or had their meaning expanded, to make room in the language for the latest technologies.

When a closed gate was discovered, and mankind’s door was opened to far away worlds, they considered the possibility of going to another system. Their population had grown rapidly, and they now had a wish to live on a planet, even if it was not in the solar system.

But their isolationist attitude became a barrier to them. Mankind’s united space colonization projects went through without a place for them. So they began working on their own extra-solar colonization project. Unfortunately they did not have a closed gate that would let them travel at relativistic speeds; all they had were nuclear fusion engines.

In order to accomplish their goal with low velocity spaceships, and to make it easier for the crew to operate in space, they touched upon the forbidden technology of genetic engineering. They started work on specially engineering a crew to accomplish their goals.

Talented members of their community were gathered, and thirty life forms were created from their genetic material. These life forms were not considered to be human, so they genetically engineered them to have blue hair, a color of hair that human kind cannot possibly have, to distinguish them.

“This hair...” Lafiel pointed at her own hair, and frowned when she realized that it was no longer blue. “Anyways, blue hair was the label for slaves.”

“I don’t understand.” Jinto shook his head. “Why do you want blue hair then?”

“In order to hold onto our heritage and remind ourselves of our original sin.”

“Original sin?”

“Yes, the original sin shared by all Abh.”

One of the life forms was lost during training, but the other ancestors of the Abh were placed on a low velocity space ship just as planned. The ship would reach a painfully slow speed through a short period of rapid acceleration, and then crawl towards their destination. If they could not find a source of hydrogen at the destination, they would not even be able to come back on that ship. Any normal person would have refused to board it. But the ancestral Abh were not considered human, had no choice but to do so.

During their trip, they discovered a closed gate. They spent all of the fuel they had for deceleration, and proceeded to capture the closed gate. It was a risky gamble, but they won out in the end. Once they succeeded in capturing the closed gate, the ancestral Abh redesigned their ship to run on Yuanon propulsion, with the limited resources that they had. They now had wings that they could fly through space with.

But when they veered off the planned flight path, they had no choice left but to break communications with the mother city. They wished to become an independent race, and they declared their independence all alone in space, with no other witnesses than themselves.

“That’s your original sin? How is betraying mother city a crime?”

“No. We would not feel guilt over something like that. There is more to the story.”

The ancestral Abh stopped their ship in a nearby star system. Once they had plenty of resources at hand, they expanded their ship. Their population had grown, so they needed to expand their ship. The ship they had been on before was simply a survey ship, but this new ship had all the functionalities of a city-ship.

They did not hate the mother city. The mission that they were given by the mother city was a selfish and cold blooded one. But it was also the mother city that gave the Abh the ability to feel space; the mother city gave the Abh the spatial sense. However, the Abh also felt fear. They feared that the mother city would send ships to hunt them down. Thinking back on it rationally, it was an unnecessary fear. The mother city did not have the capability to send ships to hunt them down.

But to the ancestral Abh, the mother city was a god like existence. They seemed capable of anything. The ancestral Abh extracted information from the computer banks, and created weapons. They drafted all of their adults into an army, and began training them. To segue, the people who lead the training were the navigators at the time: they were Lafiel's ancestors.

There were many jobs to be done on the city ship at the time, and all of them were difficult jobs. Their population was low. They could not establish schools for each of the jobs needed. Therefore apprenticeship was used to train people for jobs. The apprenticeship system became a hereditary system. All jobs, not just the navigator's jobs, became passed down hereditarily. Each of these bloodlines then became the Empire's old noble families.

Once they were prepared, the ancestral Abh decided to make the first move. In other words, they decided to attack the mother city.

"That's a really hasty decision." Said Jinto.

"I felt the same way, so I asked my father about it."

"And?"

"My father said that our ancestors were constantly plagued by an unbearable fear, and they feared that they would always be scared. They had no other goal other than to end their period of fear as quickly as possible."

"I guess I can understand that..."

"Honestly, I do not completely understand it either. Father cannot possibly understand either. Only those who lived through that period can truly understand how it felt. Anyways, our ancestors returned to the solar system..."

It ended quickly.

They only found out later, but because the ancestral Abh did not return immediately, and the construction of numerous other Yuanon propulsion ships, the mother city had already sent out numerous colonization ships. So by the time the Abh returned, they were already greatly weakened.

If that fact were known, it would have become clear to the ancestral Abh that the mother city had neither the will nor the ability to send out hunt squads. Then the ancestral Abh would probably not have attacked. But instead the mother city tried to negotiate with them. The ship and knowledge that the ancestral Abh had were quite remarkable, so the mother city tried to enslave the ancestral Abh again.

The ancestral Abh terminated negotiation very quickly, and made an all out assault on the mother city. Though their population was far smaller, all ancestral Abh were soldiers, and they had plenty of weapons. On the other hand, war was already a thing of the past for the mother city. The giant mother city had barely any defensive capability. They had no way of putting up resistance against a city ship that had transformed into a fortress.

There were other nations within the solar system, but none of them got involved. Even if they wished to step in, the attack was carried out swiftly, and there was a great distance in-between the mother city and other nations. They would have been unable to step in. Even if they had, the ancestral Abh had more military might than the entire solar system.

The more than million people who lived in the mother city were all swallowed in the flames of war. Some were thrown into the vacuum, some burned within the fires that swallowed the city.

"Our ancestors accomplished their only objective. But they realized exactly how much they loved the mother city when they saw its wreckage burning in space."

"Loved it?"

"Yes. It was their homeland, and they loved the culture of the mother city. Its culture was the only reason for the existence of the mother city. But now the mother city was gone. They could not count on the immigrants who left the mother city either. So the responsibility of keeping the culture alive fell upon our ancestors. They found a new objective, to preserve the culture and language of the mother city."

"Is that still the Abh's goal?"

"Yes. That was when our ancestors started calling themselves Abh. Until then, they referred to each other only as 'comrade'. In ancient Barone, in other words the language of the mother city, Abh means people of space or the ocean. There was no better term to call ourselves during the wandering time. Of course, the pronunciation of the word has changed quite a bit."

"Isn't your mission to preserve their culture? Isn't it bad then that the pronunciation's changed?"

"Not at all. All cultures are like that. Change is part of our culture. I also hear that the culture that the mother city restored was just a hodgepodge of cultures from different ages, and not actually the true culture. Then there is no point in being obsessed with the past. Developing the culture is part of preserving it. We just have to prevent ourselves from being influenced by other cultures."

"I guess you're right."

"At least, that is how we think of it."

"But how does our enemy know that?"

"It is not strange. It becomes quite clear if you look at records left in the solar system. There are many worlds within the Empire that has records of the truth as well. Your ancestors must have left the solar system before this happened."

"Probably. I'm sure I would have learned about the destruction of an entire space colony in history."

"The Abh destroyed the homeland that they loved. This is our race's original sin. To protect the culture we inherited from the mother city. That is our race's reason for existence. My father told me that being Abh is to carry both the burden and duty of our race. I agree with him." Lafiel then remained silent for a moment. "Jinto, do you no longer wish to become Abh?"

"What are you talking about?" Jinto made a smile. "I'm already an Abh aren't I? That's what you taught me."

"You are right." Lafiel nodded.

Just as Jinto was about to finish the completely chilled Borkos style stew...

"Excuse me." He heard the voice of a woman outside the door.

"No!" Jinto shouted out of reflex. But the door was already opening by then.

"Excuse me." A woman carrying new sheets in both hands came in. Her skin was tanned brown, and her hair was black. She had a well-built face that looked to be in its thirties.

"W-Who are you!?" He could tell that his voice was shaking. He was scared to death of why she had a glint in her eye.

"Oh, can you not tell from the way I'm dressed? I'm from house keeping."

"House keeping..." Jinto was confused. He did not know that this hotel had house keeping.

"Yes. I have come to change your sheets."

Jinto relaxed when he saw that Lafiel had hidden her spatial sensory organ with her bangs.

"But..." said Jinto. "You've never come to change our sheets before. Why now?"

"Oh, it is but part of our normal service." Jinto pointed at a slot in the wall. If they tossed laundry in there, it was washed and delivered to their door within the hour.

"I'm sorry, I believe there was some miscommunication. May I come in?"

"Umm, no. I'll take it in." Jinto tried to hide his panic as best he can. The wrist computer and the laser pistols were both in the bedroom. The pistols were hidden under the pillows, and if they were bound to find it if they changed the sheets.

"Well, customer I can't..."

"It's okay." Jinto said forcefully, he then ran into the bedroom and pulled the sheets off. He returned to the living room holding it, and he gave it to the housekeeper.

"Oh, thank you very much." The housekeeper was still holding onto the new sheets. "Well at least let me put these on."

"No, there's no need to. We'll do it ourselves." Jinto refused to let her do it.

"Oh, really." The housekeeper put the sheets down on the couch and tilted her head. "Do you have any laundry that needs to be washed?"

Jinto was about to shake his head, but he realized that it was probably not too wise to seem desperate to get her out. He ran to the bathroom and picked up the towel from there and gave it to her.

"Thank you." The woman put the old sheets and laundry into the chute.

"Umm..." Jinto asked. "Are you going to come change our sheets every day?"

The housekeeper smiled, "if you wish for me to."

"Then, umm, please don't. If you bring the new sheets, we'll change it ourselves."

"Oh, really. Okay."

"And can we lock the door from the inside?"

"Of course."

"We had it locked just now, but you came in..."

"I am part of the staff."

"Umm... is there a lock that the staff can't open?"

"Sir, if there were we would not be able to care for your safety." She said in a scolding tone.

"Oh... You're right." The housekeeper had a good point. The hotel would be troubled if their customers locked themselves in. "But in the future, please don't come in until we say that it's okay to."

"I always make sure to do so." The housekeeper said sincerely.

"But..." Jinto tried to say something back, but he decided not to. Nothing could be gained from yelling at her for coming in just now despite his objections. The housekeeper refused to leave the room for some reason. She stood there smiling meaningfully as if waiting for something.

"Is there anything else?" Jinto was confused.

The housekeeper sighed deeply. "Sir, it really is rude of me to ask you this, but do you know what the word 'sif' means?"

He did not. Jinto panicked. What exactly was this woman asking for? What did she want?

"It is also referred to as 'gratuity'." She continued.

"Oh, I see!" Jinto shouted, ecstatic that he had finally realized what she was asking for. "I understand. Please wait for a second."

Jinto took a coin out of the bag he used as a wallet and gave it to the housekeeper. The housekeeper looked at the coin dejectedly. Jinto added another coin to it. She finally started smiling again.

"It really is not my place, Sir. But may I say one thing?"

"Yes, of course."

The housekeeper picked up a small bowl next to the laundry chute. Jinto had no idea what that bowl was for.

"It would be wonderful if you could put the sif in this bowl and leave it outside your door while you're waiting for your laundry."

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry it just slipped my mind." Jinto explained.

"Please make sure to do so." The housekeeper reiterated.

"Yes of course." Jinto nodded his head greatly. "I'll leave some extra in there, enough for three days."

"I'm glad you understand, sir." The housekeeper bowed. "Excuse me now, I will be leaving."

Jinto sighed in relief as soon as she left.

"What was that just now?" Lafiel asked.

"She came to complain in a roundabout way because we didn't pay her."

"We did pay them their money."

"We paid the hotel. But we missed someone else that we needed to pay."

"I have a hard time understanding you at times."

"Really? Anyways I completely understand why the housekeeper came in on the third day so forcefully. They will leave us alone so long as we follow the rules." Jinto said, and then meekly added on. "... or at least I hope so."

### 13. Hover Car Discovered

"Are you sure?" Chief inspector Entryua asked.

"I am fairly certain." The chief of forensics replied. "The license plate number matches, and we found bodily fluids from the three victims inside the car."

"Blood?"

"No, semen."

"Geez." Entryua groaned. "I can't believe you actually checked something like that."

"It's not like we enjoy doing it." The chief of forensics grimaced.

"I can't believe someone could do something like that in such a small space." Entryua pointed at the seat in the hover car.

"Really."

"And all three of them! Wait. Was it a voluntary, umm..., release of bodily fluids?"

"I can't tell that." The chief of forensics said. "But... I have a feeling that chances of that are slim."

Entryua felt the same way. "Maybe we should investigate whether the victims are guilty of a crime or not."

"More importantly." Captain Kite, who was listening to Entryua talk to the forensics officer the entire time, grew impatient. "Have you found any signs that an Abh was in a car?"

"Not yet. We have found more than fifty hairs, and we were just about to run a genetic analysis..."

"Then please do so, immediately."

The chief of forensics looked at Entryua for approval. He finally turned around and left when Entryua made a look telling him to go.

"It's a good thing they weren't too sanitary." Entryua leaned on the car and lit up a cigarette.

The forensics team that came all the way from Lume Biga now poked at the hover car that may have been carjacked by an Abh and her companion. Eventually the forensics team would begin their favorite game of taking it apart and putting it back together. Various forensics cars and patrol cars from the Lume Biga city police surrounded it, and low ranking policemen stood guard.

"We have a lead!" Kite was excited.

"It's not too hard to find a lead when you've been at it for three days." Entryua replied hardly excited.

*To spend three days on something like this! It would have taken less than an hour if the police could patrol without getting interfered. Or if communication between various police department went freely the way it did before.*

Entryua asked Kite to at least give free travel passes to the police, but Kite simply stated that he did not have the right to do so. Entryua had a horrifying thought when that happened. That Kite may not actually be a Captain, but was actually a runaway soldier with no real power. Fortunately that doubt was cast off quickly. They could get past any checkpoint quickly if Kite was in the car with them.

"What do you think we should do now, chief inspector?" Kite asked. "I believe we should break into every room in this city in pursuit of them."

*Hey, young one – Entryua was fed up – think about the resources we have. Break into every room? We'd have to bring the entire Lume Biga city police force here to do that. I don't know about Aizan, but I have no intentions of closing down the police station for a few weeks. I'll just avoid the issue.*

"Well," Entryua pretended to think. "This is Gzonu, so I think we should leave it up to the Gzonu city police. They know the city, and they have more people."

"Hand it over to someone else!?" Kite shook his head as if he would not consider the idea. "I don't understand how you could say that so casually. We're dealing with the hated Abh here. Though you were shouting 'long live Her Majesty the Empress' until just yesterday so I guess it's not surprising..."

"See here. I don't even know what the Emperor's name is."

"That is obviously a violation of your right to knowledge. You see, everyone has a right to know..."

"Please don't explain. I can look up the Emperor's name easily. I'm just not interested."

"The greatest enemy of diplomacy is indifference to politics. You have been oppressed by the Abh and their lackeys the Imperial citizens."

"Don't insult my ancestors." Entryua blew a puff of smoke into Kite's face.

"A-Ancestor..." Kite stuttered in surprise.

"You didn't realize? Entryua is an Abh name. My ancestor five generations ago was a citizen. I hear that he was a crewman in the Star Forces. I don't know the details though. He probably returned to this world because he was tired of living in space."

"O-Oh." Kite's jaw remained open for a while, but he got right back on track. "Then you should hate them all the more."

"I'm having trouble following your logic."

"I mean, you were demoted from citizen to subject, you should be angry..."

"I'm not vengeful enough to be angry about that. Entryua laughed bitterly. "And you've misunderstood something. Citizens are of the same status as subjects. The Empire protects a citizen's rights; a subject government protects a subject's rights. It's just the government that's different. It is confusing for us cops though. I have a friend who's a citizen, but I don't act humbly before him, we treat each other as equals."

"Your friend..." Kite's eyes opened wide.

"Yeah he took care of the gardens in the Sfagnoff Marquis' manor. I'm sure you've thrown him into a prisoner of war camp... excuse me democracy school. I tried to contact him because I was worried, but no one was home."

"Of course. They are worse than the slave masters themselves. I don't know much about your friend, but if he was an Imperial citizen he needs to be educated on democracy..."

"I really don't understand how I can remain so calm." Entryua made a vicious smile towards Kite. It was nowhere near the smile of an Abh but it was a smile that broke countless criminals and their lackeys. "I've always been known for being loyal to my friends."

"About your suggestion earlier..." Kite was a little stirred.

"Which one?"

"The one about handing everything over to the Gzonu city police."

"Oh that."

"It may be a good idea." Kite said, appraising the situation. "You do not seem to enjoy working with me."

"No, it suddenly became very enjoyable." Entryua began fiddling with the stun gun at his waist.

"Just so that you know." Kite made a harsh face. "I don't think it would be wise for you to do anything to me. I have been given the right to arrest whoever I want."

"Hey, you guys." Entryua called his subordinates over.

"What is it, chief inspector?" A few of them that were bored ran over.

"Nothing, just stay there."

"Huh?"

Entryua turned back towards Kite. "Sorry, I didn't hear what you just said. What about your right to arrest whoever you want?"

Kite ground his teeth. "Some of our soldiers are in this town!"

"But they don't seem to be here."

"Do you think..." Kite looked around worriedly.

Of course Entryua had no intentions of actually harming Kite. He did not want to make his subordinates fight the army with nothing but stun guns.

"I'm just kidding." Entryua patted Kite on the shoulder in a friendly manner. "Was it not funny? I expected you to start laughing up a storm."

"Oh, okay, so that's what it was..." Kite smiled nervously. "Jokes are great for deepening a friendship. But I'm having a hard time telling what are jokes here."

"Each planet has a different idea of what a joke is." Entryua suddenly grabbed Kite by his collar and whispered to his ear. "But remember this. You aren't welcome here. I have no intentions of deepening my friendship with you."

"B-but..." Kite's mouth opened and closed silently.

Entryua grinned and let go.

"Let's carry out that suggestion of mine then. I'll tell the people in the Gzonu city police to send someone who doesn't smoke." Entryua picked up the communicator at his waist and called supervisor Aizan. He needed to have the supervisor initiate the transfer of jurisdiction to another department. Once that was done, he could negotiate with them on it.

But Aizan did not wish to let go of his tie to the invading army. He seemed to desperately want to show the invading army how useful he could be. Entryua pointed out that they were stepping over their jurisdiction by operating in Gzonu city, and that it may displease the invading army if they were to fail in apprehension.

Aizan ignored Entryua's warning and ordered him to apprehend the Abh that landed. Entryua expressed his wish to transfer jurisdiction carefully, and then listed off a great list of reasons why the investigation may fail to try to make Aizan worry. Eventually, Aizan broke. Entryua put the phone down with relief.

Entryua smiled towards Kite. "Now we can both be happy."

"That was a very illegal action to take on my homeworld." Kite said stunned, "This may be the last thing you ever do as a police officer."



"No it won't." Entryua said confidently.

Entryua was well known in Lume Biga. There was a reason why he was considered a capable and just police officer. Aizan would be the target of a great deal of complaints if he were to fire Entryua. Aizan should be well aware of that too.

"Chief inspector." The chief of forensics, who had been waiting while Entryua was talking to Aizan, stepped inbetween Kite and Entryua and handed Entryua a hair specimen. "We got it. This hair is from an Abh, probably a female. It's been dyed black."

"The chief inspector was on the communicator." Kite glared. "Why didn't you report to me!?"

"Captain, you're not part of our chain of command." The chief of forensics glared at Kite coldly.

"I am of the same rank as your chief inspector." Kite whined.

"I didn't know that." The chief of inspector wasn't even looking at Kite anymore.

"What does it matter, captain. We got yet another lead." Entryua swung the plastic bag around.

"Yes, but..." Kite said dissatisfied. His eyes showed an anger that he could not voice.

*Maybe we picked on him too much.* Entryua thought to himself just as the communicator rang. Entryua picked it up. It was supervisor Aizan calling him of course. But he reported something completely unexpected.

The negotiation with the Gzonu city police failed. They willingly gave jurisdiction of the case to the Lume Biga city police. Aizan reported that they cannot divert any staff; but that they would share any information they had willingly.

*Their supervisor is a lot smarter than Aizan.* Entryua thought to himself sadly.

"So anyways, Entryua. Don't worry about anything else, just keep at your duty." Aizan said pleased. Entryua cut off the communicator after giving a groan.

"We have to continue with the investigation." He briefly reported the bad news to Kite.

"I see." The Captain was surprised for an instant, but he became expressionless again. "I am thinking of asking for support."

"Not from our city police right?" Entryua showed displeasure. I'm sure the supervisor would pull even the secretary from office duty if Kite requested it.

"No." Kite said sternly. "From my squad. I'll talk to my superior and ask him to send a few soldiers."

He knew exactly what Kite's aim was. He was using their shortage of manpower as an excuse to get a few friendly people around him. Entryua did not blame him for wanting so, especially after threatening him with numbers earlier. Entryua had no intentions of disagreeing. Disagreeing would not prevent Kite from recruiting them.

"I see. We can use all the manpower we can get." Entryua blew it off.

I'll try suggesting splitting off into two groups for the investigation. That way we can both investigate it without killing each other.

"Yes." Kite nodded and picked up the communicator on his wrist. He began talking over the communicator, he sounded serious. Entryua could not tell what he was talking about. But Kite's disappointment showed how it ended.

"I wonder how all of us could end up dissatisfied." Entryua thought of Kite as a comrade for the first time. "Maybe someone's hogging all the happiness somewhere."

"I'm sure that's the case." Kite muttered back. "More importantly, what will we do now?"

"We just have to follow the books what with the numbers we have."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't break into every room to see where they're hiding. We'll start asking around the hotels and moving on from there."

"It sounds like it will be very time consuming."

"Yeah. Let's pray that they're stupid enough to stay at a hotel. I doubt too many people would be traveling at a time like this."

## 14. The Warriors

Jinto heard a sound behind him when he was focusing on the holovision to try to improve his ability to speak the dialect of Krasbyul. When Jinto turned around in surprise, he saw four men rush in. He suddenly stood up.

"Don't even think of resisting, it's useless." The small man that came in first shouted. All of them had a stun gun aimed at Jinto. Jinto would become frozen stiff if he tried to do anything.

"W-Who are you!?" Jinto shouted back.

"We don't look like cops?" The small man looked hurt.

"C-cops..."

*They're finally here...* Jinto's palms were sweating.

The men were all wearing the same uniform. It was yellow mixed in with green, and it did not suggest that they were policemen. But this was Krasbyul, the Imperial world with no fashion sense, even that color combination looked plain.

"There's a girl too right? The Abh girl." The small man asked.

"No." Jinto played dumb. "Are you sure you have the right room?"

*Lafiel's in the bedroom, maybe I can fool them...* Jinto hoped against hope.

"She's asleep right?" The small man saw through him. "Why are you still awake? This is a strange time to be up. Don't you know that it's time to be sleeping? You've completely screwed up our plan."

Do I need to apologize for that? Jinto thought.

"Hey" The small man turned towards one of the others. He was a big man, strongly built with dark skin. "Go check out the bedroom."

The big man nodded and headed towards the door to the bedroom. A bald man, as thin as a bird, followed him.

"Don't!" Jinto dived for the big man, forgetting about the stun guns. The big man swung his arm around once, and Jinto flew off and collapsed on the ground. He tried to get up again but they stuck the end of a stun gun right to his face.

"I admire your courage." The small man said as he placed the stun gun right between Jinto's eyes. "But I won't hesitate to fire if you move again."

"Did you come to arrest us?"

"That's the story."

"That's the story?"

"Shut up. I'll explain later." The small man looked at the big man. "Hey..."

Jinto took advantage of that instant that the small man looked away. He bit down on the small man's arm. Jinto and the small man began struggling on the floor. Jinto refused to let go of the small man's arm. He twisted the small man's wrist.

"Ow!" The small man shouted, dropping the stun gun.

Jinto tried to pick it up, but two men jumped on Jinto before he could get it. It was the thin man who followed the big man and a young man with a short buzz cut, dyed yellow.

"Damn!" Jinto was pushed down on his stomach. The thin man sat on top of Jinto, holding his legs down. The young man twisted Jinto's arms back and sat on top of them.

"Keep him down." The small man picked up the gun, breathing heavily.

"Should we tire him out?" The young man suggested.

"And then what? Am I supposed to carry him? No, we want him to walk on his own feet as much as possible." The small man shook his head.

"But undertaker..."

"You idiot! We're supposed to be cops, call me sergeant."

"Yes, sergeant."

*That's strange. Are they really policemen? If they're not policemen, who are they? I know they're not from the United Mankind.* All of Jinto's thoughts stopped when he felt something hard in the back of his head. The small man pressed the gun down on Jinto's head.

"That's some loyalty, huh? Just so that you know, we want you to be able to walk on your own but it doesn't have to be that way. Have you ever been shot by a stun gun before? Let me tell you it's not pleasurable. If you're expecting that you instantly go unconscious, you're wrong. All the muscles in your body will be screaming in pain."

"Are you really the police?" Jinto asked.

The thin man whistled. "I like guys like him. To be able to ask a question in a situation like this. Or maybe he doesn't really understand how much trouble he's in. Curious."

"That doesn't matter." The small man ordered the large man. "Daswani, what are you doing? Hurry up!"

The big man known as Daswani nodded silently and opened the door to the bedroom. He froze as soon as he took a step into the bedroom. Daswani shook his head rapidly, and then slowly backed out of the bedroom.

Jinto did not realize what was going on at first. But when Lafiel appeared behind Daswani, it could not become clearer. Lafiel wore the white robe that the hotel provided. Her spatial sensory organ shined brightly behind her disheveled hair. Her large eyes had become a cold slit, and there was a laser pistol in her hand.

The laser pistol was quite obviously deadly. It had the power to easily cut a person apart. A stun gun's looks and ability were both toy-like compared to it.

"It's the Abh..." The young man muttered in surprise. "There really was one."

Daswani backed into a wall. No one dared move a muscle for a few long minutes of silence. It was the small man who broke the silence. He unexpectedly spoke in standard Barone, though he did have an accent.

"Throw down your gun, Abh. Or else this boy will get it. Even stun guns can kill at this distance."

"If he dies, you will all die." Lafiel said so stubbornly, glaring at them all. "I will not permit any of you to leave this room alive. Just so that you know, I am in a terrible mood at the moment."

"I can understand that." The thin man muttered. "Anyone would be in a bad mood if they were woken up like this. I guess the Abh aren't an exception, what a discovery."

Everyone ignored his incredible discovery.

"We have four people. We won't lose to just you." The small man said back.

"Would you like to try?" Lafiel's eyes glinted.

"Yeah!" The young man tried to aim his stun gun towards Lafiel. But Lafiel was faster. She scrunched her lips as if to whistle, and fired the pistol. The laser beam that came out of the pistol hit the stun gun accurately.

"Ow!" The young man dropped the stun gun. It had grown scalding hot in an instant.

The big man tried to raise his gun while that was happening, but a laser beam pierced that stun gun too. The big man tried to pull the trigger, bearing the heat, but the stun gun was no longer functioning.

Two black holes suddenly opened in the wall to the immediate left and right of the big man's head. Daswani collapsed when he noticed it.

"Don't shoot, I'm not doing anything!" The thin man tossed his stun gun away and raised his arms above his head.

"As you can see, I have been trained to use the pistol." Lafiel quietly told them. "I have several things to be proud of, and my aim is one of them. But I'm a little hazy right now, and my body is a little slow. Don't expect me to be completely accurate in the future."

A tense silence filled the room once again.

The small man was sweating, and unable to move at all.

Though Jinto was now able to move his arms and legs, there were still two men sitting on top of him, and a gun pointed to his head.

Jinto suddenly thought of something to say. "Umm, maybe you should reconsider."

The small man glared at Jinto. His gaze moved to the stun gun. He then glanced at Lafiel's laser pistol and looked emptily at a corner of the room. He looked as if he was thinking back to his childhood back when he was happy.

Jinto swallowed hard as he nervously watched the small man's movement.

The small man moved quickly when he finally decided. The stun gun disappeared from his hands as if magic. The two men got off of Jinto at the same time. Jinto rolled himself to a standing position, and walked over to Lafiel.

"I'm glad you reconsidered." Jinto said sincerely.

"Reconsider what?" The small man looked as if he did not know what they were talking about.

"I'm glad you understand." Jinto said bitterly.

"Yes. Understanding is always good." The small man raised his arms high above him. "Welcome to the planet Krasbyul, I welcome you."

A dry wind blew through the middle of the room.

"I guess I was wrong that we came to an understanding." Jinto muttered within the heavy air of the room.

"Jinto." Said Lafiel. "We're retreating. I'll keep watch over them, so get our luggage."

"I think that's a good idea." Jinto walked into the bedroom. It did not take long to gather their belongings. They had all of their clothes in a bag so that they could leave at any time. Jinto returned to the living room with the laser pistol in his right hand and the knapsack over his left shoulder.

"Let's go then." He said to Lafiel.

"Yes." Lafiel said to the men. "You shall go into the bedroom."  
 "Wait." Said the small man. "We are your friends."  
 "You have a strange way of showing your friendship." Jinto pointed out.  
 "Don't you want to know who we are?"  
 "Not really." Jinto replied coldly.  
 "Not curious at all? Curiosity is the source of progress." The small man continued.  
 "I don't really care whether you're an undertaker's club or a bird watcher's club." Jinto said sternly.  
 The wrist that they bent back was still hurting. He had no reason to feel friendly towards them.  
 "I'm the only undertaker." The small man pounded at his own chest.  
 "Really. You must really like your job. Do you make corpses too?"  
 "Just go into the bedroom." Lafiel cried out.  
 "Dammit." The men moved towards the entrance to the bedroom at gunpoint.  
 But they heard another door, the door to the hallway, open.  
 Another one!? Jinto pointed his gun towards the door nervously.  
 "You're all so useless." A woman walked in. Jinto was surprised to see that it was the housekeeper from earlier that day.  
 "You're one of them?"  
 "Yup. I'm the leader." She spoke Barone far better than Jinto did. "Oh, I'm not armed."  
 "Then you're not an employee here?"  
 "Nope, I'm not."  
 "So that 'sif' was made up too."  
 "Nope, that's true." The woman said bitterly. "You're really unpopular here among the real staff."  
 Jinto shifted his wait uncomfortably. "But you came here earlier today to get information on us right?"  
 "Yes." She smiled towards Lafiel. "The Abh lady, the base of your hair is turning blue. You should be thorough when dyeing your hair, and do it regularly too."  
 "Thank you for your advice." Lafiel said coldly. "Could you go into the bedroom as well?"  
 "Wait, listen to me. Things can work out to benefit both of us."  
 "What shall we do, Jinto?" Lafiel's expression was harsh as usual, but there was a bit of indecisiveness showing.  
 "Well I guess there's no harm in just listening to them."  
 "A wise decision." Said the fake housekeeper.  
 "But first, stand all in a row." Lafiel pointed towards the window with her pistol.  
 "Cautious." The woman appraised them, and followed orders.  
 "Am I the only one who can't help but relate our situation to an execution?" The small man joked.  
 "It's okay, undertaker." The thin man comforted him. "Our necks would already be sliced off if she wanted to kill us."  
 "I've been wondering about it for awhile, but why is it so irritating when someone else has a good point?" The five of them lined up by the window. Now they could keep watch on all of them at the same time.  
 "Let us introduce ourselves first. Call me Marka."  
 "Just call me undertaker. I have a real name, but that's what everyone calls me." The small man introduced himself.  
 "I'm Ming. I have a name that my parents gave me, but I don't like it, so just call me Ming." Said the thin man. Jinto noticed right then that he had a mustache, and had one side of it dyed red and the other yellow.  
 "I'm bill. Everyone in town knows who Flying Bill is." The young man said.  
 "Daswani." The big man stated his name.  
 The five of them then became silent. Until Jinto realized that they expected something of them.  
 "Sorry, but I don't really feel like introducing myself."  
 "Okay." Marka tried to avoid looking disappointed. "I believe you registered as Sai Lina and Sai Jinto, right?"  
 "Yeah."  
 "Then we'll call you that. At least it looks like Jinto there did use his name." Marka had great hearing, she caught it when Lafiel called Jinto by his name.  
 "But Lina is not an Abh name." Min looked towards them curiously.  
 "I won't tell you her real name." Jinto stated.  
 "Not even her first name? She must be a really important girl. Important enough that everyone would recognize her name. I'm guessing she's part of the Marquis of Sfagnoff's family?"  
 "Feel free to guess. But we're not going to tell you. We don't know who you are."  
 "Oh yes, I had forgotten." Said Marka. "We're members of the Anti-Imperial Krasbyul Rebels."

“Anti-Imperial? Sounds like you hate the Abh.”

“We don’t hate the Abh, Jinto. We’re just seeking independence. We refuse to recognize the existence of the Empire’s Lord, and we want the right to go trade and explore on our own space ship.”

“But there’s no way that the Empire will let you do that.”

“Yup. That’s why we’re fighting.”

“With the Empire?”

“There’s no point in fighting the bird watcher’s club.”

“And, you know that we’re from the Empire.”

“That girl there is an Abh, so of course you are.”

“And, you say you’re on our side?”

“Yup, that’s it.”

“I see.” Jinto nodded. He understood that there was a great divide between them and Marka’s group. He turned towards Lafiel. “Want to go now that we’ve finished talking?”

“Wait! We’re not done talking at all!”

“I don’t get this at all!”

“I’m not talking to you, citizen. Marka is talking to the Abh lady there. Servants should just stay quiet.” Bill piped in.

Jinto was angry, but he decided to let them keep thinking that he was a citizen. It would be difficult to convince them that he was a noble, and nothing good can come of their knowing that he was a noble.

But Lafiel did not remain silent. “His word is my word. Do not take him lightly.”

Jinto saw that envy flashed in Bill’s eyes.

“And, what do you want?” Lafiel asked.

The undertaker grinned. “We want you to become our hostages.”

“Jinto.” Lafiel turned towards the young man. “You’re right, we should go.”

“Yup. We should.” Jinto started backing away slowly with the gun in one hand and the bag over his shoulder. “Good bye. It was nice meeting you. Talking to you was fun.”

“They got the wrong idea because you had to open your big mouth!” Marka slapped the undertaker’s head. “Wait!”

“Hurry up and say what you need to say. My arm is getting tired.” Lafiel gave them one last chance.

“Listen, you’re going to get caught at this rate.” Marka spoke quickly. “You don’t seem to know your way around this world at all. You stand out as much as a camel at a swimming pool. But we can hide you, until the Abh return.”

“That would be great.” Jinto was worried too. It would be nice to have the cooperation of the locals in hiding them. “But why would Anti-Imperial activists like yourselves do that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To take you hostage.” Said the undertaker.

“You shut up. You’re well known for making things worse.” Marka reiterated. “But, yes. The undertaker is right. We want to negotiate with the Empire using your, or more specially that little lady’s status. An Abh’s finally come within our reach, we can’t let an invading army take that opportunity away from us.”

“That is impossible even if I were Her Majesty the Empress herself. The Empire...” Jinto understood what Lafiel was trying to say. Taking hostages was useless against the Abh. Even if you kidnapped the Empress herself, and asked for but a trifle, the Empire would not give in. You should simply receive retribution fitting the crime.

But Jinto nudged Lafiel’s side with his elbow and whispered. “Let’s not discourage them. Let them think that they can negotiate with the Empire.”

“You’re going to lie to them?” Lafiel looked guilty.

“We’re not going to lie to them, we’re not the ones that gave them this crazy idea.”

“That is true...”

“It’s a common thing to be misinformed. Let’s let these people keep dreaming.”

“But would they not be upset when they find out that taking me hostage is useless? Enough to try to kill us? Is that not what a hostage is?”

“I have no intentions of really becoming a hostage. Leave it up to me.”

“Why do you think I realized that you were an Abh?” Marka shot her words at them like a stun beam when she noticed that their attention was back on her. “There’s a rumor starting to spread about you already. The receptionist at this hotel saw that little lady’s face clearly.

“He said that she had to be an Abh, even though her hair was black. She’s far too beautiful for a grounder, and she carries herself differently. She can only be an Abh who’s fled to the surface. The receptionist just happened to be one of our supporters, so we heard about it first. But what do you think would happen if someone told the United Mankind forces!?”

"Listen, you may think that you're hiding, but you're actually practically shouting out that there's an Abh hiding here."

"Okay." Jinto raised his hand and stopped her from continuing. "We'll entrust ourselves onto you. But there's a condition."

"A hostage is making a condition?" The undertaker opened his eyes wide. "Do you know what a hostage is?"

"Shut up, undertaker. This would never have happened if you had done your job. We would have been able to negotiate in a better position. At least we wouldn't have to do something as embarrassing as asking them to become our hostages while having a gun pointed at us."

"Then you should have done it yourself, Marka."

"Oh, you're going to make a frail little lady like me do the rough work? Do you not have any compassion?"

"Can I tell you what my condition is now?" Jinto asked modestly.

"Go ahead." Said Marka.

"First of all, we won't hand our weapons over to you."

"An armed hostage? You must have a crazy idea as to what a hostage is."

"I told you to shut up, undertaker! What else?"

"We'll always be together. You won't separate us without our approval."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Finally, we want you to explain everything to us. Tell us where we're going, what we're about to do."

"Fine. Now that we've come to an agreement, let's get out of here." Jinto was stunned at how quickly Marka accepted their conditions.

"Wait, she has to change." He pointed at Lafiel, still in the robe.

"I prefer being dressed like this." Said Lafiel. "It is far better than what you bought."

"What do you think?" Jinto asked Marka.

"It looks like a bath robe. And, it is really peculiar for people to be walking around outside in bath robes."

"See?" He took her clothes out of the knapsack and gave it to Lafiel. "Go change."

"Stop treating me like a child!" Lafiel shouted, but she went into the bedroom obediently.

"Are you sure they're a noble girl and her companion citizen?" Bill asked. "He's hardly treating her respectfully."

"They're just acting. Very impressively too." Marka settled his question.

"Umm, we have a question too." Jinto asked.

"What?"

"You're assuming that the Empire will come to take back this world. What will happen to us if the Empire doesn't come back?"

"What!? The Abh not retaliate after someone attacked them!?" The undertaker looked at Jinto surprised. "That's the funniest thing I've heard this year."

In Yunyu 303, roughly 6000 cedlairh away from the Sfagnoff System through planar space.

6000 cedlairh was a distance that a fast communications vessel could cover in five hours, and a slow transport could cover in 70. For the Iryush system, where sordec were few and far in-between, they were practically right next to each other.

That is where the Abh fleet was.

The flagship of the fleet was the cruiser 'Keirhdys'. The bridge of this cruiser, which was built to be a flagship, had a double layer construction. The fleet command bridge rested one level above the bridge where command of the ship was taken.

Admiral Trife Borju Ubteru Lemserr paced back and forth in that bridge.

It seems like things are turning out just like the way I wanted it to.

He was built strongly, something one rarely saw in an Abh. He had dark green hair and a dark face that made one picture a carnivorous beast. When he spoke, the well-developed incisors, the family trait of the Trife family showed deepening that impression. But he looked aggressive whether his mouth was open or not, as if he was born to become a soldier. Though he was beautiful just like all Abh, his aggressive look left a deeper impression.

A staff of twelve advisors, a sub commander, and several command officers, gazed at the impatient commander. Three standards were raised in a triangle behind the commander's chair that Trife should have been sitting in. The one at the top was the Imperial banner, the Gaftnochec. The lower left was the Banner of the Rarbyuv regional defense headquarters. It was drawn with the Gaftnochec in mind, but the base was red, and

there was lightning in the picture.

The lower right was the Trife family banner, the mourning pheasant. Division commanders and those of higher rank had the right to raise their own family banner.

"Your Grace, the cruiser Adras has brought back the latest map." The head advisor reported.

Kilocommander Kahyurec Bot Satek the successor to the Duke Lemeshu, unlike his superior officer, was built frailly just like an Abh. His hair was the normal blue, and his looks were average for an Abh too, in other words one out of every thousand grounder men would look about as good as him. His eyes were always half closed, giving the impression that he was half asleep.

"I see, display it." Trife ordered, expecting good news.

"Yes." Kahyurec gave the signal to one of his subordinates, and a holographic projection of planar space appeared.

The space-time particles that flowed outwards from the high-density area of the Milky Way galaxy cluster flowed into the space-time particles from nearby cigamhs near the Sfagnoff gate, creating a localized area of high space-time particle density. To a space-time bubble, it was difficult to enter and easy to leave an area of high space-time particle density. When shooting torpedoes at each other, the ship in the high space-time particle density area is at an advantage. In other words, it was like the high ground in classical warfare. It was displayed as being higher than the rest of the diagram in the planar space projection.

There was a swarm of space-time bubbles gathering within that high space-time particle density area. It was the perfect place to defend an invasion of the Sfagnoff system from.

"The enemy seems to have noticed our approach due to our reconnaissance runs." Kahyurec explained. "Judging from their mass, they have roughly three divisions of fleet. They are quite clearly prepared to fight. It is also quite clear that the enemy has no intentions of leaving the area around Sfagnoff gate."

"About three divisions of fleet. It's rather small." Trife smiled because it was just as they predicted.

"Is this the enemy's total force?"

"Probably so. If I were in charge of drawing the enemy's defense plans, I would send my entire force there to meet us."

"Do you have any solid information instead of just guesses?"

"Unfortunately not. Kahyurec shook his head. "We need help from central intelligence to be certain, but we lack that. Intelligence has failed to predict this invasion to begin with, so it is probably impossible for them to predict the size of the enemy fleet."

"Intelligence." Trife said that name bitterly. "They're filled with incompetent idiots who can't even feed a cat."

"Isn't that a bit too much to say, Your Grace?" Communications officer sub-hectocommander Nasotryua said. She had just transferred from central intelligence a few days ago, and she did not enjoy listening to Trife insult her old post.

"Really?" Trife raised his hand to his forehead, and began pacing around.

He had personal qualms with Head of intelligence, Admiral Kashnansh. It started back in the distant past, in an episode with a room in the trainee center and a girl with light blue hair. Ever since then, they have been quibbling every time they met each other.

*Kashnansh is an irritating person, and completely incompetent. It must be force high command playing a bad joke to put him as head of intelligence. But it was unfair of me to label all of his subordinates as being incompetent. They made a mistake this time, but they usually carry out their duties. If I made a mistake, I should take back what I said. I should take back what I said just now.*

"I was wrong." The high commander corrected himself. "Intelligence is filled with incompetent idiots that are perfect for being assigned to feed cats.!"

"I'm sure that the people in intelligence would be ecstatic to hear that." The head advisor said with a blank face.

"Really? Good." Trife was very much satisfied.

Nasotryua remained quiet, with a difficult face. Trife forgot about intelligence, and focused on more important matters.

*What should I do now?*

Right now, he had command of seven divisions of fleet.

Assault division	Byuldef
Assault division	Lokerr
Assault division	Wakaperr
Assault division	Ktyrr
Bombardment division	Bask Gamryuf
Reconnaissance division	Ftune



The temporary battle fleet that Trife commanded included the above independent divisions and the ships directly under his command. This fleet was named after the high commander to be called the Trife Fleet. It numbered roughly 2100.

*What a strange number.* Trife was dissatisfied. *The problem is, this fleet doesn't have a clear-cut goal.* Rarbyuv regional defense headquarters assigned seven divisions of fleet to sub commander of headquarters Admiral Trife, and sent him out in response to the attack on the Sfagnoff Marquisdom.

Their first goal was to gather information on the enemy and discover what their purpose was. *But we have too many ships to just run a reconnaissance run on the enemy. There would be no need to organize a fleet for that. We could just leave it to the reconnaissance division Ftune.*

*And if we're to recapture Sfagnoff, or prevent further movement of the enemy fleet, we don't have enough ships. Looks like I pulled the short straw.* Trife thought of his coworkers during the entire trip.

There were four sub commanders in Rarbyuv regional defense headquarters including Trife. Sub commanders were there to be assigned to command a fleet in the event of a large-scale operation or mock battle. During peace times, they have no fleet to command, but they always had a staff in case of an emergency. You could make a fleet work by gathering miscellaneous divisions, but not a command staff.

*Any one of the other three could have done it.* Trife was brooding over the fact that he was assigned to this mission during the entire trip here. It was a completely peaceful trip, they did not meet with any enemy invasion fleets when they expected to.

That made sense. They sent far too little force to invade deeply into the Empire, they were holing themselves up inside the Sfagnoff system.

"We can win right?" Trife confirmed with the head advisor.

"Yes. But if we assume that what we see is all the ships that the enemy has."

"I don't like to fight based on assumptions."

"Then shall we turn back? Or shall we wait for reinforcements?"

"I will turn away from my likes." Trife raised his arms and declared. "We will now go to recapture the Sfagnoff system."

"Yes, sir." All of the advisors made eye contact with him and saluted.

"Kahyurec, how long will it take to make a plan?"

"There is one thing I need to check with you before I can answer that." The head advisor pointed out silently.

"What?"

"Does our mission objective include destruction of the enemy fleet?"

"I believe" tactical advisor hectocommander Shuryl said impulsively. "That we should try to flank them."

"Hmm..."

It was a very tempting plan. Flanking them would be a very extravagant plan. They would split their force, send part of it behind the enemy and cut off their path of retreat. Then they would pincer the enemy force with the main fleet. If it went well, they could completely obliterate the enemy forces. Given the situations, there was very little chance of anything going wrong. Their side had over twice the ships that the enemy had. Even if the enemy were to focus their attack on one side, they would still be able to fight them at an advantage.

To make things better, there was the reconnaissance division Ftune within the Trife fleet.

When one hears "reconnaissance division", one would normally think of a lightly armed squad. But that was far from the truth. The mission of reconnaissance divisions was to break into a highly hostile area, and force their way through the enemy defenses to gather intelligence on the enemy. The heavy ships-of-the-line and weak destroyers would only get in the way. The operative portion of the division was made completely out of cruisers. The supporting supply ships were small ones, the size of cruisers, and it excelled in both mobility and destructive power.

Some people say that a reconnaissance division's destructive power was five times that of a normal division. Though it would be difficult to realize because of cost prohibitiveness and flexibility, there are people who passionately believed that they should compose the entire Star Force out of reconnaissance divisions.

In other words the reconnaissance division was the cavalry. There was no division better suited for taking the flanking maneuver.

Trife debated the idea for a few seconds. Then he declined it despite his own wishes. "No we can't. Our goal isn't to fight them, but to recapture the Sfagnoff system. This war will last for a long time. We cannot lose ships to unnecessary battles, even if our victory is assured."

"But..." Shuryl protested.



"No! Quiet! Do not try to tempt me any more." Trife shoved her protests aside.

"Yes, sir." Shuryl reluctantly stopped protesting.

"Then will we be moving slowly towards the enemy menacingly?" Kahyurec checked with the admiral.

"Yes." Trife nodded even though his heart was still with flanking the enemy. "We'll establish a horizontal wall with our forces and slowly move towards them. They will probably run if we do that."

"Understood. I will draw up the plans following that idea."

"How long will it be until we can leave?"

"What shall we do with the cruisers that are currently on reconnaissance duty?"

"We won't wait for them. We'll pick them up on the way."

"Then we can leave within two hours."

"Don't slack off. Do it in one."

"Understood."

Trife grimaced. *If he accepted my demand to do it in less time without objections, doesn't that mean that he could've done it with even less time? But, it's too late. I said one hour already.*

"Good, get to work. I will be greatly disappointed if I don't see a proper plan of attack within an hour."

"Yes, sir."

Trife finally sat down on the commander's chair after seeing his advisors walk into the tactics room.

Exactly one hour later, Kahyurec filed the formation and course of advance to Trife. Whether he admitted it or not, Trife trusted in his head advisor's ability. He approved the plan with a cursory glance and gave out the order to the fleet.

"Everyone, we will now go to recapture the Sfagnoff Marquisdom. Unfortunately, we will probably not see combat. But in the event that we do enter combat, I look forward to seeing a beautiful fight. Well then, go!"

2000 ships simultaneously started their engines.

## Extra: Abh Units of Measurement.

What shows the Abh's relationship to Earth best is their unit of time. One year in the Abh calendar is 365 days. Of course they have no need to distinguish one year from the period of rotation around a star, so they have neither leap years nor leap seconds. One year was always 365 days, one day was always 24 hours, one hour was always 60 minutes, and one minute was always 60 seconds.

All of their other basic units of measurements are borrowed from that of Earth. In other words, they use the meter based on the circumference of the Earth at the equator: One cubic centimeter of water at Earth gravity is one gram. But, all of this is represented in Barone, and the prefixes change with every 4<sup>th</sup> digit, so one does need to pay attention.

All basic units other than time (seconds) is as follows.

Length: Dagh = centimeter (cm)

Weight: Po = gram (g)

Various prefixes are attached to the basic units of measurement to change their size.

	Prefix	Length	Mass
$10^{20}$	Dorial	1 quadrillion km	100 trillion tons
$10^{16}$	To	100 billion km	10 billion tons
$10^{12}$	Zese	10 million km	1 million tons
$10^8$	Se	1000 km	100 tons
$10^4$	Ueth	100m	10kg
1		1cm	1g
$10^{-4}$	Sheth	1 nanometer	.1mg
$10^{-8}$	Sowaf	1 Angstrom	.01 nanograms
$10^{-12}$	Kos	10 Y	
$10^{-16}$	Peta	.001Y	

Therefore, three Zesedagh is 30million kilometers, 800 Uethpo is 8 tons.

However, the Abh also use units of measurements like the light second and light year, so no unit of length above the Zesedagh is usually used.

They also use microscopic units of measurement based on Plank length and Plank weight, but we will not touch upon those here.

In planar space, where different laws of physics apply than in normal space, different units of measurement become necessary. This is the cedlairh and digrh. One cedlairh is defined as "How far a space-time bubble with one Sepo of weight can travel in a second at a fully mobile state." One digrh is "The speed at which one cedlairh can be traveled in one hour of space-time bubble time."

## Author's Afterword

I read once that Robert E. Howard created the foundation of Heroic Fantasy by writing down what Conan told him. Since I am not superstitious, I interpret this as his listening to his subconscious voice. But I thought it was a wonderful story. Back when I heard it, I was still a student, but it made me want to become a science fiction writer, to want to experience something like that. Besides, it sounded fun.

Quite a bit of time has passed, and that happened a short while after I published my first short story.

A beautiful woman came to me as I was drinking by myself, and imagining various things. She had hair the color of a deep forest, and she wore a delicate crown over it. She looked down at me with very impressionable jet black eyes.

"What luck" I thought to myself. I am a very healthy male, so a young and pretty girl is far more attractive to me than a well built man. I picked up my typewriter immediately, and prepared to listen to her story.

"Could you begin by telling me your name?" I asked, and then the beautiful woman haughtily moved her jaw and ordered me to "Just call me Lafiel!". Then... she disappeared. "Hey, what about the story?" I asked, but there was no response. All that remained to me was the name 'Lafiel' and the image of her.

Even so, I still wanted to write her story. But I didn't think that I could handle writing about the her of now, so I thought about writing about her when she was younger. I don't necessarily think that young girls are easier to understand than grown women, but there is an order to things.

You are free to believe or disbelieve that story I just made up. LoL

But sometimes, I really started asking myself if these characters existed within me. For example, there is a scene in which Jinto and Lafiel are walking in this volume. Lafiel is in a bad mood. But even the writer didn't know why she was in a bad mood. After all I'm looking at things from Jinto's point of view. I can just tell that she's angry for some reason.

"Exactly what are you angry about~. You're the type of girl who would just go out and say what displeases you." I thought to myself, wondering why she was angry along with Jinto.

But when I shifted to Lafiel's perspective, I understood exactly why she was displeased. *I see, it's all really clear when I look at it from her perspective.* That was a strange experience.

Well, there is a phrase called 'a slump'. Sometimes I begin to think that this second volume is relatively boring. But it is also the volume with my favorite scene. There is no point to my telling you what it is though, so I won't.

Next is finally the last volume. "The Return Home". The climax is in there, and there are a lot of new characters. It'll be fun.

Look forward to it.

April 10<sup>th</sup> 1996

## Translator's Afterword

Now it's finally time for my favorite part of the book. The part that I get to make up! No, I don't make up all of the text that goes before this, just some of it \*smile\*. Last time, I talked about why I'm even putting a translator's afterword in here, so this time I'll talk about things with more substance.

I promised in the last afterword that I'll talk about why Mr. Morioka's background made it difficult to translate. Well remember the part about how the Abh wished to preserve the original culture of Japan? (The island chain refers to Japan in case you didn't get it) What he actually meant was that all "gairaigo" (words borrowed from Western languages) were removed to be replaced by a made up equivalent using Chinese characters.

If you know anything about Chinese characters, you know how difficult they are. I hear stories that many Japanese people have difficulty reading this novel because of the excessive amount of Chinese characters in it. It's very easy to read through it and get the general idea, but when it comes to translating the novel, you need to understand the text 100%, and that becomes rather difficult. I struggled for hours looking up these kanji characters that weren't in any dictionaries that I owned. LoL What's worse is when he combines them in ways that they were originally not meant to be combined. Sometimes it's easy to get what he's saying, sometimes it's not.

Crest of the Stars has been translated into Chinese, but that is significantly easier than translating it into English. This is because they didn't have to try to come up with creative translations for all the massively complicated and made up complex kanji words.

Mr. Gatou Shouji (author of the Full Metal Panic novels) said in an afterword that he always has trouble coming up with what to talk about, even though he always thinks about what he's going to write in the afterword while writing the actual novel. Just like him, I couldn't help but to think about what I was going to blab about this time, but unlike him I have no real trouble in writing this.

Well, second things second. Last time I asked you to e-mail corrections to me, same goes for this book. If you spot corrections, please e-mail them to me. ^\_^ If you would like to review the novel, or the afterword, please e-mail those to me as well. [Loae666@yahoo.com](mailto:Loae666@yahoo.com) is my e-mail in case you're interested.

This time I tried putting in the official romanization for the phone terms instead of my messed up romanization. Please tell me how you like that. It's rather confusing because 'ec' is silent if it's at the end of the word, and 'mp' 'mh' 'mf' are all pronounced f. But once you get used to it, it's not that bad.

Last time translating the novel took me only two weeks, this time it took me more than three. I went slowly this time, partially because I had to look up the meaning of complex kanji and how to spell it in Barone every time a rather difficult word popped up. Right now it's 4:35 in the morning, oh my I did not realize that it was this late. I just spent the last six hours in front of the computer typing this up because the Japanese novel for this has already arrived.

One final word. Mr. Morioka said that he thought this book was rather plain. I personally think that this book is the most meaningful one for people who have already seen the anime. If you have seen the anime for the novel already, then you know roughly what's going to happen, but you aren't exposed to the rich background behind the story. This volume exposes you to a great deal of background knowledge about the setting. If you've read through the novel, you know what I'm talking about. So I rather like it.

Well, I'm going to try to finish up the third and last volume before my summer break ends, but I make no guarantees.

See you in Crest of the Stars III "The Return Home"  
8-28-2002